

# 将进酒

原作：唐酒卿

广播剧第一季



QIANG JIN JIU

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# DESCRIPTION

The Six Prefectures of Zhongbo were ceded away in surrender to the external enemies, and Shen Zechuan was taken into custody in the capital, reduced to \*a drowning dog loathed and condemned by all. Xiao Chiye followed the scent of the furor and made his way over. But instead of setting others on him, he kicked Shen Zechuan with his very own leg that rendered the latter an invalid. Who would expect this invalid to turn around and bite him in a counterattack until he was all drenched in blood? That was the start of an epic feud between both men who tear at each other every time they come face-to-face with one another.

“Fate wants to bind me here for life, but this is not the path I choose. The yellow dust submerged my brothers deep under. I have no wish to bow in submission to an illusory fate. The imperial edict couldn’t save my troops, and the imperial court couldn’t fill the stomachs of my mounts. I’m no longer willing to lay down my life for this purpose. I want to overturn that mountain. I am going to fight for myself.”

## CHARACTER INFO

<https://qiangjinjiu.carrrd.co/#characters>

# QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 1 : FRIGID WIND



Edited by: [Suika](#)<3

“Prince<sup>1</sup> of Jianxing, Shen Wei’s regiment suffered a crushing defeat at the Chashi River in the Northeast. The Prefecture of Dunzhou’s frontline fell into the enemy’s hands, and thirty thousand soldiers were buried alive in the Chashi sinkhole. You were among them, but why were you the only one to escape unscathed?”

Shen Zechuan’s eyes were glazed and unfocused. He did not answer.

The interrogator pounded on the table and leaned forward to question him with a malicious glare. “Because Shen Wei was in covert communication with the Twelve Tribes of Biansha<sup>2</sup> and had the intention to present the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo over to our external foes. You people want to collude with the enemies to breach the defenses of Qudu from within and without. That’s why the Biansha Cavalry did not kill you. Am I right?”

Shen Zechuan moved his dry, chapped lips. He struggled with some effort to listen to the interrogator’s question, his Adam’s apple throbbed as he answered haltingly. “No... no.”

The interrogator snapped in a harsh voice, “Shen Wei immolated himself for fear of punishment. The Imperial Bodyguards<sup>3</sup> have already



presented correspondence documents of their secret liaisons to the emperor. And yet, lad, you still dare to deny it. How truly pigheaded of you!”

Shen Zechuan felt as if he was in a daze. He had no idea how long it had been since he had gotten some shuteye. It was as if he was being suspended by a single thread high up in the air, and if he so much let go from a moment of negligence, he would fall and smash himself into smithereens.

The interrogator spread open the confession statement and took a few glances at it, “You said last night that you were able to emerge unscathed from the Chashi Sinkhole alive because your elder brother saved you. Is that right? “

The scene that day vaguely materialized before Shen Zechuan’s eyes. They had been trapped so deep in the sinkhole that no matter what they did, they were unable to climb out, even with countless soldiers all crammed within. The pile of corpses under their feet grew thicker and thicker, but it was still not enough for them to reach the edge of the opening. The Biansha Cavalry surrounded the sinkhole, and the sound of flying arrows slicing through the frigid wind pierced through the night. Blood overflowed his calf as anguished wails and the gasps of those on their deathbed clung to his ears.

Shen Zechuan began to hyperventilate and tremble in his seat. He lost control of himself and clutched his hair, unable to stop a strangled sob from escaping his throat.

“You are lying.”

The interrogator raised the confession statement and flicked it at Shen Zechuan.

“Your elder brother is Shen Zhouji, the eldest lawful son<sup>4</sup> of the Prince of Jianxing. He abandoned thirty thousand soldiers before the Chashi Sinkhole and fled on the sly with his own private soldiers, but the Biansha Cavalry lassoed him with a rope and dragged him along the road by the Chashi River to his death. He was already dead by the time the Twelve Tribes of Biansha slaughtered those soldiers. There was no way he could save you. “

Shen Zechuan’s mind was in a whirl. The interrogator’s voice sounded so far away, and all he could hear was the neverending wails.

*Where is the way out? Where are the reinforcements?* The dead pushed against the dead, those putrid, decaying flesh was pressing down on his

hands. Mu-ge was shielding him above his head while he laid sprawled over the bloodied carcasses. He listened to Mu-ge's rapid breathing, yet the cries that emerged from his throat were those of despair.

"Your bro is superhuman." Ji Mu struggled to smile, but tears were already streaming down his face. He continued in a sobbing voice, "I'm an impregnable fortress! I'm hanging in there, it'll be fine. We hang in there, and the reinforcements will arrive soon. When that time comes, I'll return home with you to join Father and Mother. I still have to look for your sister-in-law..."

The interrogator banged the table and bellowed, "Come clean with it!"

Shen Zechuan began to struggle. He looked as if he wanted to break free from some invisible shackles, but the Imperial Bodyguards swarmed over and pinned him down against the table.

"You are in our imperial prison.<sup>5</sup> I have not employed extreme torture on you on account of your young age. But since you don't know what's good for you, don't blame us for being ruthless. Men, apply the torture!"

Shen Zechuan's arms were tied with ropes before he was dragged to the open space in the room. Someone set a bench down with a "clatter" and bound his legs to it. A burly man beside him lifted his flogging rod, weighed it in his hands, and swung it down.

"I'll ask you one more time." The interrogator brushed aside the foam on the tea with the teacup's lid. It was only after he took a few languid sips that he asked, "Did Shen Wei collude with the enemy to commit treason?"

Shen Zechuan refused to relent. He shouted intermittently between the flogging. "No, no!"

The interrogator set aside the teacup, "The Shen Clan would not be here today if you had used this fortitude on the battlefield. Continue to flog him!"

Shen Zechuan was gradually crumbling. He hung his head and said in a hoarse voice, "Shen Wei never colluded with the enemies..."

"We suffered a crushing defeat at the battle at the Chashi River all because Shen Wei recklessly fought the enemy head-on. After the defeat at the Chashi River, there was still a chance to redeem the situation at the Dunzhou frontline. Yet he withdrew his troops for no reason despite the great disparity of power between our troops and theirs. Because of this, the three cities of the Prefecture of Duanzhou fell into the enemy's hands. Ten of thousands of commoners in those cities lost their lives to the Biansha

machetes.” At this point, the interrogator let out a long sigh and continued hatefully. “It was a bloodbath in the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo. Shen Wei led his troops and withdrew south. The battle in the Prefecture of Dengzhou was the fishiest of all! The Qidong Chijun Commandery Garrison had already crossed Tianfei Watchtower to provide assistance, but he forsook the strategy of a pincer attack and instead mobilized thousands of cavalry to escort his own family to the City of Dancheng. This resulted in the entire line of defense in the Prefecture of Dengzhou to collapse— Wasn’t this all done intentionally? If it weren’t for the Libei Armored Cavalry<sup>6</sup> galloping for three straight nights across the River of Ice<sup>7</sup>, the Biansha Cavalry would have already arrived at the gates of Qudu!”

Shen Zechuan felt dizzy and he was drenched in cold sweat. The interrogator flung the confession at him in contempt, and it smashed into the back of his head.

“You’d rather be a dog than a man of Zhongbo. And this time, Shen Wei is a sinner of Dazhou.<sup>8</sup> You still want to deny it? You have no choice but to plead guilty!”

Shen Zechuan was in so much pain that half of his body was numbed. He sprawled on the bench, looking at that confession before his eyes. The ink writings on it were clear. Every character was like a humiliating lash of the whip on his face as it announced to everyone in the world:

Shen Wei betrayed his country. He’s not even worthy to be a dog.

He had left the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo to overrun with bodies. No one had even gone to collect those corpses buried in the Chashi Sinkhole yet, because everyone in the cities of Dunzhou had been massacred.

Shen Wei burned himself to his death, but this bloodstained debt had to be borne by someone alive. Shen Wei had a harem of wives and concubines along with numerous sons. But they all perished when the Biansha Cavalry invaded the Prefecture of Dunzhou. It was only because Shen Zechuan was of lowly birth and had been raised on the outside that he could escape unscathed.

Shen Zechuan was dragged back to his cell, and his heels left behind trails of blood in its path. He faced the wall and gazed at that small, narrow window. The frigid wind howled, and the snow came pelting down. The pitch-black night stretched on without end.

It was primal chaos in his head. Amidst the sound of the winds, his mind wandered back to the sinkhole.

Ji Mu was dying. His breathing had grown labored. Blood dripped down his armor onto the back of Shen Zechuan's neck and quickly turned icy. The wails around him had vanished, leaving behind only the unendurable groans of pain and the bellows of the frigid, biting wind.

Shen Zechuan was face-to-face with a dead man who was no longer recognizable. His legs were pinned under heavy human bodies while a shield was pressing painfully against his abdomen. All he could smell as he breathed was the thick stench of blood. He gritted his teeth as the tears trickled down his face, but he had to stop himself from crying out loud. Despairing, he stared down at this face that was trampled beyond recognition, but he could not make out if this was a soldier he had seen before.

"Bro." Shen Zechuan sobbed softly. "I, I'm scared..."

Ji Mu's throat bobbed. He gently patted Shen Zechuan's head, "It's alright... we'll be fine."

Shen Zechuan heard the singing of the soldiers at death's door. The gale tore apart the sound of the song and sent tattered pieces of it fluttering away into this frigid night.

"Battle in the city south... Death at the north of the city wall... Left out in the open, unburied... Free for all the crows to feed."<sup>9</sup>

"Bro." Shen Zechuan whispered beneath him. "I'll carry you on my back... bro."

Ji Mu's body was like a distorted shield. He smiled and said in a hoarse voice, "I can walk on my own."

"Were you struck by an arrow?"

"No." Ji Mu's tears had dried up. He said breezily, "... Those Biansha baldies can't shoot for nuts."

Shen Zechuan's fingers were soaking in flesh and blood. With some difficulty, he wiped his face, "*Shiniang* made dumplings. Once we return home, we'll eat many bowls of it."

Ji Mu sighed, "... Bro is a slow-eater. Don't... snatch."

Shen Zechuan gave a firm nod beneath him.

The snow gradually blanketed Ji Mu's body. He seemed tired and sleepy; his voice was so, so small, and he did not even have the energy to move his fingers. The song was sung very slowly, and when it reached the line "*the valiant cavalry perished in battle*", Ji Mu closed his eyes.



Shen Zechuan said, “I... I’ll also give bro my money, to marry sister-in-law...”

“Bro.”

“Bro.”

Ji Mu remained silent. It was as if he was tired of listening to his words and could not help but fall asleep.

Shen Zechuan began to tremble all over. He forgot when the Biansha Cavalry left and how he climbed his way out. When he propped himself up and lifted himself out, there was only a dead silence amidst the heavy snow. The stacked corpses cushioned under his knees all looked like discarded burlap sacks.

Shen Zechuan looked back and began to choke with sobs.

Ji Mu’s back had been pierced with such a dense cluster of arrows that his entire person had turned into a twisted hedgehog. So much of his blood had trickled down onto Shen Zechuan’s back, but Shen Zechuan had never realized it.

The sound of horse hooves came swiftly in pursuit like the looming thunder. Shen Zechuan suddenly gave a start as he jolted awake.

He felt like retching, but then he realized that both of his wrists had been firmly bound, and there was a burlap sack filled with soil on his body.

The sack became heavier and heavier as it weighed down on his chest. He could not even utter a sound. This was the technique of inflicting “death by crushing with an earth-filled sack” habitually used in prisons on prisoners whom they did not want to survive the murder attempt or leave a trace of an injury behind. If Shen Zechuan had not woken up earlier, he would have been but a mere corpse gone cold by daybreak.

Someone wants to kill him!



#### Footnotes

1. 王 Princes, or lords, during the Ming dynasty were titled and salaried members of the imperial bureaucracy with nominal lordship over various fiefs throughout China
2. The enemy’s tribes at the desert at the frontier/borders.



- 3.
4. 锦衣卫 Jin Yi Wei, or literally Embroidered Brocade(-robed) Guards, were elite bodyguards and secret police that directly served the Ming Emperors. They were authorized to overrule judicial proceedings in prosecutions, with full autonomy granted in arresting, interrogating and punishing anyone, including nobles and the Emperor's relatives.
5. Children in those days were classified according to whether they were a child born to the principal wife or concubines. A lawful son was born by the legal wife (this was the wife who has been officially married into the family, also known as the principal wife). Being the eldest of the legal wife made him the legitimate heir. They also had higher social status and often received better treatment compared to the other common sons born by concubines. It's recommended to keep this in mind, as this will be a recurring theme in the novel.
6. 诏狱 Imperial prison, a top-level prison in ancient China where most of the criminals were senior or top-ranking officials involved in cases that required the Emperor to issue an imperial edict to convict them.

7. Armored cavalry (铁骑) was a kind of cavalry that bore heavy arms while fighting on armored horses. They were one of the powerful forces in ancient wars. Meanwhile, the general cavalry (骑兵) or horsemen were simply soldiers who fought on horseback.
8. 冰河 River of Ice, i.e. also glacier.
9. 大周 Dazhou or Great Zhou. The Dazhou here refers to the name of the empire in this novel.
10. 《铙歌十八曲·战城南》 The Eighteen Cymbal Songs – Battle in the City South, is a folk song written for those who perished in the battlefield. It described the cruelty of war and expressed the poet's opposition to it, stating that the common folks were only the sacrifice of war.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 2 : DEATH BY FLOGGING



It was gloomy inside the Imperial Prison. Shen Zechuan's hands and legs felt cold. He was beginning to find it hard to breathe. He kept twisting his wrists, but the hemp rope was so tightly secured around him that his attempts were futile.

The sack of earth was squashing down on his chest, making him feel as if he had been thrown into a deep pool. His ears were humming, and his breathing, disordered. It was so hard for him to continue breathing that it felt like he was drowning.

Shen Zechuan turned his eyes to stare at the candlelight beyond the bars.

Several Imperial Bodyguards in the hall were drinking and shouting as they played the finger-guessing game. They were simply too occupied to look back at Shen Zechuan. The sack of soil nailed Shen Zechuan down onto a crudely made straw mat. Nausea, stemming from the suffocation, engulfed him like a surge of floodwater.

His vision swam. Shen Zechuan raised his head high and gritted his teeth to move his legs. Both his legs had been flogged until they were near numb; he felt nothing when he raised them. He stepped on the left corner of the bed made up of wooden planks. It was already rotting from bug infestation; in fact, he had even damaged it a little by sitting down on it on his very first day here.

His breathing grew labored.



Shen Zechuan stepped on that corner and stomped down on it with all his strength. But his legs were so weak that his kick did not even make a sound. The bed plank did not budge even the slightest. Cold sweat streamed down in torrents until the clothes on his back were soaked through.

He yearns to live.

Frantic whimpers escaped from Shen Zechuan's throat. He bit down on his tongue until it bled and stomped down again on the bed plank.

Ji Mu's brutalized and barely recognizable corpse was the horsewhip igniting his desire to live. Ji Mu's voice seemed to be still reverberating in his ears.

He must live!

Shen Zechuan struck that wooden plank furiously until he finally heard a "thud". Half of the bed board collapsed, and his body fell over on his side. The sack of soil tumbled down after him. He threw himself onto the ground as if he had just broken through the water surface and sucked in big mouthfuls of air.

The ground was icy cold. Shen Zechuan's injured legs would not heed his commands, so he propped himself up with his elbows. Sweat trickled down the bridge of his nose. It was cold in prison, but he felt as if his whole body was burning. It was so searing that his insides were boiling. Eventually, he could not help but lower his head to dry-heave.

Shen Wei deserves to die.

There were one hundred and twenty thousand military forces in Zhongbo, divided among the Six Prefectures to establish a defensive perimeter. After the defeat at Chashi River, the Biansha Cavalry invaded Dunzhou. Just as the interrogator had said, there was still a chance to redeem the situation. Shen Wei not only had a well-trained and powerful army; he also had ample army provision. There were also the garrison troops in the Three Cities of Duanzhou available for his deployment. Yet, he unexpectedly abandoned Duanzhou and shrank back like a coward to hide out in the Dunzhou Prince's Residence.

His retreat was the prelude to the fall of Zhongbo. The Biansha Cavalry massacred the three cities of Duanzhou, and the morale of the garrison troops took a nosedive. They fled south in a panic. Everyone thought that Shen Wei would battle to the death with the Twelve Tribes of Biansha in Dunzhou. But he took to his heels yet again when he caught wind of the news of their arrival.

The Zhongbo army retreated in defeat one battle after another, while the Biansha Cavalry was like a steel blade in its full glory perforating through the Six Prefectures' territories. They came spurring their horses on and traveled light into battle, relying solely on their spoils of war to pursue their way within eight hundred *li*<sup>1</sup> of Qudu, the Imperial Capital City of Dazhou.

If Shen Wei had implemented the scorched earth policy during his retreat and burned down the granaries in the city so that nothing was left behind for the enemies, then there would have been no way the Biansha Cavalry would advance this far. This was because they carried no army supplies with them and had to rely solely on the grains from the cities they had invaded to replenish their provisions. Once the grains in the city had been wiped out with fire, even the toughest Biansha Cavalry would have to go hungry.

A starving soldier would have been unable to continue fighting. When the time comes, the Libei Armored Cavalry would have crossed the River of Ice to intercept the Biansha Twelve Tribes' retreat, while the Qidong Five Commandery Garrisons would, from the Tianfei Watchtower, seal off all their possible escape routes. Those machetes would then be trapped like turtles in a jar. They would never survive the winter.

But Shen Wei did not do so.

He did not just give up resisting; he also left all the granaries in the city to the Biansha Cavalry. The Biansha Cavalry relied on the Dazhou's provisions to carry out a massacre of Dazhou's cities. Thanks to Shen Wei, their horses were well-fed enough to herd the common folks and captured soldiers to the Chashi River, where they were all slaughtered by the Biansha Cavalry in one night.

Shen Zechuan had a very close call with death.

And now, Qudu wanted to settle accounts. It was obvious that Shen Wei's deployment orders, while he was still alive, were all sloppily made. It did indeed seem like he was colluding with the Biansha Twelve Tribes to launch an attack from within and without. Yet, Shen Wei's immolated himself due to fear of punishment and burned himself to death, destroying all the documents along with him. Even the Imperial Bodyguards, who were effective and efficient in their duties, were now at their wits' end.

The Emperor wanted to get to the bottom of the matter, so all they could do was to keep on interrogating the only remaining person who might be in the know, Shen Zechuan. But Shen Zechuan's biological mother was a

dancer in Duanzhou. Shen Wei had too many sons, and Shen Zechuan was his eighth son born to a concubine.<sup>2</sup> There was really no place for him in the clan going by his age or rank. So he had long been driven out by the Dunzhou Prince's Residence to Duanzhou to be raised without parental guidance. Shen Wei himself probably did not even remember he still had this son.

Someone wants to kill him.

That was not exactly a secret. He had been sent here to be a scapegoat for his father. He was the last remaining member of the Shen Clan in Zhongbo, and the son was obliged to pay his father's debts. So once the interrogation in the Imperial Prison was concluded, the Emperor would surely use his life to offer as a sacrifice during the memorial for the thirty thousand soldiers who were killed at the Chashi River in Zhongbo's Dunzhou prefecture.

Even so, it should not be through an assassination like this.

Shen Zechuan wiped the corner of his lips with his thumb and turned his head to spit out the spittle of blood in his mouth.

If Shen Wei had indeed conspired with their foreign enemies with the intention to commit treason, then Shen Zechuan would have to die sooner or later. Why make an unnecessary move to assassinate an insignificant bastard born of a concubine like him? There was still someone in the capital worried about the interrogation. If that was the case, then there must have been something shady about the defeat of Shen Wei's troops.

Shen Zechuan knew nothing.

He had a *shifu* in Duanzhou, and his brother, Ji Mu, was his *shifu*'s only son. To him, Shen Wei was merely the Prince of Jianxing, who had nothing to do with him. He had absolutely no idea if Shen Wei had conspired with the enemies.

But he must deny it.

The ground that Shen Zechuan was sprawled on was so bone-chillingly cold that he was even more awake than he had been during the day. He was a felon the Imperial Bodyguards arrested on the orders of the imperial edict. All arrest warrants, writs of summons, and official rulings came directly from the top. It brought him directly from the hands of Xiao Jiming, the Hereditary Prince<sup>3</sup> of Libei, right to the Imperial Prison, bypassing even the Joint Trial of the Three Judicial Offices.<sup>4</sup>

This was clearly an indication of the Emperor's unrelenting determination to never condone this and to get to the bottom of the matter. But, under this kind of situation, who would have the guts to make such a reckless move to silence him before the Emperor could personally interrogate him?

The cold wind was still howling at the window. Shen Zechuan turned his eyes and stared at the wall in the dark. He did not dare to close them again.

The weather was slightly cool the next day. Shen Zechuan was brought back to the hall again. A snowstorm raged outside. The interrogator who had been cold towards him the other day was now smiling as he served tea with both hands and waited with deference at the side of the classical-styled, wooden chair.

There was an old, fair-faced, and beardless eunuch sitting on the seat. He was wearing the official hat of the eunuchs made of velvet for the wintry season, with in a gourd-patterned<sup>5</sup> mandarin square<sup>6</sup> on his robe. His cloak was still draped over him, and he was holding a precious, exquisite plum blossom hand warmer as he rested his mind. He listened to the movements, then opened his eyes to look at Shen Zechuan.

"Godfather." Ji Lei, who was acting on the imperial edict to interrogate Shen Zechuan, stooped over to say, "This is the surviving descendant of the Prince of Jianxing, Shen Wei."

Pan Rugui looked at Shen Zechuan and asked, "How did it come to this?"

Ji Lei was aware that Pan Rugui was not asking him why Shen Zechuan had ended up all filthy and stinky, but why he had yet to pry the whys and wherefores out of Shen Zechuan.

Ji Lei's forehead was drenched in sweat, but he did not dare to wipe it away. He maintained his bow and responded, "This lad is ignorant. He has been delirious ever since we brought him back from Zhongbo. We don't know who put him up to it, but he has been refusing to confess."

"A wanted felon His Majesty ordered to arrest." Pan Rugui did not accept the tea offered. "A child of fifteen or sixteen of age who was sent to the famous Imperial Prison to be personally interrogated by you, His Excellency Ji. And yet you still can't even hand over a confession statement."



Cupping the teacup in his hands, Ji Lei said with a bitter smile, "It's precisely because of that I do not dare to employ the tortures without authorization. He was already suffering from a cold when he arrived. If he dies because we did not hold back on the torture, then this case of Shen Wei would end up as a cold case."

Pan Rugui scrutinized Shen Zechuan for a moment and said, "We are all our Master's dogs. There's no point in keeping a dog if its fangs are no longer sharp. I know you have your own difficulties, but this is all part of your duties. His Majesty wants to see him now. This is his way of showing understanding and consideration for the Imperial Bodyguards. How could you still gripe about it?"

Ji Lei hurriedly prostrated himself in obeisance and said, "Godfather is right. This son has been duly castigated."

Pan Rugui gave a snort of acknowledgment and said, "Clean him up. He can't seek an audience with His Majesty with how filthy he looks."

Shen Zechuan was taken by the errand-runner to wash up and have the injuries on his thigh simply bandaged before he was given a set of clean cotton attire to put on. He was at their mercy as they ordered him about. He was too indisposed to walk; it even took him some effort to climb onto the horse carriage.

Pan Rugui finally accepted Ji Lei's tea. He stared at Shen Zechuan's back and said, "He's really the last surviving member of the Shen Clan?"

Ji Lei answered, "That's right. He is the only survivor from the Chashi Sinkhole. The Hereditary Prince Xiao of Libei personally took him under arrest. All this while, he has been detained in the prisoner wagon of the Libei Armored Cavalry. No one has ever touched him on the way here. "

Pan Rugui sipped his cold tea. After a long time, he gave a skin-deep smile and said, "Hereditary Prince Xiao is a prudent man."



Shen Zechuan got off the carriage and let the Imperial Bodyguards carry him along a long path. The heavy snow blew onto his face. The internal eunuch leading the way hurried along without uttering a word of nonsense.

The junior eunuch waiting respectfully under the eaves came forth to receive Pan Rugui when the latter arrived before Mingli Hall. He removed the cloak for Pan Rugui, helped him change the outer layer of his robe, and then took over the hand warmer in Pan Rugui's hands. They had already

announced his arrival inside. Pan Rugui kowtowed by the door and said, “Your Majesty, this slave<sup>7</sup> has brought the man.”

A short while later, a low and unhurried voice rang out, “Bring him in.”

Shen Zechuan’s breathing hitched. They had already supported him in. There was incense burning inside, but it was not stifling hot. He listened to the sounds of intermittent coughs as he swept his gaze out of the corner of his eye and caught a glimpse of two feet inside the hall.

Emperor Xiande was dressed in a dark navy blue common robe.<sup>8</sup> He was skinny to the point of being bony, and his body was frail. Major and minor illnesses had never stopped plaguing him in the three years he had ascended to the throne. He sat on the throne, his rectangular face looking particularly gentle and delicate due to his anemic-looking complexion.

“Ji Lei has been trying him for several days.” Emperor Xiande glanced at Ji lei, who was kneeling at the back. “Has a conclusion been reached?”

Ji Lei kowtowed and said, “To reply His Majesty, this lad’s words are incoherent and full of loopholes. Everything he has confessed these few days is contradictory and cannot be believed.”

Emperor Xiande said, “Present all those he has confessed to me.”

Ji Lei took out the tidied-up confession statement from his bosom and handed it with both hands to Pan Rugui. Pan Rugui hurried forward again and respectfully presented it to Emperor Xiande.

Emperor Xiande looked through it once. When he reached the part about Chashi Sinkhole, he covered his mouth and started coughing. He refused to let Pan Rugui wipe it for him; instead he wiped off the blood between his lips himself with a handkerchief. He said in a heavy voice, “Thirty thousand soldiers lost their lives at the sinkhole but not Shen Wei. This truly makes one’s blood boils!”

Shen Zechuan closed his eyes, and his chest began to pound. Sure enough, the next moment, he heard Emperor Xiande’s orders.

“Raise your head!”

Shen Zechuan’s breathing quickened. His palms on the ground that were propping himself up felt icy cold. He raised his head slowly, his eyes carefully landing on Emperor Xiande’s boots.

Emperor Xiande looked at him and asked, “You are Shen Wei’s son and the only survivor of the Chashi Sinkhole. What do you have to say?”

Shen Zechuan's eyes reddened. His body trembled ever so slightly as he sobbed and said nothing.

Without a change in expression, Emperor Xiande demanded, "Answer me!"

Shen Zechuan suddenly raised his eyes. The tears trickled down along his cheeks. He raised his eyes for a fleeting moment, then kowtowed hard onto the ground. His shoulders trembled, and spasmodic sobs in his throat rose along with the trembling.

"Your Majesty... Your Majesty! My father is loyal to the country. He was too ashamed to face the country and the Elders of Zhongbo after the defeat of his troops. That's why he immolated himself to atone for it!"

Emperor Xiande rebuked, "What nonsense are you spouting?! If he was that devoted to the country, why would he keep retreating?"

Shen Zechuan's voice was hoarse from his sobbing. "My father sent all his sons onto the battlefield. My eldest brother, Shen Zhouji, was tortured to death by those Biansha people who dragged him behind a horse along the Chashi public route! If it were not for his loyalty, how would he have been able to go to such an extent?"

Emperor Xiande said, "How dare you bring up the Chashi battle? Shen Zhouji fled before the battle. His crime is unpardonable!"

Shen Zechuan looked up at Emperor Xiande with tears streaming from his eyes. He said in a raspy voice, "The battle at Chashi was a bloodbath. My eldest brother may be muddleheaded and incompetent, but he defended Chashi for three days. It was within these three days that the military intelligence of the war situation was delivered to Qidong and Libei. If it weren't for these three days..."

He was so choked with emotions that he could not continue.

Emperor Xiande looked at the confession in his hand. The entire hall was silent except for the sounds of Shen Zechuan's sobs. Amidst this excruciatingly long silence, Shen Zechuan dug his fingernails into his flesh.

Emperor Xiande suddenly gave a long sigh and asked, "Has Shen Wei ever colluded with the enemies?"

Shen Zechuan's answer was resolute and decisive. "Never."

Unexpectedly, Emperor Xiande set down the confession and said in a voice that had abruptly turned cold, "This boy is cunning and harbors the intent to deceive the ruler. I must not allow you to live! Pan Rugui, drag him away and flog him to death at the Gates of Duancheng!"

“This slave obeys!” Pan Rugui immediately received his orders and bowed to retreat.

Shen Zechuan felt cold all over as if he had been doused with a basin of icy water. He suddenly put up a struggle, but the Imperial Bodyguards covered his mouth and swiftly dragged him out of Mingli Hall.



#### Footnotes

1. 里 li, an ancient measure of length, one li = approx. 500m
2. Children in those days were classified according to whether they were a child born to the principal wife or concubines. A legitimate son of direct descent was born by the legal wife (this was the wife who has been officially married into the family, also known as the principal wife). Being the eldest of the legal wife made him the legitimate heir. They also had higher social status and often received better treatment compared to the other sons born by concubines. It's recommended to keep this in mind, as this will be a recurring theme in the novel.
3. Hereditary Prince, or 'Princely Heir', (世子, shizi) Not to be confused with the Emperor's Crown Prince (太子, taizi). This is a title given to the eldest son born to the principal wife – also the legitimate heir – of a first-ranked prince. To recap, princes (王), or lords, during the Ming dynasty were titled and salaried members of the imperial bureaucracy with nominal lordship over various fiefs throughout China
4. In the Ming Dynasty, the supreme court was known as the “Joint Trial by the Three Judicial Offices” (三司会审), whose verdicts had to be submitted to the Emperor for approval. Three Judicial Offices are namely the Ministry of Justice (刑部), the Court of Judicial Review (大理寺), and the Chief Surveillance Bureau (都察院).
5. 葫芦景 is a calabash or bottle gourd pattern used on mandarin squares, or rank badges, of the official garbs (see next footnote). From the 23rd/24th day of the 12th lunar month to the lunar new year (also known as the Spring Festival), internal ministers of the Ming dynasty had to wear calabash or bottle gourd patterns on their clothes to welcome spring.





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7. 补子 rank badges or mandarin squares, was a large embroidered badge sewn onto the surcoat of an official to indicate the rank of the official wearing it. E.g., the use of squares depicting birds for civil officials and animals for military officials; there were even “seasonal” squares like the gourd (see previous footnote).
8. 奴婢, or ‘slave’ is typically a term female slaves or maidservants used to address themselves when speaking to the Emperor or his imperial concubines. During the Ming Dynasty, eunuchs (those serving at the sides of the Emperor) also used this term to refer to themselves when speaking to the Emperor.



9.

10. 道袍 *Daopao*; not to be confused with a Daoist priest robe. This was a common robe typically worn by men in the Ming Dynasty.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 3 : RAPTOR



Pan Rugui strode towards the Gate of Duancheng. The Imperial Bodyguards Commandants split into two rows flanking each side and stayed as silent as winter cicadas. Once Pan Rugui came to a halt and announced Emperor Xiande's verbal edict, the Imperial Bodyguards began their work.

The Imperial Bodyguards gagged Shen Zechuan and swiftly wrapped him up in a thick cotton-padded garment before they made him lie face down on the ground.

Pan Rugui leaned over in the cold wind to observe Shen Zechuan's state. He raised his fingers to cover his lips feebly and coughed a few times before he said softly, "You are so young, and yet you are so gutsy that you dare to put on such a melodramatic display before His Majesty. If you had just truthfully confessed Shen Wei's crime of treason, you might still have a slim shot at survival."

Shen Zechuan shut his eyes tightly. Cold sweat had already soaked through his clothes.

Pan Rugui rose to his feet and said, "Start flogging."

The Imperial Bodyguards Commandants on both sides immediately shouted in unison, "Let the rod fall!" A thunderous roar followed right after. "Hit!"

Before the words were fully out of their mouths, the rod wrapped in an iron sheet with barbs came whistling down on Shen Zechuan and dealt him a heavy blow.

After three strikes, he heard another voice. "Hit him hard!"

The pain of his flesh was like a searing fire blazing through his body. They hit Shen Zechuan until he could no longer move. All he could do was to clamp his teeth down tightly on the gag in his mouth. He was unable to swallow his blood in time, and its coppery and salty taste saturated his mouth. Shen Zechuan was still hanging on to his last breath as the dripping sweat stung his wide-open eyes.

The sky was overcast, and the heavy snow fell like willow catkins.

Flogging was not a job anyone could do. As the saying "faint at twenty strokes, lame at fifty" suggested, there were many ways to flog a man. It was generally a family craft handed down through the generations and was no less easier to train than learning a trade elsewhere. Moreover, this job did not just require one to have good martial arts skills, but also a discerning eye. These floggers had been doing this for so long that all they had to do is to look at the expressions of these Great Eunuchs from the Ceremonial Directorate<sup>1</sup> to know who should receive superficial wounds but serious internal injuries, and vice versa.

Emperor Xiande's decree today was death by flogging, and Pan Rugui did not seem to value him either. That meant there was no way an about-turn would happen; he was a man who had to die. So these Imperial Bodyguards brought out their special skills; within fifty strokes, Shen Zechuan must die.

Pan Rugui kept an eye on the timing and noticed that Shen Zechuan had already gone motionless with his head drooping. He raised his hand over the hand warmer and was about to give his instructions when he saw an umbrella floating towards them on the path. A beauty in royal garb stood underneath.

The dark clouds on Pan Rugui's face dispersed in a flash and transformed into a smile. Although he did not personally step forward in a greeting, the quick-witted eunuch beside him had already gone over to offer her his arm in support.

"My sincere respects to Third Missy. It's such a cold day. If Her Majesty the Empress Dowager has any instructions, you can just send someone to pass the message." Pan Rugui spoke as he took two steps closer.

Hua Xiangyi raised her hand lightly to motion to the Imperial Bodyguards not to move. She was delicate and beautiful. All these years,

the Empress Dowager had kept her by her side to nurture her. Her facial features resembled those of the Empress Dowager when the latter was young. Although she went by the address of the Third Missy of the Dicheng Hua Clan in Qudu, everyone knew she was a distinguished lady of the palace. Even the Emperor doted on her like his own dear little sister.

Hua Xiangyi said in a slow and soft voice. “*Gonggong*, is the one sprawled on the ground the son of Zhongbo Shen Clan, Shen Zechuan?”

Pan Rugui moved in tandem with Hua Xiangyi’s steps and replied, “That’s the one. His Majesty has just issued the decree to flog him to death.”

Hua Xiangyi said, “His Majesty was in a fit of anger earlier. If Shen Zechuan were to die, then we’ll never get to the bottom of Shen Wei’s treason. Her Majesty the Empress Dowager had arrived at Mingli Hall half a quarter<sup>2</sup> ago. His Majesty heeded her advice and has since calmed down some.”

Pan Rugui let out an “oh, my” and said, “His Majesty always listens to Her Majesty the Empress Dowager’s counsel. He was in such a terrible rage earlier that I did not dare to say a word even if I had a mind to.”

Hua Xiangyi smiled at Pan Rugui and said, “His Majesty said to ‘flog’ him. Isn’t that what you did?”

Pan Rugui took a few more steps and smiled too. “That’s right. I was in such a hurry earlier when I heard the word ‘flog’ and gave this lad a good beating. May I know how we should deal with him now?”

Hua Xiangyi swept a glance at Shen Zechuan and said, “Before His Majesty’s retrial, drag him back to the Imperial Prison first. The child’s life is of utmost importance. I’m counting on *Gonggong* to inform His Excellency Ji to take good care of him by all means.”

“That goes without saying.” Pan Rugui said, “How would Ji Lei dare to turn a deaf ear to Third Missy’s exhortations? The weather is cold, and the roads are slippery. *Xiaofuzi*, hold Third Missy steady.”

As soon as Hua Xiangyi left, Pan Rugui turned back and said to the two rows of Imperial Bodyguards, “His Majesty said to flog. We are about done hitting this person. Drag him back. You’ve heard Third Missy’s words earlier. That’s Her Majesty the Empress Dowager’s wish. Return and inform Ji Lei that all the people involved in this case are immortals.<sup>3</sup> If something were to happen to the lad under his watch...”

Pan Rugui coughed slowly.

“Even the Jade Emperor<sup>4</sup> himself wouldn’t be able to protect that head of his.”

Xiaofuzi returned to help support Pan Rugui by the arm. The long and wide stretch of road was empty. He whispered, “Forefather,<sup>5</sup> we let him go just like this. Will His Majesty the Emperor really not blame us later?”

Pan Rugui stepped on the snow and said, “His Majesty knows deep down that we can’t be faulted for this.”

He walked a few steps. Snowflakes squeezed their way into his fur collar.

“A promise is worth a thousand ounces of gold. A sovereign fears backpedaling on his words the most. His Majesty suffered another bout of serious illness due to the invasion of the Biansha Twelve Tribes. These days, he has been considering conferring a princess title on Third Missy to please Her Majesty the Empress Dowager. At this point in time, His Majesty will have to acquiesce even if Her Majesty the Empress Dowager were to make other demands of him, let alone to spare a man’s life.”

As he spoke, Pan Rugui inclined his head to look at Xiaofuzi.

“When have you ever seen Her Majesty the Empress Dowager change her orders?”

Regardless of which case it was, the real master was the one who stood by his or her own words.



Shen Zechuan was delirious with fever. One moment, he saw Ji Mu dying before him. The next moment, he saw himself while he was still living in Duanzhou.

The wind of Duanzhou caressed its way past the banner. *Shiniang* raised the curtain to step out with a white porcelain bowl in her hand. It was filled with dumplings that had thin skins and a large portion of fillings.

“Tell your bro to come home!” *Shiniang* called out to him, “He can’t even sit still for a moment. Get him to hurry back for his meal!”

Shen Zechuan climbed over the corridor’s railing, took a few steps over to his *shiniang*, and bit the dumpling off the chopsticks before running off. The dumpling was so scalding that he kept huffing through his mouth. As he went out of the door, he saw his *shifu*, Ji Gang, sitting on the stairs. Thus, he squatted beside him.

Ji Gang was grinding a rock with his hands. He turned his head to harrumph at Shen Zechuan and said, “Silly lad, how much is a dumpling

worth? Look at how much of a rarity you treat it as! Go call your bro back. The three of us father and sons will go to Yuanyang Tavern for a big meal. “

Shen Zechuan did not continue the conversation, because *shiniang* was already pulling at Ji Gang’s ear. She said, “Turning your nose up at dumplings, huh? How capable of you. Do you really have the money to get yourself another wife? Going over yourself with these two silly lads in tow, hm?!”

Shen Zechuan laughed out loud. He leaped down the stairs and waved to his *shifu* and *shiniang* before he ran out to the alley to look for his brother, Ji Mu.

It was snowing heavily along the way. Shen Zechuan could not find him. The more he walked, the further he went, and the colder he became.

“Bro.”

Shen Zechuan dashed all over the place, shouting.

“Ji Mu! Let’s go home for our meal!”

Gradually, the sound of horse hooves surrounded him. The heavy snow obstructed his view. Shen Zechuan was deeply entrenched in the sound of horse hooves, yet he could see no one around. The sound of fighting erupted in his ears, and warm blood splattered over his face. There were stabs of pain in both of Shen Zechuan’s legs as an overwhelming force pinned him down onto the ground.

He saw the dead man close before him again. The rain of arrows whistled in the wind. The man on his back was heavy, and that sticky and warm liquid trickled down along his neck, along his cheeks.

This time, he knew what it was.

Shen Zechuan woke up trembling. He was drenched in sweat, and it was so freezing that he shivered uncontrollably. He sprawled over the bed plank as his eyes adjusted with some difficulty to the darkness.

There were still people in the prison room. The errand-runner cleared away the filthy items and lit the oil lamp.

Shen Zechuan felt parched. The errand-runner seemed aware of his thirst and poured a bowl of cold water for him before setting it on the bed plank. Waves of hot and cold washed over Shen Zechuan. Very slowly, he nudged the bowl over to himself, spilling half of the water in it.

No one spoke in the prison. Shen Zechuan was the only one left after the errand-runner withdrew. He slipped in and out of consciousness. This

night seemed to drag on endlessly. No matter how he waited, dawn never came.

The errand-runner came again to change Shen Zechuan's medicine. He was already a lot more sober. Ji Lei looked at him beyond the bars and said in a cold voice, "You are one lucky bastard. A scourge truly never dies. Her Majesty the Empress Dowager spared your life. I suppose you don't know why."

Shen Zechuan lowered his head and said nothing.

Ji Lei said, "I know your *shifu* is Ji Gang, the fugitive Ji Gang of the martial fraternity. I was fellow disciples with him twenty years ago. Together, we served as the Imperial Bodyguards in Qudu. I'm afraid you don't know this, but he was once a Third Grade<sup>6</sup> Imperial Bodyguards Vice Commander. I'm trained in that set of Ji Clan's Boxing Style too."

Shen Zechuan raised his head and looked at him.

Ji Lei opened the door and waited for the errand-runner to leave. Once there was no one around, he sat down beside Shen Zechuan's bed.

"Later, he committed a crime. His offense was one where he would have to be beheaded for it. But the earlier Emperor was benevolent. In the end, he did not put him to death and simply exiled him beyond the Pass." Ji Lei propped up his knee and grinned at Shen Zechuan with his back to the light. "Your *shifu*—has no capability to speak of. He's just a lucky loser. Guess how he survived? Through the glory of your *shiniang*, Just like you today. You probably don't even know who your *shiniang* is. Let me tell you then, your *shiniang* is Hua Pingting.<sup>7</sup> There are the eight cities of Cen'nan in Qudu. The Dicheng Hua Clan among them is the clan of the current Empress Dowager. So, it's all because of your *shiniang* that the Empress Dowager spared your life today."

Ji Lei lowered his head and whispered.

"But who would have known that your *shiniang* had already died during the military upheaval? I'm telling you. Ji Gang is a worthless wretch. His father died twenty years ago, and twenty years later, his wife and son died too. Are you aware of who the main culprit is? You know it deep down. The perpetrator is Shen Wei!"

Shen Zechuan's breathing hitched.

"Shen Wei opened up the line of defense at Chashi River. The Biansha Cavalry invaded and ran rampant all over. The machete severed your



shiniang's throat. Everything that happened before she breathed her last could make Ji Gang's life a living hell."

"Duanzhou fell into the enemies' hands. You said it was your brother who saved you." Ji Lei leaned back, sized up the back of his hand, and said, "Ji Mu, huh? Ji Gang raised you and watched you grow up, so Ji Mu was your brother. He was Ji Gang's only son—Ji Gang's only offspring, and the Ji Clan's only descendant. But because of Shen Wei and you, he died too. Pierced through the heart with ten of thousands of arrows. His remains were even left behind in the sinkhole, subjected to the humiliation of being trampled by the horses of the Biansha Cavalry. I wonder how Ji Gang would have felt if he was still alive and had to collect his son's body."

Shen Zechuan suddenly lifted his body. Ji Lei easily pushed him back down.

"Shen Wei betrayed his country and colluded with the enemies. This is a debt you have to shoulder. You seek to live today, and countless ghosts of Zhongbo who have died unjust deaths wails. You fell asleep at night, slowly distinguishing who among the others in your dreams are your shiniang, your shifu! You are still alive, but living is already more of an agony than dying. Can you forgive Shen Wei? If you forgive Shen Wei and help to exonerate him, then you will let your shifu and his entire family down. No matter what, Ji Gang is the benefactor who has raised and nurtured you. How can you do unto him such a disloyal and unfilial act?"

"Besides, even if you drag out your own feeble existence, there is no longer anyone else in this world who will empathize with you. Once you are in Qudu, you are Shen Wei. The people are enraged now. Those who hate you to the core are more than one could count. You still have to die, anyway. Rather than dying a dubious death, why not speak frankly to His Majesty and come clean about Shen Wei's crimes? It would also comfort your shifu's soul in Heaven."

Ji Lei suddenly stopped talking when he saw Shen Zechuan, who was pinned on the bed plank, smiling. The young man's deathly pale face took on a sinister, frosty turn.

"Shen Wei did not collude with the enemies."

Shen Zechuan enunciated each word through clenched teeth.

"Shen Wei never colluded with the enemies!"

Ji Lei lifted Shen Zechuan and slammed him into the wall. A "BANG" rang out, and bits of earth and dust rained down from the friction. The

impact caused Shen Zechuan to cough incessantly.

“There are too many ways I can use to kill you.” Ji Lei said, “Unappreciative little bastard. You got lucky this time and managed to escape death by the skin of your teeth. And now you really think you can survive beyond today?”

Turning around, he dragged Shen Zechuan to the door of the cell and kicked it open before heading out.

“I’m impartial in my duties and will obey the will of the Empress Dowager. But there are plenty of people in Dazhou who can do as they please with no regard for authority. Since you are so hopelessly foolish, then I’ll accede to your wishes. You want someone to kill you—that person is already here!”

The city gates of Qudu suddenly opened wide, and a row of pitch-black heavy armored cavalry swiftly galloped in from beyond the gates, sounding like peals of thunder.

Shen Zechuan was dragged along the path. The Imperial Bodyguards scattered, and the packed crowd split into two to clear the way for the heavy armored cavalry.

A Libei raptor hovered in the sky as the sounds of clanking armor drummed against his chest. The rumble of hooves drew nearer. Shen Zechuan opened his eyes and saw the leader of the heavy armored cavalry charging straight over.

The steed under the heavy armor was like a ferocious beast, huffing out hot clouds of air as it galloped a few steps before them. It was reined in just as it was about to crash into them. Hooves rose high in the air. By the time it came to a stop, the man on the back of the steed had already turned around and dismounted.

Ji Lei stepped forward and said aloud, “Xiao...”

The man did not even look at Ji Lei and headed right for Shen Zechuan. Shen Zechuan had only just moved his shackles when the man kicked Shen Zechuan right on the chest with lightning speed!

The force of this kick was so powerful that Shen Zechuan did not even get the chance to steel himself for it. Blood splattered the moment he opened his mouth. His entire person went tumbling on the ground. For a moment there, he almost puked his guts out.



### Translator's Note:

Will be using “Imperial Bodyguards” in place of “Embroidered Brocade Guards” for 锦衣卫. For consistency purposes, most of the terms in this novel will be from Xie, B., & Mirong, C. (2013). A brief history of the official system in China. and Zhang, Y., Xue, S., Xue, Z., & Ni, L. (2017). Chinese-English Dictionary of Ming Government Official Titles. (other sources in [synopsis](#)).

### Footnotes

1. 司礼监 Directorate of Ceremonial, one of the Twelve Directorates staffed by eunuchs during the Ming Dynasty that's in charge of palace entertainment, ceremonies, punishments and such. The Seal-holding Director of the Ceremonial Directorate (司礼监掌印太监) – the most powerful eunuch position among all the twelve directorates – and the Imperial Bodyguards Commander-in-chief would typically oversee the flogging.
2. one *ke* (一刻) is about 15 minutes. So half a *ke* is about 7-8 minutes.
3. literally immortals from 神仙打架, or immortals fighting, i.e., when people at the top fight or compete with each other
4. 天王老子 generally refers to someone who holds the highest status and most power. That'd be the Jade Emperor in Heaven and the Emperor on Earth. He's also insinuating here that the Empress Dowager's words hold more sway over the Emperor's.
5. 老祖宗 literally old ancestor or forefather; sometimes the top eunuch in the Ming Dynasty is privately addressed as such
6. 三品 Officials were classified in nine hierarchic grades, with grade one being the highest rank. Their salaries ranged according to their rank.
7. 娉婷 also means a graceful, beautiful woman

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 4 : LAST DESCENDANT



Battle boots trampled over the accumulated snow and circled around Shen Zechuan before stopping at his side. The man used his toe to correct the position of Shen Zechuan's face, causing his boots to be smeared with bloodstains. The voice under his helmet was muffled as he asked, "Shen Wei's your old man?"

Shen Zechuan could not stop the blood from gushing out through his clenched teeth. Even as he hastily used his hands, he could not cover it up either. He did not answer.

The man looked down at him for a moment and said, "I'm asking you."

With blood in his mouth, Shen Zechuan lowered his head and uttered a "yeah".

Ji Lei availed himself to the opportunity and said from the side. "He's the eight son of Shen Wei. His name is Shen..."

The man lifted his arms and took off his helmet to reveal a young face. The gyrfalcon circling in the sky rode on the cold wind and landed on his shoulder, sending up a puff of scattered snow. He looked at Shen Zechuan as if he were looking at a pair of worn-out shoes. It was hard to tell if his gaze was one of disdain or loathing; it was as frigid as a blade.

Shen Zechuan did not know him, but he recognized the Libei Armored Cavalry.

Back then, Shen Wei had cut a sorry figure as he retreated to the West. When he arrived at Cizhou, it was already Zhongbo's last line of defense. The Libei Armored Cavalry headed down from north to south. The Hereditary Prince, Xiao Jiming, braved the snow to spur his troops on for three days without rest, crossing the River of Ice<sup>1</sup> straight to Cizhou. Who would have known that Shen Wei did not even manage to defend Cizhou, causing the Libei Armored Cavalry to end up besieged by the enemies? If it were not for Xiao Jiming having reinforcements in place, it would have turned out to be another brutal battle.

After this battle, Libei came to hate the Zhongbo Shen Clan the most.

This man was not Xiao Jiming. But since he could spur a horse on to Qudu with a raptor on his shoulder, then he must have been the Prince of Libei's youngest son and Xiao Jiming's younger brother—Xiao Chiye.

Ji Lei initially harbored the intention to instigate him, but he lost the courage to fan the flames when he saw the Deputy General, Zhao Hui, behind Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye threw his helmet to Zhao Hui in passing. The sides of his lips curled into a smile, and the earlier penetrating stare dissolved away like melting ice. His frivolous temperament instantly materialized. Even the armor on him looked out of place now.

“Your Excellency Ji.” He put his arm around Ji Lei’s shoulders. “I’ve kept you waiting.”

Ji Lei exchanged glances with Xiao Chiye and laughed. He said, “Second Young Master, it has been two years since we last met, and you have become so distant!”

Xiao Chiye pointed to the blade at the side of his waist and said, “I’m carrying a blade, so I’m considered half a soldier.”

It was only then Ji Lei seemed to notice it. He laughed and said, “Excellent blade! Second Young Master came to His Majesty’s rescue this time. It has been hard for you along the way. Let’s have a drink tonight after you have sought an audience with the Emperor!”

Xiao Chiye regretfully motioned Ji Lei to look at the Deputy General, Zhao Hui, behind him. He said, “My eldest brother has sent someone to watch me. How can we drink to our hearts’ content like this? Once I’ve taken a breather in a few days, I’ll treat you.”

Zhao Hui expressionlessly paid his obeisances to Ji Lei.

Ji Lei smiled in response and said to Xiao Chiye. “Then, go on first to the palace. The Guard of Honor is still waiting for you.”

Both men chatted and laughed freely as they walked all the way to the palace. Zhao Hui followed behind them and cast a look at Shen Zechuan as he was leaving. The Imperial Bodyguards at the side caught the hint and dragged Shen Zechuan back.

Ji Lei watched as Xiao Chiye entered the palace. Once the men flanking him were his own men, he spat out a mouthful of saliva like a man down on his luck. The smile on his face disappeared, leaving only discontent behind.

What he had been initially thinking was that since this hoodlum was usually impudent and audacious, it was only to be expected if he ended up killing a man. Who would expect this numbskull to be so crafty that he had actually handled this issue with such care? One kick, and he had let Shen Zechuan off just like that.



Xiao Chiye entered the palace, and Zhao Hui handed him a handkerchief. He wiped his hands as he walked.

Zhao Hui whispered. “Young Master’s kick earlier was too risky. If the last survivor of that Shen dog died on the spot, the Empress Dowager would surely be displeased.”

Xiao Chiye’s smile vanished, and gloominess shadowed his face. He had just withdrawn from the desert battlefield, and the murderous intent and malevolent aura pouring off him were so compelling that the eunuch leading the way before them did not dare to eavesdrop again.

Xiao Chiye said coldly, “My intent was to kick him to death. Old Dog Shen allowed a bloodbath to happen in Zhongbo. We have been burying those soldiers in the Chashi Sinkhole for half a month, and we are still not done burying them. And now the Hua Clan wants to protect that old dog’s remaining descendant for the sake of their personal relationship. How in the world could something go so perfectly according to wishes? Besides, my eldest brother has been carrying out raids for thousands of *li*.<sup>2</sup> After this battle, there is nothing else to bestow or confer him with. Our Libei is at the peak of its glory. It has long become a thorn in the Empress Dowager’s side.”

Zhao Hui said, “The Hereditary Prince often says that the moon waxes only to wane.<sup>3</sup> The reward from Qudu this time is most likely a Hongmen Banquet.<sup>4</sup> Young Master, the main forces are stationed hundreds of *li* away from the capital, and the aristocratic clans’ eyes and ears are everywhere in the city. At this point in time, we must not act impulsively.”

Xiao Chiye threw the handkerchief back to Zhao Hui and said, “Got it.”

“Is Ah<sup>5</sup> Ye here?”

Emperor Xiande fed the parrot.

The feathered animal had been raised until it was impeccably wily. Imitating Emperor Xiande’s words, it opened its beak and said, “A-Ye is here! A-Ye is here! A-Ye pays his obeisances to Your Majesty! Your Majesty! Your Majesty! Long live! Long live! Long live Your Majesty!”

With the feed in his hands, Xiao Jiming answered, “He should be here now.”

“Two years, huh.” Emperor Xiande teased the parrot. “I haven’t seen him for two years. This lad takes after your father. He grows so fast. I’m afraid he will be even taller than you when he’s all grown.”

Xiao Jiming said, "He has grown taller, but he's still a child at heart. All he does is to stir up trouble at home."

Emperor Xiande was about to say something when his coughs started up again. Pan Rugui held out a cup of tea to him from the side. Emperor Xiande moistened his throat for a moment. Before he could continue his words, he heard the announcement of Xiao Chiye's arrival outside.

"Come in." Emperor Xiande sat back on the chair and put up an arm. "Come in and let me take a look at you."

The eunuch carefully lifted the curtain, and Xiao Chiye strode across the door and entered. With an air of coldness around him, he knelt at the bottom and kowtowed to Emperor Xiande to pay his obeisances.

With a smile, Emperor Xiande said, "What a fine lad, looking all mighty in your armor. I heard that when the Biansha Twelve Tribes raided the food supplies route and relay station at the frontier the year before last, you showed your prowess and captured several people alive. Is that right?"

Xiao Chiye laughed and said, "Your Majesty thinks too highly of me. I've indeed caught a few men, but they are all small fry."

The year before last, the Biansha Twelve Tribes carried out a raid on Guanbei's food supplies route. Leading the troops, Xiao Chiye made his debut in battle. In the end, he was thrashed up pretty badly by those Biansha baldies. It was Xiao Jiming who cleaned up the mess for him. This incident turned into a joke after news of it spread that year. Consequently, Xiao Chiye was reduced to an imbecile known to all.

Seeing him thus, Emperor Xiande's voice softened, "You are young, and to be able to spur a horse on while brandishing a spear is already a skill in itself. However, your eldest brother is one of my Dazhou's Four Great Generals. I'm sure he usually gives you some pointers on military tactics. Oh, Jiming. I can see that A-Ye is aware of the need to keep forging ahead. You mustn't be too stern on him."

Xiao Jiming voiced his compliance.

Emperor Xiande added, "This time, Libei Armored Cavalry has performed meritorious service in coming to my rescue. Other than yesterday's major reward, I want to give A-Ye a small reward today as well."

Xiao Jiming rose to his feet to bow and say, "It's his blessing to receive His Majesty's favor. However, he has no merit and no contribution to speak of. How could he receive such a lofty reward?"

Emperor Xiande paused for a moment before saying, "You have launched a long-range raid over thousands of *li* and crossed the River of Ice overnight. Your merits are immeasurable. I'll even bestow a reward upon your wife, Lu Yizhi, this time, let alone A-Ye. A-Ye, Libei is a frontier of strategic importance. You are still young, so it's inevitable for you to find it dreary and boring if you remain there for long. Now, I'm intending for you to come to Qudu to be a merry Commander-in-chief of the Imperial Regalia.<sup>6</sup> Are you willing to?"

Xiao Chiye had been remaining motionless with his head lowered. On hearing this, he raised his head and said, "I'm naturally willing if it is a reward bestowed by Your Majesty. All those in my family are warriors and generals. I can't even find a place to enjoy a song. If I remain in Qudu, I'd enjoy myself too much to even think of home or work."

Emperor Xiande laughed aloud and said, "What a lad. I'm asking you to be a guard, but you just want to have fun! If your father were to hear of this, I'm afraid you will not be able to escape another beating."

The atmosphere in the hall relaxed. Emperor Xiande retained both brothers to have a meal together with him. When it was time for them to withdraw, Emperor Xiande asked, "I heard that Qidong had sent someone over too. Who is it?"

Xiao Jiming replied, "It's Lu Guangbai from the Bianjun Commandery."

Emperor Xiande seemed to be a little tired. Leaning against his chair, he waved his hand and said, "Tell him to come tomorrow."

Xiao Chiye followed Xiao Jiming out. The brothers had not walked far when they saw a man kneeling on the verandah. Pan Rugui approached and leaned forward to say with a beam on his face, "General Lu, General Lu!"

Lu Guangbai opened his eyes and said wearily, "Pan *Gonggong*."

Pan Rugui said, "You can stop kneeling. His Majesty the Emperor is tired today. He can only see you tomorrow."

The reticent Lu Guangbai nodded his head and rose to his feet to head out with the Xiao Clan brothers. It was only after they stepped out of the palace gates and mounted their horses that Xiao Jiming asked, "Why do you keep kneeling?"

Lu Guangbai said, "His Majesty does not want to see me."

Both men went silent for a moment, knowing full well the reason for this. But Lu Guangbai did not feel bitter about it. He looked sideways at



Xiao Chiye and asked, “Did His Majesty reward you?”

Xiao Chiye held the reins and answered, “He’s keeping me on a leash.”

Lu Guangbai reached out to pat the back of Xiao Chiye’s shoulders and said, “How is this putting a leash on you? The ones he’s keeping a leash on are your eldest brother and your father.”

Xiao Chiye listened to the sound of the horse’s hooves for a while before he said, “His Majesty mentioned my eldest sister-in-law. I almost broke out in a cold sweat then.”

Lu Guangbai and Xiao Jiming burst out laughing together. Lu Guangbai asked, “Are His Highness and Yizhi well?”

Xiao Jiming nodded. With his cloak wrapped around his court attire, and with his armor removed, he was not as young and valiant like Xiao Chiye. Yet, he had a presence that inexplicably commanded attention. He said, “They are both well. My father is still concerned about the Old General’s leg injury. This time, he specially instructed me to bring the medicinal plaster<sup>7</sup> he usually uses. Yizhi is fine too. It’s just that she has been missing all of you very much ever since she’s with child. She wrote many letters; I’ve brought them too. You can read them when you come over to the residence later.”

Lu Guangbai pulled the reins uneasily and said, “Everyone in the family is a warrior; there’s no mother or sister-in-law who could go over to accompany her. It’s freezing cold during winter in Libei. I’ve been worrying ever since I heard of the news when I led the troops out of the Bianjun Commandery.”

“Yeah.” Xiao Chiye turned his head as well and said, “It’s so dangerous in Cizhou. Brother is now a caged man and told me not to write home so as not to worry sister-in-law. The battle broke out too suddenly. It was only when he left home that brother and sister-in-law found out about the pregnancy.”

Xiao Jiming has always been able to show restraint. He merely said, “Father is keeping watch at home this time to protect Yizhi. Don’t worry. I’ll not go anywhere else once I return home after the new year.”<sup>8</sup>

Lu Guangbai sighed and said, “In recent years, Libei has been caught in the heart of the storm. Every time we dispatch troops, we have to think twice. This time, we can only hate Shen Wei for shrinking back without putting up a fight and leaving us with such a rotten mess. When my troops passed the Chashi Sinkhole, the blood was all over the horses’ hooves. He

could not escape the death penalty, so he immolated himself first. But there's indeed something odd about this matter. Jiming, you captured his son and had him sent to the capital. Did you notice anything?"

Xiao Jiming gathered his cloak in the wind and said, "Shen Wei has been one to attach great importance to the distinction between those of lawful and common birth. This son of his is his eighth son of *shu* birth. There's no one in his mother's family to back him, and so he was abandoned in Duanzhou to be raised there. It stands to reason that he has no access to inside information. There must be a reason His Majesty is so insistent."

Xiao Chiye put on his helmet and said, "It's hard to quell the public wrath. His Majesty personally handed the military power for the Garrisons of the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo over to Shen Wei. Now that such a thing has happened, he has to kill someone as proof of his impartiality."

However, the one with imperial sovereignty over Dazhou was not the Emperor, but the Empress Dowager, who held court in place of the Emperor behind a screen.<sup>9</sup> Now that the situation was at a stalemate, everyone all had their eyes on this life of Shen Zechuan. If he pleaded guilty and died, then that would be all's well that ends well; if he did not die, then he would be doomed to be a thorn in the flesh. The Libei Xiao Clan was now at their peak of glory and splendor. Even Qidong Commander-in-chief of the Qi Clan had to give way to them. Xiao Jiming was the "the River of Ice Armored Cavalry" among the Four Great Generals, and he was also the brother-in-law<sup>10</sup> of Lu Guangbai of the Qidong Bianjun Commandery. To put it more explicitly, this was a man who could mobilize the Libei Armored Cavalry and rely on his wife's family to deploy the Bianjun Commandery Garrison troops. Qudu had no choice but to guard against him.

"Her Majesty is bent on preserving his life." Lu Guangbai pursed his thin lips. "She's gunning to raise a jackal in the future who can rightfully and legitimately recover Zhongbo and, at the same time, submissive enough to be at her beck and call. When the time comes, she can consolidate power from within, while reining in Libei from without. She will be a thorn in our side. Jiming, we must not let this lad live!"

The gale on the street outside brought snow that felt like slicing knives as it scraped across their cheeks. The three men spoke no further. In this

endless silence, Zhao Hui, who had been silent behind them, urged his horse on forward.

“Young Master previously kicked him with eighty percent force right at his heart. His breathing was already weak, and his old wounds bled again when he fell to the ground.” Zhao Hui pondered it over. “Yet, he did not die immediately.”

Xiao Chiye lifted the horsewhip and said, “He has been on trial for so many days and was even flogged. He was already hanging on by his last breath. That kick of mine was to send him on his way to the Underworld. If he doesn’t die after tonight, then I’ll acknowledge that he’s a tenacious one.”

However, Zhao Hui frowned and said, “He’s skinny and frail, and he has yet to recover from his cold all this time. By all logic, he should have died a long time ago. Yet, he is still hanging on. There is undoubtedly something odd about it. The Hereditary Prince...”

Xiao Jiming swept a glance at them out of the corners of his eyes, and both men shut their mouths. He gazed out at the road before them in the intense wind. After a moment’s silence, he said, “Whether he lives or not is all fated.”

The wind howled, and the metal chimes under the eaves on both sides clanked against one another. The murderous aura among the snow dispersed. Sitting level atop the horse, Xiao Jiming calmly and unhurriedly hit the horse to spur it forward.

Zhao Hui lowered his head and stooped over as he urged his horse on to catch up.

The expression under Xiao Chiye’s helmet was vague. Lu Guangbai punched him on the shoulder and said, “He’s your eldest brother, after all.”

Xiao Chiye seemed to smile as he murmured, “... Fate, huh?”



#### Footnotes

1. 冰河 River of Ice, i.e. also translated as glacier.
2. 里 li, ancient measure of length, 1 li = approx. 500m
3. 月盈则缺, (花盛而谢) a variant of 月满则亏, 水满则溢 The moon waxes only to wane, (and flowers bloom only to fall/ water

brims only to overflow ). i.e. things/situations reverse or decline when they reach their extreme or limit.

4. 鸿门宴 Hongmen Banquet; a banquet set up with the aim of murdering or dooming a guest. Refers to a famous episode in 206 BC when future Han emperor Liu Bang (刘邦) escaped attempted murder by his rival Xiangyu (项羽).

5. “Ah” is a prefix used before monosyllabic names to indicate kinship and/or familiarity.

6. The Imperial Bodyguards or Brocade Guards (锦衣卫) were originally known as the Yiluan Si (仪鸾司/仪鸾司), or Imperial Regalia Service. It was only changed by Emperor Hongwu (historically) during the Ming Dynasty in 1382 to the Imperial Bodyguards Command (锦衣卫亲军指挥使司).



7.

8. 膏药 medicinal/herbal paste on a plaster, used in TCM for treating contusions, rheumatism etc.

9. 年后 Refers to the lunar/Chinese new year

10. 垂帘听政 literally to hold court behind a screen or curtain. A practice in ancient China, where the Empress or Empress dowager was allowed to preside over the imperial court without actually being seen by her subjects since women were prohibited from politics. This would usually be done by a child emperor's mother who would serve as regent and rule in place of the Emperor.

11. 妹婿 He's married to the younger sister of Lu Guangbai.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 5 : FRONTLINE



The medicinal decoction leaked through the corners of Shen Zechuan's lips and soaked through the front of his clothes. The physician was so anxious that he sweated profusely and kept wiping his temples and forehead.

"He wouldn't swallow the medicine." The physician said, "He definitely can't make it through this!"

Ge Qingqing held his blade and stood to look at Shen Zechuan for a moment before he asked, "Is there nothing else you can do?"

The physician's hands that were holding up the medicine bowl trembled, causing the spoon in it to clatter against the bowl. He kowtowed to Ge Qingqing with all his might and said, "It can't be done! He won't make it! Please prepare the straw mat<sup>1</sup> as soon as possible."

Ge Qingqing looked to be in a predicament. He said, "Feed him first.", then turned around to step out of the door. Ji Lei was standing just outside. Ge Qingqing paid his obeisances and said, "Your Excellency, the physician said he won't make it."

Ji Lei crushed the peanut shell and blew away the powder. He asked, "Has he breathed his last?"

Ge Qingqing replied, "He's still hanging on to his last breath."

With his hands at his back, Ji Lei turned his head back to look at Ge Qingqing. "Keep an eye on him. Before he dies, get him to sign the written confession."

Ge Qingqing nodded and watched Ji Lei leave. He stood in the courtyard for a moment, then said to the subordinate beside him, "Go and call the errand-runner over."

A little while later, a hunched errand-runner all wrapped in coarse linen came pushing a cart. The sky was dark by now, and the Imperial Prison was under tight security. Ge Qingqing raised a lantern to illuminate the way and motioned for the man to follow him in.

The physician had already left. There was only an oil lamp lit in the room. Shen Zechuan lay on the bed with his face totally devoid of color. His hands and legs were as icy as those of a corpse.

Ge Qingqing stepped aside and said to the errand-runner, "Uncle Ji... Here he is."

The errand runner slowly stripped away the bundle of coarse cloth to reveal a face destroyed by fire. He stared at Shen Zechuan, took two steps over, and stretched out a trembling hand to caress Shen Zechuan's hair. When he saw how skinny and bloodied all over Shen Zechuan was, he could not stop his tears from coursing down his old cheeks.

"Chuan-er."<sup>2</sup> Ji Gang's voice was hoarse as he called out, "Shifu is here!"

Ge Qingqing blew out the lantern and said, "Uncle Ji, don't be afraid. Ever since those from the prison knew that he was your disciple, they have been treating him with meticulous care. The previous interrogation looked like heavy torture, but it did not hurt his foundation. During the flogging, the brothers more or less went easy on him on your account. He won't be maimed even with twenty strikes. However, the eunuch from the palace overseeing the punishment has sharp, discerning eyes, so we didn't dare to be too slack. Fortunately, Third Missy Hua came in time. Otherwise, Pan Gonggong would have gotten suspicious."

Ji Gang's hair was already half-white. With his world-weary face shedding tears, he said, "I, Ji Gang, will surely repay this kindness in the future!"

Ge Qingqing hurriedly said, "Uncle Ji! How can you think this way?! What our brothers have repaid are the kindness and affection you have showered on us when you guided us and saved our lives in the past." With that, he sighed again. "Who would have expected a Cheng Yaojin<sup>3</sup> to come charging out of nowhere this suddenly? The Second Young Master of the Xiao Clan was really trying to kill him with that kick. Uncle Ji, can he still be saved?"

Ji Gang felt Shen Zechuan's pulse and said with a forced smile, "Good lad. He did well with the technique Ah-Mu<sup>4</sup> taught him. It's still not at the point of no return yet. Don't be afraid, my son. Shifu is here!"

Shen Zechuan had started following Ji Gang at the age of seven and trained martial arts under him together with Ji Mu. Each strike from Ji Clan's Boxing Style was tough and fierce at the outset. It had to be complemented by the Ji Clan's mental cultivation techniques. Those without a steadfast will could not practice it. Ji Gang was a heavy drinker when he was back at home. He taught the older one and forgot about the

younger one. As the older brother, Ji Mu had to teach his younger brother a stance every time he learned one. No one would have expected Shen Zechuan to have mastered it pretty well over the years.

Ge Qingqing bent over for a look and said, "But he's still young after all. I'm afraid his body will be in bad shape after going through this. Uncle Ji, I've sent someone to decoct the medicine the physician prescribed again. Please see if you can feed it to him."

Shen Zechuan was burning up so much his mouth felt parched.

His whole body was hurting all over. It was as if he was lying on the main street of Qudu, getting crushed by the horse carriages coming and going.

The pain was like an endless inferno consuming Shen Zechuan's body. In the darkness, he dreamed of the heavy dancing snow, Ji Mu's blood, the cold of the sinkhole, and the kick he received before Xiao Chiye.

Ji Lei was right. To remain alive now was to suffer. He received the flesh and blood Shen Wei gave him, and so he had to endure such punishments. He took over Shen Wei's sins and became the sinner the loyal souls of those who had died unjust deaths howled him out to be. By putting on these shackles, he would always have to shoulder this burden as he moved on.

But he couldn't take it lying down!

Someone suddenly pried his teeth apart, and a warm current flooded into his throat. The bitter taste of the medicine made Shen Zechuan's eyes watered. Hearing a familiar call, he forced his eyes open.

Ji Gang fed him medicine and wiped away Shen Zechuan's tears with his rough fingers. He whispered, "Chuan-er, it's shifu!"

A sob formed in Shen Zechuan's throat, causing him to choke out the medicine along with his tears. He stretched out his fingers to hook the corner of Ji Gang's clothes and clenched his teeth, fearing this to be merely a dream he had made in the stupor of illness.

Ji Gang's face was ugly. He turned his head slightly to avoid the light from the oil lamp and said, "Chuan-er, stop harboring the will to die! You're the only one shifu has left in this ignoble existence of his."

Shen Zechuan could not stop his tears from streaming down his cheeks right there and then. He averted his gaze to stare at the pitch-black roof and whispered, "Shifu..."

His eyes gradually focused amidst the whirl of the wind and took on a hint of malevolence.

“I won’t die.” He said in a hoarse voice, “Shifu, I won’t die.”



The next day, Emperor Xiande rewarded the Three Armies with a feast. Apart from Libei Armored Cavalry and Qidong Garrison Troops outside the city, the palace also hosted a banquet and led all the various ministers and officials to entertain the Commander-in-chief of the army.

Having changed into his court attire, Xiao Chiye overshadowed the delicateness of the scholars around him as he took his seat. The embroidered lion beast set against a pattern of clouds<sup>5</sup> on him radiated an air of intensity and awe. But his frivolousness reared its head when he sat down for a conversation.

The civil officials engrossed in drinking kept stealing glances at him. As they said, a tiger father will not beget a dog for a son.<sup>6</sup> But how was it that it was only the Hereditary Prince Xiao who took after his father?

It was with tacit understanding they nitpicked at Xiao Chiye’s every move and action. They could feel that sense of willfulness and frivolousness hitting them right in the face. He was a world of difference from Xiao Jiming, who was sitting upright in the seat of honor.

“Don’t detach yourself from this all.” Lu Guangbai sat beside him to urge him, “Since His Majesty has rewarded you, he will surely call you up later.”

Xiao Chiye caressed the walnut in his palm, looking a little out of it.

Lu Guangbai turned his head to the side to look at him and said, “You went out drinking with others last night, huh.”

“Make merry while you can.” Xiao Chiye slacked in his seat. “If anyone dares to do a Xiang Zhuang’s Sword Dance<sup>7</sup> later, I’ll do a Fan Kuai<sup>8</sup> while in a state of inebriation. That would be the best of both worlds, wouldn’t it?”

“That’s fine too.” Lu Guangbai poured wine. “But drinking is bad for your health. If you want to be a good commander-in-chief, then change this bad habit of yours.”

“I was born at the wrong time.” Xiao Chiye threw Lu Guangbai a walnut. “I won’t have the chance to play the hero now that the Four Generals seats are full. If you can no longer make it someday, remember to let me know in advance. It won’t be too late for me to kick the habit then.”



Lu Guangbai said, "Then I'm afraid you have to wait."

Both men laughed for a moment and drank up half of the wine. They listened as the topic of discussion at the banquet changed to the Zhongbo Shen Clan.

Grasping the walnut in his hand, Lu Guangbai listened attentively for a moment and asked, "Didn't they say last night that this person won't make it?"

Behind him, Zhao Hui responded in a hushed tone, "That's right. Didn't Young Master say that the kick was to send him on his way to the Underworld?"

Xiao Chiye denied it. "Did I say that?" The other two looked at him in silence, prompting him to ask, "What?"

Lu Guangbai said, "He didn't die."

Zhao Hui said, "He didn't die."

Xiao Chiye exchanged glances with the other two for a moment and said, "It's none of my business he's a tough one. The King of Hell isn't my old man."

Lu Guangbai looked up and said, "Let's see what His Majesty has in store for him. He's really one tough cookie."

Kneeling behind then, Zhao Hui lowered his head to stuff himself with food. He said offhandedly, "Someone must be helping him in secret."

"Even if he doesn't die, he'll be maimed." Xiao Chiye glanced coldly at the Hua Clan seat a short distance away. "The Empress Dowager is already advanced in age. All she can do now is to rack her brains trying to groom a stray dog."

"What a sin." Zhao Hui emotionlessly stuffed a spare rib into his mouth.

Seeing that the atmosphere was satisfactory enough after three rounds of drinking, Emperor Xiande spoke, "Jiming."

Xiao Jiming paid his obeisances and stood by to take his orders.

Looking as if he could not hold his wine, Emperor Xiande leaned against the Dragon Throne<sup>9</sup> and said, "When all is said and done, there is no conclusive evidence for Shen Wei's troops' defeat and whether he had colluded with the enemy. That Shen..."

Pan Rugui bent over and whispered, "Your Majesty, it's Shen Zechuan."

Emperor Xiande paused for a moment, but instead of continuing, he turned to the Empress Dowager and asked, “What does Imperial Mother<sup>10</sup> think?”

A solemn silence descended upon the banquet as the entire court of civil and military officials lowered their heads to listen.

The Empress Dowager wore a *zaoluo*<sup>11</sup> headband with a depiction of a dragon dropping a pearl among golden clouds. A row of golden emerald leaf beads circled around the headdress with a dazzling array of big pearls hanging from it. She sat – poised and dignified – high up on her seat. Her neatly combed glossy hair was the color of frost. No one in the entire banquet hall dared to raise their head to look directly at her.

The Empress Dowager said, “Our morale suffered a blow in the battle of Zhongbo all because Shen Wei panicked and lost his presence of mind. But now that he had immolated himself due to fear of punishment, and his descendants have all died in battle, there’s only this son of common birth left behind. It goes against benevolence and righteousness to eliminate his whole clan. There is no reason we can’t let him live so that he will feel gratitude towards us.”

The banquet hall was silent. Lu Guangbai suddenly spoke up. “This subject<sup>12</sup> doesn’t think it’s appropriate.” He took three steps out of the file of officials to kneel in the hall and continued, “Her Majesty is benevolent. But the battle of Zhongdu is different from past battles. Although there is no evidence that Shen Wei colluded with the enemy, he is, nevertheless, still suspected of it. This lad is his remaining descendant. If we let him live, I fear he will become a danger in our own backyard in the future.”

The Empress Dowager looked at Lu Guangbai for a moment and said, “The Earl<sup>13</sup> of Biansha has been stationed in the desert to defend it for decades, and he doesn’t exactly emerge victorious every battle.”

Lu Guangbai replied, “Although my father is not invincible, no external enemies have ever been able to push deep into the territories of the Bianjun Commandery for decades.”

The big pearls beside the Empress Dowager’s ears swayed gently. She said, “It’s precisely because of this that it’s even more pertinent to teach him protocol and virtue so that he can understand the disastrous consequences of this war. It’s easy to kill a man. The horses of the Biansha Cavalry stepped into Zhongbo and killed tens of thousands of Dazhou commoners. We have

yet to seek redress for the humiliation of our Empire. What crime is there for a child to be guilty of?"

"This subject finds it inappropriate as well."

The Deputy Senior Grand Secretary of the Grand Secretariat,<sup>14</sup> Hai Liangyi, who had remained quiet all this while, supported himself up from the table and kneeled down as well.

"Her Majesty is benevolent, but this is no trivial matter. Even if Shen Wei did not collude with the enemy, he still deserves to be beheaded after this battle. Moreover, this child has been tried and interrogated thrice, and his confession statement is all over the place. He insisted that Shen Wei did not collude with the enemy. But he's a son of common birth Shen Wei had raised elsewhere. If he had no idea that Shen Wei had colluded with the enemies, then how would he know for sure that he didn't? It can be seen that he is cunning by nature; he lacks credibility. Just as General Lu has said, if we keep the last descendant of the Shen Clan alive, he will one day become the scourge of trouble in our own backyard!"

Instead of being furious, the Empress Dowager said, "Secretariat Elder<sup>15</sup> Hai, please rise quickly."

After Pan Rugui helped Hai Liangyi up, the Empress Dowager said, "It's as my dear ministers said. I've<sup>16</sup> been biased in my thinking. I'll leave the decision-making on this matter to the Emperor."

Under the watchful eyes of his ministers, Emperor Xiande coughed feebly. He accepted the handkerchief Pan Rugui handed him and covered his mouth. After a long silence, he finally spoke.

"What Imperial Mother has said is not without reason. The child is innocent. However, when all is said and done, Shen Wei's troops were still defeated, and he had indeed abandoned the city. On account that there is only this bloodline left in all nine generations of his clan, I'll give this child a chance to reflect on his sin and redeem himself. Ji Lei."

"This subject is at your command."

"Take this child into custody at Zhao Zui Temple.<sup>17</sup> Without my order, he cannot venture out!"

Xiao Chiye threw the broken pieces of walnut onto the plate.

Zhao Hui asked, "Young Master, aren't you eating?"

Xiao Chiye said, "Maimed and useless. Who wants?"

Zhao Hui's eyeballs followed the plate as it turned. He said in a lowered voice, "Isn't this to the satisfaction of all? We didn't get what we

wanted, neither did the others.”

“Caging him in is still better than letting him out.” Lu Guangbai returned to his seat and said.

“Not necessarily.” Xiao Chiye pointed to himself. “Am I not a caged man too?”

Lu Guangbai and Zhao Hui said in unison. “Good for you.”



P/S: [Character glossary](#) added! To avoid spoilers, the list will be updated as the translation of the story progresses, e.g. when new characters are revealed or when the characters’ titles and ranks change.

#### Footnotes

1. One of the simplest forms of burial. For the poor who can’t afford a coffin or unworthy/unidentified people, their corpses are usually simply wrapped in a straw mat before being buried or thrown into a mass grave.
2. “~er” (which also means ‘son’) is a suffix normally used as a term of endearment.
3. 半路杀出个程咬金 Cheng Yaojin ambushes the enemy. Cheng Yaojin (589-665) was a general in the period between Sui and Tang Dynasties, who often ambushed his enemies on the roads. This proverb is used to describe a situation where someone shows up unexpectedly and disrupts a plan. It is also used to describe an unwelcome busybody who shows up where they are not wanted.
4. “Ah” is a prefix used before monosyllabic names to indicate kinship and/or familiarity.



朝服 | 黄强文史

- 5.
6. Refers to the rank badge on his court attire. Animals were used on rank badges or mandarin squares (a large embroidered badge sewn onto the surcoat of an official to indicate the rank of the official wearing it) for military officials, while birds were used for civil officials. The lion is a symbol used for Grade 1 and 2 military officials. (Grades 1 and 2 are top-rank officials).
7. 虎父无犬子 literally, a tiger father will not beget a dog for a son. i.e., like father like son, a valiant father would have a valiant son and so on.
8. 项庄舞剑 (意在沛公) lit. Xiang Zhuang (项庄) performs the sword dance, (but his mind is set on Liu Bang); refers to 206 BC plot to murder Liu Bang (刘邦), Duke of Pei and future Han emperor, during a sword dance at Feast at Hongmen; i.e., an elaborate deception to hide malicious intent or to act with a hidden motive.
9. Fan Kuai (樊哙) was a military general of the early Western Han dynasty, also known for defending Liu Bang at the Feast at Hongmen, which was actually a trap set to kill Liu Bang.



- 10.
11. Dragon throne (龙椅); the imperial throne or seat of the Emperor.
12. Royal/Imperial Mother or Mother Empress, or *muhou* (母后); Term of address for ‘mother’ the Emperor and his siblings used for the Empress Dowager.
13. 皂罗 *zaoluo*, a thin black silk fabric. It also refers to the headdress made of *zaoluo*.
14. 臣 *chen*, an official, minister, or subject of the Emperor. It’s also used to refer to oneself while conversing with the Emperor, it has the same connotation as “I, your servant/subject”
15. Earl (伯) is one of the noble titles in the Ming Dynasty, below Duke (公) and Marquis (侯).
16. 内阁 Grand Secretariat, or also known as the Cabinet, is a central government institution during the Ming dynasty.
17. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the Grand Secretary of the Grand Secretariat (内阁大学士) was addressed as *gelao* (阁老)
18. 哀家 *ai-jia*. An imperial term for “I” that a widowed Empress/Empress Dowager used to refer to herself. I’ll just be using “I”, “me”, “my”, etc, in the text for easier reading, but the Empress Dowager in this novel always uses “ai-jia” when referring to herself.

19. 寺 generally refers to a monastery or temple but in ancient China, it also refers to a government bureau, otherwise also translated as Court. This temple here is more like a secluded building that serves as a detention area to reflect on one's sin.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 6 : IMPRISONMENT



It was a rare sunny day in Qudu the day Shen Zechuan entered Zhao Zui Temple. White snow covered the palace tiles, with green plums mirrored on vermillion walls. Sunlight shone through the eaves, casting slanting lines of yin and yang<sup>1</sup> before his feet.

He had just recovered from a bout of severe illness and was skinny to the point of being skeletal. At fifteen years of age, his past and old dreams were like ashes scattered clean by this biting cold north wind the moment he opened his eyes.

Ge Qingqing went down the stairs first. He turned his head to look back at him and said, “It’s getting late.”

Shen Zechuan supported himself against the pillar and slowly made his way down the stairs. He was neither accustomed nor terrified to be exposed under the sun. The childishness of youth seemed to have been pulverized amidst that pallor of his face. Other than the fragility of illness, they could discern nothing else from his expression.

Ji Lei was waiting at the entrance of Zhao Zui Temple with Xiaofuzi following beside him. Raising his head to look at this ancient temple, Xiaofuzi marveled, “What a magnificent and queer temple. It really doesn’t seem to be the place to imprison people.”

“You don’t know its past.” Ji Lei said, “Zhao Zui Temple was originally a place for the imperial clan to offer incense. Lord Guangcheng’s handwritten orders were even previously offered in worship inside. In its heyday, all the eminent monks in the world assembled here, and large-scale intellectual discourse was all the rage for a time.”

“Why haven’t I heard any mention of it in recent years?” Xiaofuzi sized up the temple gates. “It’s rather dilapidated. There haven’t been any repairs done on it for a long time, have it?”

Ji Lei spent a moment composing himself and said, “It’s been twenty years. The condemned Crown Prince instigated the Eight Great Training Divisions of Qudu to plot a rebellion. After his troops’ defeat, he retreated here and fought back like a cornered beast. In the end, blood splattered all over the Buddha statue as he slit his own throat to end his life. From then



on, the former Emperor no longer set foot in his place. He stripped the temple of its name and renamed it Zhao Zui.”

“Oh man, twenty years.” Xiaofuzi clutched his throat as if this was a surprising thing to him. “I wasn’t even born yet! That was the time His Excellency Ji just joined the Imperial Bodyguards, wasn’t it?”

Ji Lei did not answer him. He turned to the rear and rebuked. “Why is he not here yet?”

Xiaofuzi was still circling around the “Zhao Zui” stone tablet. When he was done, he asked Ji Lei, “But I’ve never heard of anyone being locked up inside either?”

Ji Lei seemed annoyed and said, “Those imprisoned are all the secretariat ministers involved in the case of the condemned Crown Prince. The clans of the civil officials and military commanders involved were all executed. Those that remained are few and far between. It has been twenty years, who would still remember?!”

The prisoner wagon<sup>2</sup> rolled up to them. Ge Qingqing paid his obeisances to Ji Lei and said, “Your Excellency, I’ve brought him here.”

“Send him in.” Ji Lei then said to Shen Zechuan, “After today’s farewell, we probably won’t have the chance to meet again. The Emperor’s magnanimity knows no bound. You must remember this with gratitude for the rest of your life. ”

Shen Zechuan turned a deaf ear as he entered the Zhao Zui Temple. That vermilion door with paint peeling off it moved with a loud rumble. He stood in the middle and looked at Ji Lei. Ji Lei was displeased by his gaze and was about to lose his temper when he saw Shen Zechuan unveiled a smile on his cleansed face.

He’s gone mad.

Ji Lei thought subconsciously. But then he heard Shen Zechuan say, “Your Excellency Ji.” His voice was calm. “We will meet again.”

The vermilion door shut with a “bang” and stirred up a cloud of dust. Xiaofuzi covered his nose and coughed while stepping back repeatedly. But then, he saw Ji Lei standing motionlessly where he was.

Ji Lei only returned to his senses after being called a few times. He swiftly mounted the horse. With the sun shining on his back, he cursed, “... Bah. Just my rotten luck!”



Xiao Chiye was riding his horse across the street when he bumped into Ji Lei. Reining it in, he laughed and said, “Old Ji, aren’t you on duty before the Emperor?”

Ji Lei looked covetously at the battle steed under Xiao Chiye’s crotch and said, “I have to take that surviving criminal into custody at the temple today. I’m now hurrying over to the palace. Second Young Master, that’s an excellent steed! I heard you tamed it yourself?”

“I had free time. “Xiao Chiye lashed out the horsewhip with a crack, and the gyrfalcon in the sky swiftly swooped down onto his shoulder. He said, “Torturing falcons<sup>3</sup> and playing with horses are all the talents I have.”

“Once you assume your duties after the new year,<sup>4</sup> you’ll be busy.” Ji Lei said, “Qudu’s latest eminence! I’m not on duty tomorrow. How about a drink together?”

Xiao Chiye said, “If the wine isn’t good, I’m not going.”

Ji Lei laughed out loud and said, “Of course it’s good wine! Who dares to invite the Second Young Master if the wine isn’t good? I’ll call at your residence later to invite you. Would the Hereditary Prince have the time to have fun together with us?”

Xiao Chiye caressed his bone thumb ring<sup>5</sup> and said, “My eldest brother, huh? He’s not a fan of such activities. Why? It’s not prestigious enough for you if I’m the only one going?”

Ji Lei hurriedly said, “That’s not what I said! Second Young Master, that settles it then.”

Xiao Chiye acknowledged him and kicked the horse to leave. But just before leaving, he seemed to recall something and asked, “How did that surviving criminal look? Can he walk?”

“Walk, he can.” Ji Lei responded. “But not nimbly enough from the way I see it. How many can actually survive floggings without post-injuries? He is lucky to be able to walk.”

Xiao Chiye did not say a word more as he spurred his horse on and left.



A little later, the errand-runner delivered the meals to Zhao Zui Temple. Shen Zechuan lit the oil lamp but did not touch the food. Grabbing the oil lamp, he walked a round along the small corridor beside the main hall.

The dust had been accumulating here for a long time. Some side rooms in the wings had fallen into a state of dilapidation with the doors and

windows already rotten. Shen Zechuan saw several skeletons that toppled over when the wind blew. Since he did not come across any living creature, he returned to the main hall.

The Buddha statue had collapsed, and the incense altar was old but still durable. The size below was just right. Shen Zechuan hung up a tattered curtain cloth and lay down underneath with his clothes on. The cold from the floor made his legs hurt. He endured the pain and closed his eyes to count the hours.

Fresh snow started to fall in the latter half of the night. Shen Zechuan listened as the night owl hooted twice. He sat up and lifted open the cloth just in time to see Ji Gang step through the door before him.

“After you’ve eaten,” Ji Gang opened the cloth bundle.<sup>6</sup> “Train. This place can’t keep the wind out at night. It’s too cold. Shifu is afraid you will fall ill if you sleep.”

Shen Zechuan looked at the roasted chicken wrapped in oil paper and said, “One should abstain from meat when ill. Shifu, you can have it.”

Ji Gang tore up the roasted chicken for him and said, “Bullshit! This is the time where you should eat your fill. Shifu likes to eat the rear end of the chicken; even at home, it’s my favorite. Save it for me.”

Shen Zechuan said, “Since I’m following you, I will eat what you eat.”

Ji Gang glanced at him and laughed. He said, “Brat.”

Master and disciple split the roasted chicken among them. Ji Gang seemed to have grown a mouthful of iron teeth as he chewed even the chicken bones into pieces. He handed the bottle gourd to Shen Zechuan and said, “Drink some wine if you really can’t put up with the cold. But don’t drink too much. Just sip accordingly, just like your brother.”

They never mentioned Zhongbo, Duanzhou, or even the Chashi Sinkhole these days. Shiniang and Ji Mu were unspoken wounds both master and disciple shared. Both of them thought they had hidden it pretty well, but they never realized that the blood was already seeping out and that the pain was mutual.

Shen Zechuan took a sip and handed it over to Ji Gang.

Ji Gang did not take it. He said, “I’ve quit. Shifu doesn’t drink anymore.”

Silence descended in the hall. Without the shelter of the door, the snow fell before their very eyes, becoming the only scenery in this endless night.

Ji Gang asked, “Why are you in a daze?”

Shen Zechuan said, “Shifu.”

“Just say it if you have something to say.”

“I’m sorry.”

After a long silence, Ji Gang said, “It’s not your fault.”

Shen Zechuan clenched his fist. He stared at the snow as if the tears would fall if he blinked. His voice hitched as he said, “Did you go looking for us at Chashi?”

Ji Gang slowly leaned against the incense altar, burying his body within the shadows. It was as if he was looking for his own voice. After a long time, he said, “I went. I found him.”

He found him.

Ji Gang found his son – all covered in arrows – in the pit of snow. He had jumped into it and stepped across those thick piles of corpses to dig out Ji Mu’s body.

Ji Mu was only twenty-three of age. He had just been promoted to Squad Commander of the Duanzhou Garrison Army. His armor was new. The day he put it on, Hua Pingting hung a protective talisman for her son in the lock. When Ji Gang found him, he had been frozen purple along with his other comrades.

Shen Zechuan raised his head slightly and said, “Shifu, I’m sorry.”

Ji Gang was already old. He tousled his white hair and said, “He’s the elder brother, isn’t he? That’s what he should do. Everything that happened is not your fault. “

The snow fell for a moment.

Ji Gang huddled over and said, “Who would have known that those Biansha baldies would come? That he would become a soldier and charge to the very front of the battle is something that can’t be helped. I taught him martial arts, and with that temperament of his, you might as well kill him than to ask him to flee. He could hardly bear to see others suffer and dragged down. So how would he, how would he flee?”

“It’s not your fault or his. Shifu is the one to be blamed. I indulged in excessive drinking. Your shiniang scolded me for so long, but I never quit. When the cavalry came, I couldn’t even fight properly. At this age, I’m old and disabled. I’ve long gone useless.”

Water dripped onto the bottle gourd. Shen Zechuan gripped it and said nothing.

“Old and disabled.” A grinning head suddenly poked out from behind the Buddha statue and said, “Old and disabled!”

Ji Gang sprang up like a leopard and bellowed, “Who’s there?!”

The unkempt man gradually stretched his body out and imitated Ji Gang. “Who, who!”

When Ji Gang heard this voice clearly, he pressed Shen Zechuan down and involuntarily blurted out in astonishment, “... Grand Mentor<sup>7</sup> Qi!”

The man speedily shrank his head back. Kicking the Buddha statue, he yelled, “I’m not! I’m not the Grand Mentor!”

Ji Gang ran a few steps behind the Buddha statue in pursuit. When he saw the man about to bore his way through a hole to flee, he could not help but pounce and grab him by the ankle. The man immediately let out a squeal like a pig being slaughtered and shouted, “Your Highness! Your Highness, flee quickly! “

Shen Zechuan covered his mouth and joined forces with Ji Gang to carry him back.

“Who is this?” Shen Zechuan asked.

“You are young, so you’ve never heard of him.” Ji Gang’s voice was unsteady as he pressed the man down and said, “Grand Mentor Qi, this is great! You are still alive! What about His Excellency Zhou? Is His Excellency Zhou here too?”

Grand Mentor Qi was thin and small. He could not kick them away, so he glared at them and whispered, “He’s dead, dead! I’m dead. His Highness is dead. Everyone is dead!”

Ji Gang said in a heavy voice, “Grand Mentor, I am Ji Gang! The Imperial Bodyguards Vice Commander, Ji Gang!”

Still badly shaken, Grand Mentor Qi hesitantly raised his neck to look at Ji Gang’s face. He said, “You’re not Ji Gang. You’re an evil spirit!”

Ji Gang said sorrowfully, “Grand Mentor! In the twenty-third year of Yongyi,<sup>8</sup> I escorted you into the capital. This was where His Royal Highness the Crown Prince met and welcomed you. Have you forgotten this too?”

Grand Mentor Qi’s eyes glistened as he raved madly. “They killed the Crown Prince... Your Highness!” He sobbed and said, “Ji Gang, Your Excellency Ji! Take His Highness away! The Eastern Palace has become the target of public censure. What crime has His Highness committed?!”

Ji Gang dejectedly released his hands and said, "Grand Mentor... In the twenty-ninth year, Ji Lei sold himself to the enemy. I've already been kicked out of Qudu. In these twenty years, I've been reduced to a mere fugitive of the martial fraternity. I have also gone on to take a wife and fathered a child in Duanzhou of Zhongbo."

Grand Mentor Qi stared at him blankly and said, "... His Highness is gone, but the Imperial Grandson is still around! Take him away. You, take him away!"

Ji Gang could not help but close his eyes and said, "In the thirtieth year of Yongyi, the Crown Prince slit his own throat and committed suicide in this place. No one from the Eastern Palace returned alive."

Grand Mentor Qi leaned back and muttered. "That's right, that's right..." He sobbed like a child. "How did it come to this?"

This night had made Ji Gang mentally and physically exhausted. He said, "After the parting of drifting clouds, ten years have gone like flowing water.<sup>9</sup> Who would expect that when we meet again in this life, it would be under such circumstances?"

Grand Mentor Qi turned his body to hide his face and said, "Did they lock you up too? Let them lock! Let them kill all the literati in this world."

Ji Gang said, "My disciple is shouldering the blame for his father."

Grand Mentor Qi said, "Shouldering the blame for his father... That's great. Who's his father? He couldn't have angered His Majesty too, could he?"

Ji Gang sighed and said, "Last year, Shen Wei's troops were defeated..."

He did not expect Grand Mentor Qi to turn his head suddenly upon hearing the words "Shen Wei" and crawled on all fours towards Shen Zechuan. He asked, "This, is Shen Wei's son?"

Ji Gang had a sense of foreboding and was about to act when Grand Mentor Qi beat him to it and pounced. Making a grab for Shen Zechuan with his wizened fingers, he said savagely, "Shen Wei! Shen Wei killed His Highness!"

Sharp-eyed and agile, Shen Zechuan had already grasped Grand Mentor Qi by his wrists. Right after this, Ji Gang grabbed hold of Grand Mentor Qi and said, "Grand Mentor! Do you want my disciple to die today for the same reason the Imperial Grandson did? No matter what crimes Shen Wei committed, it has nothing to do with my disciple!"

Grand Mentor Qi gasped heavily and spoke in a trembling voice.  
“Since he’s Shen Wei’s son, Shen Wei’s son...”

“He was Shen Wei’s son when he was born.” Ji Gang held Grand Mentor Qi down and suddenly kowtowed. He continued, “But he later became Ji Gang’s son. If I utter a single word of falsehood tonight, then I’ll die a terrible death! Grand Mentor, are you going to kill my son?”



P/S: For those who missed it last chapter, the [character glossary](#) has been added! To avoid spoilers, the list will be updated as the translation of the story progresses, e.g. when new characters are revealed or when the characters’ titles and ranks change.

#### Footnotes

1. The concept of Yin and Yang represents opposing forces such as life (yang) and death (yin), male (yang) and female (yin), light (yang) and darkness (yin), etc. Here, it simply refers to strips of alternating shadow and light on the ground.



- 2.
3. 囚车 literally a prison/prisoner wagon used to transport criminals over a long distance.
4. 熬鹰 literally torturing falcons, it’s one of the ways to train them by not allowing it to sleep and torture it to exhaustion to wear down its wild nature.
5. 年后 Refers to the lunar/Chinese new year



- 6.
7. Ornamental thumb ring which is often made from jade, but in this case, it's made of bone. It's also typically worn by archers in ancient times to protect the right thumb when drawing a bowstring.



- 8.
9. 包袱, a cloth bundle. In the old days, people traveled around with their clothes and possessions bundled up with a piece of cloth. The bundle was then worn across the shoulders and carried around. It also works for carrying food around.
10. 太傅 Grand Mentor, or Grand Tutor, was usually in charge of tutoring the Crown Prince.
11. This is the name of an era during which a specific Emperor reigned.



12. 浮云一别后，流水十年间 A line from the Tang poem, A  
Greeting on the Huai River to my Old Friends from Liangchuan  
《淮上喜会梁州故人》 by Wei Yingwu (韦应物)

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 7 : GRAND MENTOR



Dumbstruck, Grand Mentor Qi pulled his hands back. He turned his head away, refusing to look at Shen Zechuan. He had been imprisoned here, deranged for twenty years, hating everyone beyond this place. Yet, tonight, he had to persuade himself not to hate the son of his enemy.

“Then...” Grand Mentor Qi’s voice sounded plaintive. “Then, who can I kill now?!”

The snow fell silently, and the crow in the courtyard flew away from the branch. The tattered curtain in the temple fluttered along with the wind. Grand Mentor Qi trembled and rose to his feet, then staggered with his arms raised high, devastated and inconsolable.

“The die is cast! The victor emerges king, and the loser is the rebel. His Highness’s virtuous name has been smeared, and you and I are those treacherous traitors doomed to be condemned by posterity! Who do I kill? I’ll kill this muddleheaded and blind Heaven! Twenty years ago, His Highness’s blood was spilled here. What have we done wrong? That the Emperor would be so ruthless to wipe us out?!”

Tears poured down Grand Mentor Qi’s face. His body trembled as he kneeled at the entrance of the hall and banged his head repeatedly on the floor.

“Kill me now as well!”

The snowy night was miserably cold. No one in the empty temple responded. It was in this way Grand Mentor Qi kneeled, just like that deteriorating and battered Buddha statue. Fragments of cotton-like snow covered him as he remained still and silent under this brilliantly illuminated Qudu night.

An hour later, Ji Gang helped Grand Mentor Qi up, and the three men sat in a circle before the incense altar.

“Many things happened tonight because of me. I will take this opportunity and explain to my heart’s content.” Ji Gang lifted his sleeves and said, “Grand Mentor, Chuan-er was born in the Shen Clan. He’s Shen Wei’s eighth son of common birth. Eight years ago, the situation between the lawful and common factions in the Prince of Jianxing’s Residence were as irreconcilable as fire and water. Shen Zhouji, the Hereditary Prince of

Jianxing, won the favor of his father and reassigned his brothers of common birth out of the residence. At seven years of age, Chuan-er was sent back to Duanzhou, but his enlistment as a soldier to bolster the army numbers failed to work out. So he lived in the side courtyard to be raised by his mother's maid. But that woman was greedy and extravagant and often misappropriated the child's food rations. Pingting was on friendly terms with his mother. When she learned of this, she asked me to take Chuan-er back so that we could raise and nurture him."

Grand Mentor Qi sneered and said, "Shen Wei himself was of common birth and had his share of injustices in his childhood. How ludicrous of him to favor those of lawful birth when he came to have sons later. What's more, he's such a lecher and went on to beget so many sons. What a sin!"

"We have repeatedly sent letters to the Prince Residence, but not once has Shen Wei ever replied. Grand Mentor, look at the Eight Great Clans of Qudu. We have never heard of such blatant abandonment even among the son of common births of those clans." Ji Gang furrowed his eyebrows. "And so it was like this that Chuan-er came to follow us. That time, Mu-er was fifteen of age. He was so delighted to see his younger brother. Since then, our family of four has settled down in Duanzhou. We even had to expend a lot of effort just to be able to get into the Military Service's Yellow Register."<sup>1</sup>

After a moment's silence, Grand Mentor Qi said, "You left the capital bearing the name of a criminal. It's naturally difficult for you to register your household. It was precisely to suppress rebels and prevent civil unrest that His Royal Highness strictly enforced the Yellow Register system to record households back then."

Ji Gang said, "I understand. Grand Mentor, what happened in Qudu after I left? How did His Royal Highness the Crown Prince end up in that state?"

Grand Mentor Qi pulled over the tattered curtain and wrapped it around his shoulders. He said gloomily, "... After you left, Ji Wufan lost the confidence of the Emperor. Pan Rugui, having received the Emperor's favors for serving the Empress, took up the post of Brush-holding Director at the Directorate of Ceremonial. As a result, the Imperial Bodyguards fell into decline, and its Twelve Offices existed in name only. After Ji Wufan's death, Ji Lei took up the mantle alone. From then on, the Eastern Depot<sup>2</sup> became the Godfather of the Imperial Bodyguards and ceased to associate

with the Eastern Palace. Later on, the Emperor suddenly fell ill and was frequently bedridden, so the trivial affairs of the court were handed over to the Grand Secretariat and the Eastern Palace to manage. But the Hua Clan relied on the Emperor's favor of the Empress to install many incompetent people in the court, and this led to the resurgence of Six Ministries' practice of bribery. The troubles that were the Empress Dowager's kin<sup>3</sup> were now out in force. His Royal Highness the Crown Prince went many times to submit a memorial to His Majesty. But he never expected Pan Rugui to rely on his authority of office in endorsing memorials<sup>4</sup> to take over control of government affairs with the Empress. There was no way His Royal Highness's memorial would ever make its way before the Emperor. Not only that, after the Emperor fell ill, the Empress stopped the Grand Secretariat and the Eastern Palace from paying their respects to him."

"Those castrated bunches are a menace to the empire!" Ji Gang repeatedly sighed. "If I had known Pan Rugui harbored such ambitions, I would never have stopped Father from killing him!"

"Even if you kill a Pan Rugui, there will still be a Pan Ruxi and a Pan Ruyi!" Grand Mentor said in a daze. "The harem interferes in state affairs, while their kin runs rampant. Ji Gang, you don't understand. These are all the deeply rooted maladies of the Eight Great Clans. As long as all the Eight Great Clans are not eradicated, history will just repeat! How is the Empress able to control the affairs of the imperial court when she has lived for so long in the inner palace? It's all due to the long-amassed power and influence of the Hua Clan. Even if the Empress wasn't a Hua back then – even if the Empress was someone from one of the other Eight Great Clans – this would still happen."

"But." Shen Zechuan could not help asking, "Isn't His Royal Highness the Crown Prince of lawful birth by the Empress herself?"

"No." Grand Mentor Qi lowered his head. "His Royal Highness's biological mother was an imperial concubine. The Empress was childless, having never given birth before. But His Royal Highness was taken to the inner palace and personally raised by the Empress herself. As the saying goes, even a tiger will not eat its own cubs... Kinship doesn't exist in the Imperial Clan."

The hall fell silent again.

Ji Gang let out a breath of cold air and said in a hoarse voice, "My father lost the favor of the Emperor because my excessive drinking bungled

up matters. If it weren't for this, His Royal Highness would never have come here."

"I initially thought that Ji Lei would not have become a turncoat if there's Ji Wufan before you." Grand Mentor clutched the tattered curtain. Recalling it still left a bitter taste in his mouth. "Who would have known that he..."

"Grand Mentor, you are unaware of it." Ji Gang looked at Shen Zechuan. "Chuan-er didn't know it either. My father, Ji Wufan, was sworn friends with the former Emperor. He was also the Commander-in-chief of the Imperial Bodyguards. But Father's first wife died early and he had no intention to remarry, so he adopted three sons. Besides me and Ji Lei, there was also Eldest Brother. Eldest Brother could not bear the malicious acts in the Imperial Prison, and so he left the capital in his adolescence and went to Tianfei Watchtower to be a soldier there. Ji Lei and I served in the Imperial Bodyguards and remained by Father's side to look after him as a show of filial piety. This set of Ji Clan's Boxing Style and Ji Clan's Blade Style were all taught by Father. Later, due to several incidents, Father felt that Ji Lei was harboring evil intentions and suspected him of currying favor, so he only imparted the Ji Clan's Mental Cultivation Techniques to me. But this entirely created a divide between us brothers. After Father's death, Ji Lei did an overhaul of those under his command. Many of the old guards were let go. From then on, the Imperial Bodyguards... were no longer what they once were."

Grand Mentor Qi murmured, "Such is fate. The Eastern Palace's subordinates joined forces and worked as one but still failed to protect His Royal Highness. The Emperor suspected His Royal Highness of staging a rebellion, but the authority for the Eight Great Training Divisions of Qudu all lay in the hands of the Eight Great Clans. The Imperial Bodyguards found the treason documents and asserted that it was His Royal Highness behind it. Our people were sent to the Imperial Prison, and many of them died. Those who could not withstand the punishments finally gave in. The sick Emperor flew into a rage and believed Pan Rugui's slanders. From then on, His Royal Highness was trapped in a dead-end."

Tears drenched his face as he seemed to go insane again.

"His Royal Highness was here, trapped in a dead-end! Why didn't they kill me? How do they expect me to hang on to my last breath till now?"

Living a life like this is worse than death. Yet I still can't hurry on my way to the Underworld."

He suddenly stared at Shen Zechuan, and his tone turned frenzied.

"—I can't take this lying down! Years of strategic and tactical planning have all gone down the drain! Countless Eastern Palace's aides have been killed and wounded, and the injustice His Royal Highness suffered has yet to be redressed. I can't take this lying down! "He grabbed Shen Zechuan's arm again." You are so young. You still have a chance!"

"Grand Mentor..." Ji Gang rose intending to stop him.

"You can protect him for a moment, but can you protect him for life?" Grand Mentor Qi gripped Shen Zechuan tightly. "I can stop hating or blaming him today on account of your fatherly affection, but can you make everyone in this world think this way? As long as his surname is Shen, there will be plenty of people wanting to kill him! Can he really sleep with a peace of mind just because he is skilled in martial arts? Ji Gang, your father was a martial arts master, but didn't he still end up dying of illness all alone?! In this Qudu, where the tides of power ebb and flow, it's killing someone with invisible means that's the most fatal! How could you have the heart to let him face the predators stark-naked!"

Ji Gang clenched his fists and said nothing.

Tugging Shen Zechuan, Grand Mentor Qi went down on both knees. He looked at Shen Zechuan and said in a trembling voice that was choking with sobs, "I'm Qi Huilian from Yuzhou! You don't know me, so I'm telling you. I'm, I'm the Triple Yuan<sup>5</sup> Top Scholar in the fifteenth year of Yongyi.<sup>6</sup> From the founding of Dazhou to this date, there are only five people who have come out first in all three levels of the civil examination. I'm a subordinate of the Eastern Palace and also the Minister of Personnel of the Ministry of Personnel-cum-Deputy Grand Secretary of the Grand Secretariat. I taught the Crown Prince. And I'll now, now teach you! I'll teach you everything I have learned in my life—alright?"

Shen Zechuan stared into Grand Mentor Qi's eyes. He was unusually calm. After that brief silence, he fell to the ground on his knees with a "thud" and kowtowed thrice to Grand Mentor Qi.

"If Teacher imparts the classics to me, I'll kill your enemy for you."



Ge Qingqing went out at the hour of Mao<sup>7</sup> and headed for Zhao Zui Temple. The air was clear and cold along the way, and it even snowed. He

huffed into his hands and looked for a steamed bun stall as he walked.

He heard the sounds of someone calling him from afar. There was a red silk umbrella unfurled among the snow, and the person under the umbrella swayed slightly as he moved towards him. Those who could hold up red silk umbrellas in Qudu were all bigwigs of fifth grade<sup>8</sup> and above.

Ge Qingqing stood by the side of the road and supported his blade as he paid his obeisances. The thick smell of wine assailed his nose as the person staggered his way before him.

“The Red Cavalry.”<sup>9</sup> This person stopped and reached out a hand to pull Ge Qingqing’s authority token.<sup>10</sup> He looked at it for a moment and said, “Where is Company Commander Ge going now? It’s freezing cold.”

Ge Qingqing stared at the man’s black boots and answered, “To reply Your Excellency, this humble subordinate is on office duty today and ought to be heading for the palace.”

Xiao Chiye had been drinking all night, and his clothes were in disarray. He dangled the authority token and said, “This doesn’t seem to be the way to the palace.”

Ge Qingqing raised his head to reveal a shy smile and said, “The Second Young Master is noble and does not know how much of a clutter these civilian alleys are. From here, you can make your way through a few civilian alleys and you’ll be able to turn into Shenwu Street, which will lead you straight to the palace gate.”

On hearing this, Xiao Chiye smiled and threw back the authority token to him. He asked, “You know who I am?”

Ge Qingqing caught hold of the authority token and buttered him up, “The Armored Cavalry of Libei are brave and skillful in warfare. The Hereditary Prince and Second Young Master have rendered meritorious service in coming to the Emperor’s aid. Who in Qudu does not know of you? Second Young Master, are you heading back to your residence? The road is slippery. May this subordinate be so bold as to ask if you need me to send you back?”

Xiao Chiye looked at him and said, “Do I look like a drunkard? You may leave.”

Ge Qingqing bowed again and left.

When Zhao Hui arrived, he saw Xiao Chiye rapping hard with the red silk umbrella and yelling at the steamed bun stall to hurry. He approached

and said, “The residence has prepared breakfast. Why is Young Master standing here to have your meal?”

Xiao Chiye said, “I’m too hungry to walk back.”

Zhao Hui shook the cloak open and said, “Wine and lust will only lead you astray. Young Master, let’s go home.”

Xiao Chiye draped himself with the cloak but did not move his feet. He ate two steamed buns, taking no notice of the gazes of those around him. He asked Zhao Hui, “Can one reach Shenwu Street from here?”

“Yes, but it’s not an easy path to walk.” Zhao Hui replied. “Civilian alleys with state-owned ditches. The narrower the alley, the more polluted the ditch water. Qudu has never repaired the public ditches in recent years, and this piece of land is rotten beyond recognition. Once the weather warms up, the snow melts, and the rain falls, the sewage will flood the streets. Think about it, is such a path a smooth one to take?”

Xiao Chiye said, “I only asked you one question. Why give such a long reply?”

Zhao Hui said, “What I’m saying is that you must be sure to take the correct path. Young Master, there’s no hurry to drink. If you take a detour instead, you will make your way there even faster.”

Xiao Chiye wiped his hands and motioned Zhao Hui to fish out his money. “That’s really strange. Go make some inquiries if there are any official records of someone called Ge Qingqing on duty in the Twelves Offices of the Imperial Bodyguards today—Old man, find another line of work as soon as you can; this steamed bun tastes really bad.”



#### Author’s Words:

I’ll briefly talk about the Imperial Bodyguards and Eastern Depot here. Influenced by relevant films and dramas, people often mistakenly think that the Imperial Bodyguards are a sub-committee of the Eastern Depot and that the Imperial Bodyguards Commander-in-chief had to obey the Eastern Depot Seal-holding Director’s<sup>11</sup> orders. In reality, this was not the case. The Imperial Bodyguards and Eastern Depot all served the Emperor himself. There is no superior-subordinate relationship between them. It’s just that sometimes when the eunuchs gained favor, the power and authority of the Eastern Depot would rise just as the boat rises with the tide, and the Imperial Bodyguards would have to greet them with smiles. But similarly,



when the Imperial Bodyguards Commander-in-chief won the confidence of the Emperor, then the Eastern Depot would have to play the grandson with their tails between their legs.

#### Footnotes

1. 黃冊 *Huangce* or yellow registers/yellow book served during the Ming Dynasty to provide basic data for taxation and recruitment based on the household's classification according to their occupation. It was mainly divided into three categories: civilian, military, and craftsman. The military register (or Yellow Register of Military Service (军户黄册) in this novel) was used to manage military households to inherit military posts, bolster the army numbers, and so on. These military households lived as peasants in peacetime and served as soldiers in times of war.
2. 东厂 The Eastern Depot was a Ming dynasty spy and secret police agency run by eunuchs.
3. 外戚 relatives of the Emperor on the side of his mother or wife.
4. 批红 compilation of an endorsement on a memorial; chief eunuchs had the right to note down remarks in red color (pihong 批紅) on the incoming memorials, even before the Emperor had seen them.
5. 三元 “Triple Yuan”. In the Ming Dynasty, the imperial examination system was split into three phases: the provincial exam (乡试); metropolitan exam (会试); and the palace exam (殿试). The titles for the top scholars in each exam were known as the Jieyuan (解元), Huiyuan (会元) and Zhuangyuan (状元). These three are known as the “Triple Yuan”. So a Triple Yuan Top Scholar is one who came first in all these examinations.
6. This is the name of an era during which a specific Emperor reigned.
7. 卯时 Time in those days was divided into two hours blocks. The hour of Mao is around 5-7am.
8. 五品 Officials were classified in nine hierarchic grades, with grade one being the highest rank. Their salaries ranged according to their rank.
9. 缙骑 *tiqui*; subordinates of the Imperial Bodyguards. They are mounted cavalry of the Imperial Bodyguards that wear red uniforms

and are commonly guarded escorts of an official's retinue or entourage.



10.

11. 腰牌 literally authority token, it's a small tablet hung at the waist to prove one's identity, especially for people in governmental posts or acting in an official capacity.

12. The head of the Eastern Depot is called the Eastern Depot Seal-holding Director. Among the eunuchs, he is the second highest-ranking eunuch after the Seal-holding Director of the Directorate of Ceremonial.



- 13.
14. 戒尺 a teacher's ruler in the old days for punishing errant pupils (typically by hitting them on the palms).
15. Will revise these when I think of more poetic ones .\_.
16. 将在外，君命有所不受。 A general in the field has to be resourceful and sometimes, even decide against the Emperor's orders.
17. 疑将成虎 as opposed to tame kitties and loyal doggos a sovereign usually prefers. Too much of a 'tiger' with military power, and the sovereign might come to suspect the person of harboring treacherous motives.
18. 水满则溢，月盈则亏。 Water brims only to overflow, the moon waxes only to wane. i.e., things/situations reverse when they reach their extreme or limit.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 8 : SUSPICION



The Imperial Army was waiting to rotate shifts. It was so freezing cold that they were all huddled into themselves.

The Imperial Army of Qudu was originally the Imperial Guards<sup>1</sup> of the Eight Cities. They were the impregnable fortress of the Imperial Palace in Qudu. Going by the rules, trivialities such as taking a person into custody would not have been tasked to them. But then the Eight Great Training Divisions of Qudu rose to power, and the duties and responsibilities of both parties were switched around. The Imperial Army was reduced to being the burden of Qudu. It not only abolished the military drills, but even literally became the errand-runner of Qudu. Today, they were all hereditary military households who had never seen real weaponry and were just idling around waiting to die.

Ge Qingqing was the Company Commander of the Imperial Bodyguards. He was not really considered an official in Qudu, but he was just perfect for the Imperial Army in charge of detention. This was because they had to mutually look out for each other as they patrolled Qudu every day. If it had been an official of a slightly higher rank, they would not have dared to bribe as they wished. Besides, Ge Qingqing was extremely generous in his treatment of them. So the Imperial Army turned a blind eye and let Ji Gang take on the chores of the original errand-runner.

Ge Qingqing greeted the Imperial Army and distributed the hot steamed buns he had brought with him. Ji Gang had yet to come out. The Squad Commander saw him looking pensive, so he said, "If Brother Qing is in a hurry, please go ahead and check it out on our behalf."

Ge Qingqing said, "Wouldn't that be against the rules?"

Biting the steamed bun, the Squad Commander waved his hand to motion to the Imperial Army guarding the back door to make way. He said, "Brother Qing isn't an outsider. Besides, we have surrounded this Zhao Zui Temple until not even a drop of water can trickle through. The man within can't escape for sure."

Thus, Ge Qingqing did not decline his offer further. He turned around to enter Zhao Zui Temple.

Ji Gang was sitting under the eaves. When he saw Ge Qingqing coming, he stood up and asked, "Is it time already?"

“It doesn’t matter since it’s still dark. Uncle Ji can stay a little longer.” Ge Qingqing surveyed the temple courtyard as he spoke. “This place is not fit for human living. And it happens to be in the dead of winter right now. I’ll send some quilts over later.”

Noting that he seemed to have something on his mind, Ji Gang asked, “What’s the matter?”

Ge Qingqing hesitated and said, “It’s not a big deal. It’s just that I met Second Young Master Xiao on the way earlier.”

Shen Zechuan raised his head and said, “That Xiao...”

“Xiao Chiye.” Ge Qingqing said, “He’s the youngest son of the Prince of Libei. He’s also... that same man from the other time. His gait is unsteady, and he reeks of wine. He must have gone drinking last night.”

“As long as it isn’t Xiao Jiming.” Ji Gang turned his head back to say to Grand Mentor Qi, “Grand Mentor has not left this place for twenty years. You probably don’t know the current Four Great Generals of Dazhou. The Prince of Libei has begotten himself a good son. That Xiao Jiming is truly remarkable!”

But Shen Zechuan asked Ge Qingqing, “Brother Qing, did he ask you something?”

Ge Qingqing thought carefully and said, “He asked me where I was going, and I said I was taking a shortcut to get to the command office. Then he said that this road did not seem to lead to Shenwu Street. So I gave him a perfunctory response. I suppose the descendant of a princely noble like him will not personally probe into it.”

“But this matter involves the Xiao Clan. It pays to be careful. Later on, you should still head for the palace and put a mark on the duty roster. “Ji Gang rubbed his hands in the snow. “Chuan-er, let’s train.”

“Hold it.” Shen Zechuan’s eyes were dark and deep. “Since it is a miscellaneous alley in a civilian district, then what is a noble descendant like him doing on this street so early in the morning?”

Ge Qingqing was stupefied. He said, “That’s right... The entertainment spots are all in Donglong Street, which is some distance away from the residential area. He’s nursing a hangover, and it’s such a cold day. Why did he come here?”

“He’s keeping watch at a tree to await a rabbit.”<sup>2</sup> Grand Mentor Qi wrapped himself in the tattered curtain and turned around, pointing his posterior out. He said, “The matter of Shen Wei concerns the Xiao Clan. I

heard that that kick of his was clearly aiming for this lad's life. But the lad's still alive and well now. How could he not get suspicious?"

"He shouldn't have said another word if he didn't mean it." Shen Zechuan was still full of trepidation as he recalled that kick.

"Oh, no." Ge Qingqing turned pale and said, "It's my fault for being negligent. What should we do? I'm afraid he's already on the way!"

Shen Zechuan turned towards Grand Mentor Qi. "It doesn't matter. Since Teacher has already guessed it, he must have a countermeasure."



Zhao Hui arrived at the Imperial Bodyguards Command Office. Although the Assistant Commander walking with him was of the same rank as him, he did not dare to put on airs. He led Zhao Hui to the records room and said, "What does General Zhao want to check? These are all Twelves Offices' duty rosters for today."

Zhao Hui solemnly picked up a book to flip through for a look and said, "It has been hard on our Imperial Bodyguards brothers patrolling the restricted grounds. A few days ago, I received the assistance of a Company Commander named Ge Qingqing. I've come today bearing a gift to give my thanks. Is he on duty today?"

"The Company Commanders from the Twelves Office are a motley crew. They are all inside." As the Assistant Commander spoke, he shifted over to the wall where the duty registers of the Twelve Offices were hanging on the upper side, all clearly categorized.

But Zhao Hui could not touch them; this was taboo in the palace.

The Assistant Commander asked, "Does the General know which office does he belong to?"

Zhao Hui said, "I heard that only those from the Imperial Carriage Office, Parasol Office, and the Domesticated Elephants Office could be on duty on the morning shift."

The Assistant Commander carefully checked through the registers by name. After a while, he turned and said to Zhao Hui, "General, there's no such person on duty today. Let me try looking elsewhere for you?"

Zhao Hui gently closed the book in his hands and said, "There's no need. I'll find him on my own."

When Zhao Hui left the records room, the sky had just brightened. He went back along the road and strode out of the palace.

The accumulated snow had been freshly swept off Shenwu Street, but the road was slippery. The sedan bearers who came and went as they transported the bigwigs did not dare to be rash. They walked on the road cautiously and made every effort to stay steady on their feet.

As Zhao Hui passed by a sedan, he caught a glimpse of the sedan bearers bearing broadswords. Who would have known that this one look would make him furrow his eyebrows?

“Hold it.” Zhao Hui stopped the sedan chair and asked, “Is this the chair used by the Commander-in-Chief?”

Sure enough, the sedan bearers were the Imperial Bodyguards. The one in the lead nodded and said, “You know who we are transporting, and you still have the audacity to block our way? Move out of the way quickly!”

Zhao Hui raised his hand to reveal his own Libei authority token.<sup>3</sup>

The Imperial Bodyguard nodded and said, “General, please excuse me for the offense!”

The sedan curtain moved as a slender hand lifted it. A delicate face glanced lazily at Zhao Hui and pouted coquettishly to the person within. “Your Excellency, he’s looking for you!”

Ji Lei had just returned with a hangover. Sitting unreservedly in the sedan, he said to Zhao Hui, “General Zhao! What’s the matter?”

Zhao Hui merely stared at the Imperial Bodyguard in the lead and said, “It’s nothing. I heard Young Master went drinking with Your Excellency last night. Are you only just returning?”

Ji Lei smiled and said, “So you’re worried about the Second Young Master! The Young Master returned home the moment I opened my eyes this morning. Is the Hereditary Prince looking for him?”

“I just can’t help worrying.” Zhao Hui bowed. “I’m sorry to have alarmed Your Excellency.”

“It’s fine! I just came from there myself.” Ji Lei gestured with his hand. “Who was it that butt heads with the General earlier? Hurry and apologize to the General.”

The Imperial Bodyguard in the lead kneeled on one knee and said to Zhao Hui, “This humble servant, Ge Qingqing, was blind not to recognize the General, thus offending you. I’m willing to accept my punishment.”

Zhao Hui had not misread.

Ge Qingqing’s name was indeed written on the authority token hanging at the side of his blade.



Even after listening to Zhao Hui complete his report, Xiao Chiye was still looking at the storytelling script <sup>4</sup> with one of his legs propped up.

Zhao Hui said, "From how it looks, he didn't lie. He was assigned to pick up Ji Lei before he could enter the palace."

"Yeah." Xiao Chiye said absent-mindedly. "Qingjun Pavilion is just nearby. Of course he can make it in time."

"But something feels off to me." Zhao Hui's thumb caressed the hilt of his blade.

Xiao Chiye turned the page and asked, "You can't figure it out?"

"I can't."

"Then I'll tell you." He suddenly sat up, crossed his legs, and propped up a hand on one knee. "You entered the Capital with my eldest brother. His Majesty the Emperor personally met and welcomed him. The Twelve Offices of the Imperial Bodyguards followed closely behind in a ceremonial procession. How could he not recognize you now?"

"That's hard to say." Zhao Hui said, "Perhaps he didn't remember me."

"You haven't even changed your robe, and you carry a blade on you. Even if he doesn't recognize you, all he has to do is to use his brain a little, and he wouldn't dare to reproach you in such a condescending manner right there on the street." Xiao Chiye said, "Besides, he doesn't seem like he has a bad memory to me. He could even recognize me clearly."

"I only find it too much of a coincidence." Zhao Hui pondered over it. "I just happened to run into him."

"A coincidence is exactly what they want." Xiao Chiye cast aside the storytelling script. "This Shen..."

"Shen Zechuan." Zhao Hui said.

"Letting him enter Zhao Zui Temple now looks like a losing move." Xiao Chiye said with a thoughtful gaze.



Ge Qingqing removed the fur collar and wiped his sweat.

Wu Caiquan, who was outside, came running in pressing his legs together. He repeatedly said, "Thank you, thank you! Brother Qing, thank goodness for you!"

Ge Qingqing said, "It's nothing. We are all comrades."

Wu Caiquan grinned and turned his head to yell at the person in the records room, "Old Xu! Put Brother Qing on the record for today, he stood



in for me to carry the sedan. I caught a cold last night and felt dizzy this morning. Fortunately, Brother Qing was there to help.”

Ge Qingqing lowered his head to wipe his sweat. He said, “You caught a cold. Let’s go to the Xu household’s shop for mutton soup together later.”

Wu Caiquan hastened to say, “Sure, it’s Brother Qing’s treat! Old Xu, did you hear that? Let’s go together later!”

“Don’t sweat it.” Ge Qingqing patted Wu Caiquan on the back. “Rest well. If you don’t feel well the next time, don’t hold it in like you did this time. Just tell me.”

Wu Caiquan nodded his head like a puppy. He was craving mutton soup so much that he could hardly care about anything else.



Grand Mentor Qi was finally bundled up in a quilt at night. He sat opposite Shen Zechuan and said, “In another half a month, it’ll be the Zhengdan Festival.<sup>5</sup> Qudu will host the ‘Banquet of Ten Thousand Officials’. When the time comes, all the Provincial Administration Commissioners and Prefectural Surveillance Commissioners of the various lands will enter the Capital to offer their greetings. I’m still not clear about the current state of affairs, so tell me now.”

Shen Zechuan was in the snow dressed only in flimsy clothes as he struck up the starting stance of the Ji Clan Fist. Despite it, sweat was dripping off his forehead. He said, “The Prince of Libei has been in poor health for many years, and all military affairs have been handed over to the Hereditary Prince, Xiao Jiming, to handle on his behalf. In all likelihood, he won’t attend this time. The Qidong Five Commanderies have rendered meritorious service in coming to the Emperor’s rescue. The first one who came to receive his bestowed title was one of the four generals, Lu Guangbai. Commander-in-chief Qi should be arriving these few days. With this, two major military powers of Dazhou will be temporarily residing —”

“Hold it.” Grand Mentor Qi fished out a ruler<sup>6</sup> from his quilt and asked, “Which four generals are the four generals?”

“River of Ice Armored Cavalry, Xiao Jiming; Fire Beacon Amidst Blowing Sand, Lu Guangbai; Wind Guiding the Scorching Plains, Qi Zhuyin; Thunder Sinking the Jade Stage, Zuo Qianqiu!”<sup>7</sup>

“I have only heard about Zuo Qianqiu. But I know that Lu Guangbai is most likely the son of the Earl of Biansha, Lu Pingyan. Although Lu

Pingyan later came to guard the deserts of the Bianjun Commandery, he was from Libei in his early years. He's sworn brothers with the Prince of Libei, Xiao Fangxu. If this Lu Guangbai has a sister, she would definitely be the Xiao Clan's daughter-in-law, am I right? "

"Yes." Shen Zechuan said as he dripped with sweat. "Lu Guangbai's younger sister is the Consort of Libei's Hereditary Prince."

"So, where did the two major military powers come from?" Grand Mentor Qi said, "With this connection, the Lu Clan is the mole Libei planted in the Qidong Five Commanderies to lurk within. Furthermore, there's still the Eight Great Training Divisions in Qudu, and the Imperial Army under the Eight Great Training Divisions. The Eight Great Training Divisions don't have as many people as those from Libei and Qidong, and its reputation is not as valiant as theirs either. But you must remember that Qudu is the heart of Dazhou. What they are holding in their hands is the Emperor's life."

Grand Mentor Qi weighed the ruler in his hand, then grabbed the gourd and warmed himself with a few sips of wine.

"You also must remember this. Although the Imperial Bodyguards cannot be called 'soldiers', their advantage is far greater than that of 'soldiers'. When the Emperor commands the troops, he must be assisted by influential officials and valiant generals. A general should exercise good discretion on the battlefield and not be bound by orders of his sovereign.<sup>8</sup> Keep a tight rein, and it'd be hard for them to make something of themselves. Maintain a loose grip, and you'll soon suspect them of becoming too much of a tiger.<sup>9</sup> This yardstick is difficult to grasp. You need to act in accordance with the situation and understand how to adapt to changes. However, the Imperial Bodyguards is a different matter altogether. They are the vicious hounds under the Emperor's command, and that chain is held by the Emperor alone. Whether to tighten or loosen his grip, or to pamper or discard them, wholly depends on the Emperor's moods. Such a blade, such a dog—If it were you, would you like them, or would you not?"

Shen Zechuan pushed himself to hang on for a moment, then said, "Like them—and they will go wayward! Favor and trust them too much, and they will become the source of calamity."

"Your brother sure has taught you plenty." Grand Mentor Qi said, "That's right. Remember it. Commit it to memory! Favor and trust them too

much, and they will become the source of calamity. Keeping the virtuous close and the flatterers far is a good virtue to cultivate. But when you are personally involved, black and white will intersect. How will you be forever able to distinguish who are the virtuous talents and who are the crafty sycophants? Besides, there are many matters that even a virtuous gentleman cannot do, while the crafty and the despicable ones can. The Emperor resides long-term in the Imperial Palace. He must understand the principle of checks and balances as well as listen to the voices of the various officials and ministers. As you can see, with the Imperial Bodyguards comes the Eastern Depot, and with Libei comes along Qidong.”

After a pause, Grand Mentor Qi continued.

“Water brims only to overflow, the moon waxes only to wane.<sup>10</sup> Do you know why the Xiao Clan hates Shen Wei so much this time? Not only is there nothing else to bestow or confer them with after this battle, but even if the Xiao Clan fights another battle, their defeat is a defeat, while their victory is also fundamentally a defeat. They have already reached their end.”

Shen Zechuan asked, “Their victory is also a defeat?”

“Their victory is also a defeat! Didn’t Xiao Jiming instantly offer up his younger brother after winning the battle? For every battle he wins in the future, he will be in even more of a peril. This time he paid for it with his younger brother. Next time, it might be his wife, his father, or even his own self.”



#### Footnotes

1. The Imperial Guards (禁卫) is not the same as the Imperial Bodyguards (锦衣卫).
2. From 守株待兔, keeping watch at a tree to await a rabbit or a hare, is a fable about a farmer waiting every day by a tree stump in the hope that a hare would kill itself by crashing into it. It refers to someone who sits back and does nothing except to wait for good things to drop into his lap.



3. 腰牌 literally authority token, it's a small tablet hung at the waist to prove one's identity, especially for people in governmental posts or acting in an official capacity.
4. A book that's a script for storytelling; Song and Yuan literary form based on vernacular folk stories
5. 正旦节 Zhengdan Festival is also known as Spring Festival which celebrates the start of the new year from the first day of the first month in the lunar calendar.



6. 戒尺 a teacher's ruler in the old days for punishing errant pupils (typically by hitting them on the palms).
7. Will revise these when I think of more poetic ones .\_.
8. 将在外，君命有所不受。 A general in the field has to be resourceful and sometimes, even decide against the Emperor's orders.
9. 疑将成虎 as opposed to tame kitties and loyal doggos a sovereign usually prefers. Too much of a 'tiger' with military power, and the sovereign might come to suspect the person of harboring treacherous motives.

10. 水满则溢，月盈则亏。 Water brims only to overflow, the moon waxes only to wane. i.e., things/situations reverse when they reach their extreme or limit.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 9 : PROMOTION



Since the end of the year, many of the pedestrians on the streets of Qudu wore “*nao’e*”<sup>1</sup> made of black gold paper.<sup>2</sup> As Zhengdan Festival<sup>3</sup> approached, the common folks strove to prepare pastries and cooked meat at home. The palace had started procuring the ingredients for the ‘Banquet of Ten Thousand Officials’ half a month in advance. Everyone from the Court of Imperial Entertainments was busy running all over, yet the eunuchs still got to line their pockets.

Xiao Chiye rustled his way through the book and said, “When those officials on the outside enter the Capital, it is inevitable for them to have to pay ‘ice respect’<sup>4</sup> to the officials in the Capital. But Pan Rugui is so impressive that he drew up such a well-organized list: only when they shell out the money according to his list will they be left in peace.”

“And these are only just the ‘small changes’ at the beginning of the year.” Lu Guangbai brushed aside the foam in his tea. “Let me give you an account. The money the little eunuch under Pan Rugui receives in a year far exceeds the two-year salary of a Battalion Commander Guard at the frontier. Dazhou uses the military troops every year, and each time the Ministry of Revenue asks us to deploy the troops, they have to plead with us and coax us to do so. But after the battle is over, we become the bastards who demand our payments.”

“It’s the ones with the money who are the masters.” Xiao Chiye smiled and said.

“When we came to the Emperor’s rescue before the new year, our Libei troops braved the snow to march forward. The men and horses are tired, and the repairs for the Armored Cavalry’s equipment need to be completed before the start of Spring. We have owed the workshop money for too many days. Everything requires money.” Zhao Hui carefully made the calculations in his mind and said, “Before we entered Qudu, the Libei troops engaged in farming duties<sup>5</sup> converted the annual grain harvest into money. Every day, we have to count every cent and make every cent count. Our Hereditary Prince’s Consort does not even dare to purchase expensive attire for the Residence during the new year and other festivals. The money a palace eunuch like Pan Rugui has collected has already exceeded

Duanzhou's total tax amount. The Investigating Censors throw their weight around when they are delegated to local governments. But so what? In Qudu, they don't even dare to let out a fart!"

"What to do, we are poor." Lu Guangbai lamented, "Every year, we have to worry about money. Jiming made a trip to the Capital this time, so the Ministry of Revenue did not dare to delay it on his account and had long submitted the request to the Grand Secretariat. Pan Rugui has also behaved himself and endorsed his approval. The funds should be handed over before he leaves the Capital."

"We have Eldest Brother." Xiao Chiye set aside the book and looked towards Lu Guangbai. "But what are you going to do?"

"His Majesty wouldn't see me." Lu Guangbai said, "The Lu Clan is unpopular in Qudu. The Eight Great Clans have always regarded us as savages from the desert, and the Hua Clan wouldn't even look us right in the eyes. But even if you tell me to show my 'respects'<sup>6</sup> to Pan Rugui, I don't have the money to. We are so poor at home we could barely put food on the table. Other places could cultivate lands for their troops to farm, and that is at least an emergency measure to meet needs. But our Bianjun Commandery has just yellow sand for miles around. Even if we want to farm, we don't have the fields. This time, we dispatched the troops out on a swift expedition, and all the food for the men and horses during the journey were paid for with Commander-in-Chief Qi's personal savings. To put it bluntly, it was all thanks to Commander-in-Chief Qi's understanding and sympathy. Otherwise, my troops would have never made it past Tianfei Watchtower. But how much money would Commander-in-Chief Qi have? She's using the remnants of her own dowry that the Old Imperial Consort has left for her! Her own private troops are almost on the verge of selling their own pants! The Ministry of Revenue keeps playing Taiji<sup>7</sup> with me every day. Dereliction of duty, huh? They keep pushing my account aside and refuse to allocate the funds to me, figuring that a country bumpkin like me could do nothing about them."

Lu Guangbai lost his temper in a rare display of anger. He could not help it. The Bianjun Commandery was defending along the borders of the desert, and they were the Garrison Troops that had the most dealings with the Biansha Cavalry other than Libei. They worked themselves to death all year round, running all over the place just to eke out a living under the blades of the machetes. They barely had sufficient sleep, and would never

get to eat their fill. Qudu was oppressing him, and the Earl of Biansha had long become a well-known pauper among the Princes. His clan had never even kept any of the rewards bestowed to them; all of it had been converted into money and used to supplement military supplies.

Once Xiao Jiming was neatly dressed, the maidservants left in a single file, leaving only the four of them in the room. Xiao Jiming held up the teacup and took a sip of his tea. He said unhurriedly, "The timing is good this year—Zhengdan's Banquet of Ten Thousand Officials'. Qi Zhuyin should be here already, right?"

Lu Guangbai said, "That's right. I was originally worried, but on second thought, let them do as they please and drag this matter on. If they delay it until the Commander-in-Chief enters the Capital, well then, good luck to them."

Xiao Jiming said, "She is now the most popular in Qudu. Even those local ruffians and hooligans that are the 'loansharks' in Qudu have to give her face. The previous debt can be repaid, but you can't always rely on her alone. The Bianjun Commandery is important. From what I've heard of the situation yesterday, the Ministry of Revenue will be asking you to recruit soldiers again this year."

Lu Guangbai caressed the rim of the teacup and said, "Recruit? Don't even think about it. They are all afraid of death now that something happened to the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo. They are concerned about the Bianjun Commandery getting stabbed by the Biansha Twelve Tribes, and they even feel that my twenty thousand troops and horses aren't enough. The thing is that we can recruit the soldiers, but do we have the money to pay them? I can't afford to feed and train them. I will not do it even if they hold up a blade to my neck this year."

Xiao Chiye suddenly sat upright and said, "That's right. In the past, the Ministry of Revenue was the quickest when it comes to assigning military funds and rations to the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo. The men died this time, so we can leave aside the issue of the money. But where are the grains? The Biansha Cavalry can't carry away that much grain with them when they flee."

The remaining three men looked at him.

Lu Guangbai said, "Silly lad, you can stop wondering about that. The grain was recovered and used to make up for the salary arrears owed to the Thirteen Cities of Juexi last year. Can't you guess the reason the Ministry of



Revenue dodged the issue? In recent years, the Eight Great Clans have become the Eight Great Training Divisions, and their equipment and budgets are the best in Dazhou. All this money is taken right from the tax funds. Think about it, the sum of two million. Any human would know how insane this account is. But both the Empress Dowager and Secretariat Elder Hua did not pursue this matter. So who in the Ministry of Revenue would dare to bring it up? The State Treasury is emptied of this portion of the money. Last year, the Thirteen Cities of Juexi were hit by a plague of locusts, and there was truly not a single grain harvested that year. So, where would they get the money for disaster relief? It was all thanks to the Provincial Administration Commissioner, Jiang Qingshan, who issued a peremptory order for all the officials of various ranks within the prefecture to release their private stock of grains to help the disaster victims. Because of this, Jiang Qingshan saved hundreds of thousands of commoners, but he ended up being hated by the various officials in Juexi. Before the new year, I heard that the debt collectors were even blocking the entrance to his house. He is a high-ranking provincial official of the second-grade, and yet his eighty years old mother still has to weave to pay off their debt! It would be forcing them to their death if Qudu still did not release the money. In the end, Secretariat Elder Hai submitted a memorial and contended with the Grand Secretariat and Pan Rugui for half a month before they barely made up for the shortfall.”

Zhao Hui could not help but say, “Those people say they are poor, but the amounts of bribe money are all large sums. On the other hand, those doing the real work are all walking on eggshells while tightening their belts. We might as well not come to Qudu this time. It really makes one disheartened.”

It was snowing outside the house, but there was no festive atmosphere within. The mess kept piling up one after another, and all the new sights in Qudu were like mist skimming the surface. Its wound had yet to heal, and yet they still had to cover it up even as pus dirtied its entire grounds. The snow came at just the right time to conceal it all so beautifully that they could pretend not to notice. Everyone could all live like a drunk in this fool’s paradise together.



In the middle of the night, Pan Rugui sat on the couch with his eyes closed. The naturally-colored paper flower was placed by his hand so that

he could wipe his hands after meditation. Xiaofuzi did not even dare to breathe heavily as he held a brush case in his hands and waited carefully on the footrest.

After an hour, Pan Rugui exhaled and opened his eyes. Xiaofuzi immediately presented the brush to him. With a frown of concentration, Pan Rugui wrote a few words in his palm.

Xiaofuzi buttered up to him and said, “Our Forefather is becoming more and more sagely after having recently received His Majesty’s teachings. Earlier, this grandson even saw a faint wisp of purple cloud<sup>8</sup> rising!”

Pan Rugui wiped his hands and asked, “Do you know why you have never been able to join the Directorate of Ceremonial?”

Xiaofuzi replied, “Forefather dotes on me.”

“It’s one thing to dote on you.” Pan Rugui threw the paper flower into Xiaofuzi’s bosom. “Not being able to read the situation is another. His Majesty has been enlightened for two years, and he still doesn’t give off purple aura. I’m merely a slave. How can I ascend first? Isn’t that overstepping my boundaries?”

Xiaofuzi handed the hot tea over to Pan Rugui. He smiled ingratiatingly and said, “Forefather is my master, and so Forefather is my Heaven. Seeing Forefather meditating is just like seeing the Grand Supreme Elderly Lord<sup>9</sup> descending to the mortal world! How on earth would I give it that much thought?”

“Mmm.” Pan Rugui rinsed his mouth. “This filial piety of yours could be called a skill in itself.”

Xiaofuzi let out a “hehe” as he moved close to Pan Rugui’s leg and said, “I have to show my filial respect to Forefather since it’s the Zhengdan Festival. While I was procuring for the Festival before the new year, I saw a stunning beauty in Prince Chu’s Manor! I made some inquiries around. His Majesty can’t use her anyway, so it’s of utmost importance for me to give her to you as a show of my filial piety instead.”

Pan Rugui said, “How stunning is she? Can she compare to Third Missy? Furthermore, isn’t that Prince Chu’s woman? Given that overbearing and domineering temper of his, I’m afraid he won’t let her go that easily.”

Xiaofuzi said, “No matter how noble Prince Chu is, he can’t be even nobler than his Majesty, can he? His Majesty didn’t even say anything, so

isn't it only right for me to present her to Forefather? Besides, you don't have to worry about this matter. I assure you that all the proper arrangements will be made before the beginning of Spring. It'll be her good fortune when the time comes for you to lay your eyes on her regardless of whether or not you accept her."

Pan Rugui set aside the teacup and said, "There's no hurry. I'm not an avaricious or a lecherous man. Since you brought up Prince Chu, then how is the one who has the same temper as him, Mister-Muddling-Along Second Young Master Xiao, doing lately?"

Xiaofuzi pounded Pan Rugui's thigh in a massage and said, "Heh! Forefather, this Second Young Master Xiao is really a legend. From the first night since he came to the Capital, he has been out drinking with the others! He has never done any serious work except to drink and make merry. Prince Chu and that clique of his all like to have fun with him. Birds of a feather truly flock together!"

"That's fine... but he is still a member of the Xiao Clan after all. His Majesty placed him in the Imperial Regalia Service, which is too close for comfort. It makes me uneasy." Pan Rugui thought about it for a moment, then suddenly smiled and said, "I have thought of just the perfect place to send him away to. Put on my shoes. I'm going to Mingli Hall to serve His Majesty!"

It was the Zhengdan Festival's 'Banquet of Ten Thousand Officials' the next day. There was nothing much going on during the feast, and just as the banquet was about to break up, they all heard Emperor Xiande say.

"A-Ye, has it been comfortable for you in Qudu these days?"

Xiao Chiye stopped peeling the tangerine and answered, "To reply Your Majesty, it's comfortable."

Emperor Xiande turned towards Xiao Jiming and said, "I've been thinking about it. Putting A-Ye in the Imperial Regalia Service is a waste of talent. He's a good child who has been on the battlefield. Keeping him before me is too much of an aggrievement for him. How about this? Let A-Ye go to the Imperial Army. The Imperial Army Viceroy<sup>10</sup> used to be Xi Gu'an, but he now has the Eight Great Training Divisions to manage. He is really up to his ears in work. Let A-Ye take his place."

Right at once, Lu Guangbai frowned.

At the very least, the Imperial Regalia Service would be on duty before the Emperor. If anything were to happen, His Majesty could not turn a blind

eye to it. But what good was the Imperial Army? The Imperial Army was now the errand-runners of Qudu. Was this a reward? How could this even be considered a reward?!

Lu Guangbai was about to rise to his feet when he saw that Xiao Chiye had already bowed his thanks.

“A Viceroy sounds imposing, just like a Commander-in-Chief.” Xiao Chiye smiled frivolously and said, “Thank you, Your Majesty!”

Secretariat Elder Hua laughed out loud and said, “His Majesty is wise! Hereditary Prince, here’s a young hero in the making.”

The sounds of congratulations rose and fell like the tide during the banquet. Xiao Jiming smiled and said nothing as he looked at Xiao Chiye.

Lu Guangbai drank the wine and lowered his head to say to Zhao Hui at the side. “... Such an arrangement is clearly a death sentence aimed at Jiming’s heart.”

After the banquet broke up, Xiao Chiye disappeared without a trace.

His rowdy bunch of friends wanted to congratulate him on his promotion. So he took them drinking. When they reemerged at midnight after drinking, they were all staggering on their feet.

Prince Chu, Li Jianheng, was a few years older than Xiao Chiye. He was a true scoundrel. Before getting into the sedan chair, he even tugged at Xiao Chiye’s sleeve and said in a drunken stupor, “How capable of you! The Imperial Army, huh. You need not bother about patrols or defenses. It’s a very idle job, and yet you still get to collect a salary. You get the money, and you don’t have to put your life on the line. All the best things in the world have fallen into your lap! You must be secretly smug!”

Xiao Chiye smiled too; it was even a wicked smile. He said, “That’s right. That’s why I lose no time in inviting you for a drink. Together in the future, we’ll run amok in Qudu!”

“Right, right!” Li Jianheng patted Xiao Chiye vigorously on his shoulder. “That’s the spirit! Come to my residence a few days later. I’ll get them to... celebrate for you again...”

Xiao Chiye watched the sedan move away into the distance and flipped atop his horse. He had personally trained and tamed his horse – the offspring of wild horses – at the foot of the Hongyan Mountain Ranges. It was a swift and brave divine steed that was black all over except for a patch of white on its chest.

Xiao Chiye clapped his horse forward. The stores on both sides of the street were about to light the lanterns to send him off. He raised his hand and said, "Put them out. Don't illuminate them."

The stores' attendants looked at each other, but they did not dare to disobey him. The lanterns went out one by one until there was only the dim glow of the frosty moon and icy snow on the road.

Xiao Chiye whistled, and the gyrfalcon swooped down from the darkness of the night amid the whistling of the wind. He then hit the horse to spur it on. The steed under his saddle snorted out a puff of hot air and broke into a sudden dash.

The strong wind launched a frenzied assault against Xiao Chiye, dissipating the hot flushes he had from drinking. In the darkness, he looked like a cornered beast on a rampage. The sounds of hooves became the massive crashes of collisions. He galloped through the deserted streets. The darkness ripped his smiling face away until all that remained was a cold and lonely silence.

The steed had been running for an unknown period of time when Xiao Chiye suddenly tumbled off it. He crashed heavily into the pile of snow and remained there with his head lowered for a moment.

The horse raised its hooves and trotted around him before it lowered its head to nudge him. The gyrfalcon remained perched on the back of the horse and tilted its head to look askance at him.

Xiao Chiye endured it for a moment, then propped himself up with his arms and vomited. After a long time, he stood up and leaned against the wall. The bone thumb ring on his thumb was a little large and had fallen off somewhere. He searched for it in the snow, but then he heard someone whispering a question a short distance away. "Who's there?"

Xiao Chiye ignored him.

The Imperial Army Squad Commander felt for his lantern to shine at him and said, "How dare you... Your Excellency?"

Xiao Chiye turned his head and asked, "Know me?"

The Imperial Army Squad Commander shook his head honestly. "I don't know which of the Lords you are..."

"I'm your big brother." Xiao Chiye cast away the dirtied cloak and lowered his eyes to continue looking for the thumb ring. He cursed in irritation under his breath and said, "Give me the lantern. You can scam."

The Imperial Army Squad Commander cautiously came nearer and said, “You are Second Young Master, right? We have just received the order. It’s still dark, and it’s too early for an investigation. There’s still time if you come again tomorrow...”

Xiao Chiye held out his hand, and the Imperial Army Squad Commander handed the lantern over to him. Xiao Chiye asked, “What is this place?”

The Imperial Army Squad Commander respectfully replied, “The perimeter of Qudu. Zhao Zui Temple.”

Xiao Chiye said, “You may leave.”

The Squad Commander retreated and was about to leave when he heard Xiao Chiye speak. “Shen Zechuan is here? Beyond this wall?”

“That’s right.” The Squad Commander was getting more and more apprehensive. “He’s detained in...”

“Get him to come out.”

The stunned Squad Commander hastened to say, “How would that do?! Even if you are the Viceroy, you can’t do that! His Majesty the Emperor strictly commanded...”

Xiao Chiye lifted the lantern and said, “I have the final say in the Imperial Army.”

The Squad Commander said tentatively. “Don’t kill, kill...”

“I’m fucking telling him to come out and sing me a tune!” Xiao Chiye flung the lantern aside suddenly. The light swiftly went out. He stood in the darkness, his eyes malicious.



P/s: As a reminder for those who are confused about characters’ names and titles, there’s a [character glossary](#) which will be updated as the translation progresses to prevent spoilers.

Footnotes



- 1.
2. 闹蛾 Nao'e. A head accessories in ancient times cut out of silk or 'black gold' paper into the shape of flowers or insects.



- 3.
4. 乌金纸 coal or 'black gold' paper.
5. 正旦节 Zhengdan Festival is also known as Spring Festival, which celebrates the start of the new year from the first day of the first month in the lunar calendar.
6. 冰敬 Literally, 'Ice Respect' (or paying respect with 'ice' during summer) is one of the objectionable practices of 'Three Respects' during the Qing Dynasty, along with 'Coal Respect' and 'Departure Respect'. 'Ice Respect' refers to the bribe money officials outside the Capital used to bribe the officials in the Capital during summertime.
7. 軍屯 military troops (mostly in border regions) who carry out garrison duties as well as farm corps to supply the border garrisons

with grains.

8. 孝敬 literally showing respect and filial piety to one's parents and elders, but it also refers to showering gifts on one's superiors. In this context, it refers to bribes and currying favors with gifts and money.
9. 打太极 Taiji is an ancient Chinese exercise or form of martial art that involves slow, circular movements. To play Taiji with someone is to keep passing the buck around.
10. Purple cloud is thought to be an auspicious omen in the old days.
11. 太上老君 Tai Shang Lao Jun or The Grand Supreme Elderly Lord is a deity in Taoism. It's believed that Laozi, who authored the classic Tao Te Ching, is the incarnation of Tai Shang Lao Jun.
12. Viceroy, also known as Governor-General.



## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 10 : DRUNKEN



Xiao Jiming gathered his cloak around him as he stood under the lantern. Zhao Hui stood guard behind him and said, "Counting the hours, he should be back now. The man who went to pick him up said that the Young Master had left by himself on his horse. Why isn't he here yet?"

Xiao Jiming let out a breath of cold air and looked at the sky in silence for a moment. He said, "Whenever he's unhappy in the past, he would go galloping on horseback at the foot of Hongyan Mountains. This habit won't change."

Zhao Hui said, "At the very least, the Imperial Army is a post."

Xiao Jiming shifted his gaze and asked, "Do you know what Father regrets the most in his life?"

Zhao Hui shook his head honestly.

Xiao Jiming said, "It's that he has fathered A-Ye too late. Three years ago, we were ambushed at the foot of Hongyan Mountains. Before Father's reinforcements arrived, A-Ye led the twenty members of the cavalry that had been originally assigned to guard him and rode his horse across the Hongjiang River at night. He groped around in the quagmire for half the night and burned Biansha's grains. When I saw him, he was smelly and dirty all over as he soaked in the water until the wounds on his legs festered. That year, he was only fourteen of age. I asked if he was afraid, and he said that he had a blast of a time. Father often said that the Lu Clan are the eagles of the desert, while the Xiao Clan are the dogs of Libei. I don't like this choice of phrasing, but we are like chained dogs every time we deploy troops from that time onwards. It's no longer as satisfying as it was ten over years ago. Battling all these years has long drained the valor in me. The members of the Xiao Clan are not dogs, but the only one left today with the nature of the wolf is A-Ye. What he yearns for in his dreams are the mountains of Libei. And yet, he now has to remain in Qudu and forget about the freedom of riding horses. Father and I have both let him down."

After a moment's silence, Zhao Hui looked at Xiao Jiming and said, "There's no need for the Hereditary Prince to put yourself down. The Young Master is impetuous by nature and is not the best choice of person to lead and continue the legacy. It doesn't matter if he's born earlier or later; the

reins of Libei must not be handed over to him. The Commander-in-Chief must have the tenacity of one shaped by experience, and a willpower as unwavering as a rock. The Young Master is not up to it.”

Xiao Jiming did not say a word more.

The strong wind that night sent the lanterns swinging ceaselessly. Master and slave waited for a little less than an hour before they saw someone urging the horse on towards them from a distance away.

“Hereditary Prince!” The man on the horse tumbled off and said, “Something happened to the Young Master!”

Zhao Hui immediately held up his blade and said, “Where is the Young Master?”



An hour earlier.

The Squad Commander shoved a shackled Shen Zechuan down the stairs.

“Sing.” The Squad Commander egged him on from behind. “Quick, sing a few lines!”

Shen Zechuan did not utter a word as he looked at the man squatting under the shadows of the wall. His chest hurt the moment he saw the gyrfalcon. He could not help but purse his lips into a tight line as he stood where he was.

Xiao Chiye said, “Come over and stand here.”

Shen Zechuan exhaled a breath of hot air and slowly shuffled forward to stand a short distance away from Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye rose to his feet and asked, “Who is your mother?”

Shen Zechuan replied, “A dancer from Duanzhou.”

“You know how to sing a tune, right?” Xiao Chiye’s gaze was so terrifying that it made one flustered. “Old Dog Shen didn’t teach you anything, but someone must have taught you something.”

Shen Zechuan lowered his head to evade his gaze as if he was afraid of him. He said, “... I don’t know how to.”

“Lift your head.” Xiao Chiye pushed aside the lantern with his foot. “Or are you afraid of me?”

Shen Zechuan could only raise his head. He caught a whiff of wine.

Xiao Chiye said, “It’s fine if you don’t want to sing. Find something for me.”

Shen Zechuan spread out his palms to show that he was still being chained.

Xiao Chiye frowned and said, "Just look for it like that."

So Shen Zechuan squatted down and grabbed a few handfuls of snow.

Xiao Chiye stared coldly at the top of his head and said, "Stand up again."

So Shen Zechuan propped himself up with his hands on his knees and stood up.

Xiao Chiye said, "You can squat down and up freely, and your legs are unaffected. Were the Imperial Bodyguards carrying out the floggings too considerate, or is a worthless life easier to sustain?"

"Naturally, it's because a worthless life is easier to sustain." Shen Zechuan said in a muffled voice. "How lucky for me."

"That makes little sense." Xiao Chiye pressed his whip against Shen Zechuan's chest. "That kick was meant to end this life. Your martial art skills are pretty good."

This whip gave Shen Zechuan the chills. He cowered from fear and said, "I'm just... hanging on to my last breath. Second Young Master is righteous. Why make life difficult for a nobody like me? This matter has already come to such a point, and I've gotten what I deserve. Please let me off."

Xiao Chiye asked, "Do you truly mean that?"

Shen Zechuan had already been reduced to sobs. He nodded his head vigorously.

Xiao Chiye retracted the whip and said, "You can say anything, but who knows whether or not they are true. How about this? Bark a few times like a dog. Once I'm satisfied, I'll let you off tonight."

Shen Zechuan said nothing.

The Squad Commander was scared witless by Xiao Chiye's eyes and shoved Shen Zechuan a few times.

The color drained from Shen Zechuan's face as he said timidly, "... At least let me do it before you alone."

"Scram." Xiao Chiye kept it short and to the point.

The Squad Commander instantly felt relieved and said joyously to Shen Zechuan. "Scram! Let's us scam now..."

Xiao Chiye's cutting gaze fell upon the Squad Commander's face. The Squad Commander went weak in the knees. He pointed to himself and said,

“Me, me? Sure... Sure thing!”

Gritting his teeth, he curled up into a ball and rolled<sup>1</sup> a few rounds in the snow before standing a short distance away.

Shen Zechuan coyly shifted a little closer and whispered into Xiao Chiye’s ear. “... Even if you let me off, will I let you off?”

Bits of snow suddenly flew up as Xiao Chiye gripped Shen Zechuan’s arm and pressed it down forcefully. With a sinister expression, he said, “Showing your true colors now, huh. I was wondering what’s with this helpless and pitiful act you are putting on!”

Both men suddenly toppled over onto the snow. With his hands dangling from the handcuffs, Shen Zechuan kicked Xiao Chiye in his lower abdomen and scrambled to prop himself up. “The imperial decree was for me to be confined. Yet the Xiao Clan dares to defy the imperial edict to take my life. After tonight—”

Xiao Chiye dragged Shen Zechuan towards him by his shackles.

Shen Zechuan knocked hard against the ground and yelled through clenched teeth. “—You are all the Xiao Clan’s accomplices in defying the imperial edict! My death is not to be regretted, but the Imperial Army will all die with me tonight!”<sup>2</sup>

Xiao Chiye clutched Shen Zechuan’s throat from behind and forced him to raise his head. He gave a few short laughs and said harshly, “Do you think of yourself as a golden child? Die with you? Are you even worthy?! Killing you is just like pulling weeds!”

Shen Zechuan’s breathing was strained. He suddenly looped his shackles around the nape of Xiao Chiye’s neck and summoned all his strength to wrench the latter to the ground. Xiao Chiye was caught unawares by this move. As he raised his arms, Shen Zechuan kicked him in the chest. Both men instantly tumbled upside down.

“Kill me like pulling weeds?” Shen Zechuan bent his head and stared into Xiao Chiye’s eyes, finally meeting him eye to eye amidst the chaos. He said in a hoarse voice, “You’ve missed the opportunity. It remains to be seen who will be the hound and who will be the jade baby rabbit in time to come!”

“Whoever dares to help you in secret!” Xiao Chiye’s intent to kill had been ignited. “I’ll kill one for every one of them I dig out!”

The Squad Commander was scared to death by this sudden change and rushed over to stop them. “Your Excellency! Your Excellency mustn’t kill!”

“That’s right!” Shen Zechuan snapped. “The Second Young Master wants to kill me tonight!”

“Shut your trap!” Xiao Chiye made a sudden move to gag his mouth.

Who would have known that Shen Zechuan would open his mouth to clamp his teeth down hard on him? He pressed down on half of Xiao Chiye’s body, having already bitten through the skin and flesh of the web between Xiao Chiye’s thumb and forefinger.

Xiao Chiye said in a cold voice, “Do you think you can cover it up by making a scene and acting shamelessly? Your martial arts prowess is by no means average!”

The Squad Commander could not stop them, and so he hurriedly called for help. “Pull him off, quick!”

Blood was oozing out between Shen Zechuan’s teeth, but still, he refused to let go. Xiao Chiye had already sobered up by now. He grabbed and lifted Shen Zechuan by his back collar and flung him away. The pain in his purlicue was penetrating. Yet it was Shen Zechuan’s eyes that were vividly seared into Xiao Chiye’s memory.

“Young Master!” Zhao Hui shouted on horseback.

Xiao Chiye turned his head and saw his elder brother on horseback too. The latter had already dismounted and was hurrying towards him. Right at that very instant, he felt ashamed. It was as if someone had peeled him bare of his skin and battered him back into his worthless original self.

Xiao Jiming went down on one knee, and Shen Zechuan immediately let go. Xiao Chiye’s purlicue was badly mangled, and the teeth marks on it were deep.

“Why did you fight?” Zhao Hui followed closely behind and saw his wound.

“Lock him up.” Xiao Jiming said in a deep voice.

Zhao Hui picked Shen Zechuan up and headed inside.

“The Young Master is drunk.” Xiao Jiming looked at the Squad Commander and said, “Don’t let what happened tonight get out. I will personally make an apology to His Majesty.”

The Squad Commander kowtowed to him several times and repeated, “I’ll leave the arrangements to the Hereditary Prince!”

Xiao Jiming stood up. Zhao Hui had already thrown the man back into the temple. On seeing this, he said to the Squad Commander, “It has been hard on our Imperial Army brothers tonight in sending the Young Master

back to the residence all safe and sound. It isn't easy to stand guard on a winter night. I'd like to invite all of you for a drink of hot wine. I hope the various gentlemen will not turn this invitation down."

Not daring to say no, the Squad Commander tactfully agreed.

Only then did Xiao Jiming look at Xiao Chiye, although it was in wordless silence.

Xiao Chiye did not even wipe away the blood on his hand. He wanted to say something, but then he saw that his elder brother had already turned around to mount the horse.

"Dage."

Xiao Chiye called out to him in a mutter.

Xiao Jiming heard him, but he spurred his horse on and left.



#### Footnotes

1. 滚 it can both mean to scam/get lost and to roll.
2. 陪葬 In some periods during the Ming Dynasty (and some other Dynasties), when the Emperor died, other people such as his concubines might be killed, forced to commit suicide, or were buried alive alongside the dead Emperor as a sign of their eternal fidelity to him by following him to his grave. It also refers to taking someone down with you.



- 3.
4. ^ Shen Zechuan

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 11 : NEW YEAR



Shen Zechuan's shackles were removed. He moved his wrists as he listened to the Squad Commander grumble on and on. Ji Gang pushed the wheelbarrow and swiftly finished unloading the wine for the Imperial Army. With a coarse cloth wrapped around his head, he shifted over to them.

After ordering Ji Gang to finish tidying up the courtyard before spring, the Squad Commander went outside again to instruct the squad on guard duty that night not to spread word of the incident.

"Are you hurt?" Ji Gang pulled Shen Zechuan's arm.

"No." Shen Zechuan raised his hand to wipe the nape of his neck, where Xiao Chiye had left strangulation marks. He called out, "Shifu."

Ji Gang asked, "Where does it hurt?"

Shen Zechuan shook his head. He considered it for a moment, then said, "His external martial arts<sup>1</sup> is strong and fierce, and his fists and kicks are powerful. It feels familiar to me."

Ji Gang's burned and disfigured face looked astonished. He said, "Our Ji Clan Boxing Style has never been imparted to outsiders."

"I didn't dare to counter his moves the moment he struck." The taste of blood seemed to linger in Shen Zechuan's mouth. He licked the edges of his teeth with the tip of his tongue and thought for a moment. He said, "I was afraid he might get an inkling, so I did not dare to pull out all the stops. It's just that making a scene and playing dumb could not deceive him either. Shifu, why does he hate me so much? Teacher spoke of the current political situation. Aren't those relatives of the Empress Dowager with her at the lead the ones he should hate the most?"

"That brat is drunk!" Ji Gang said with loathing. "And bullies always pick on the weak. So he could only turn to you."

Shen Zechuan shook out his left hand. "He was looking for this. Does shifu recognize it?"

Lying quietly on his palm was that aged and worn out bone thumb ring.

"Those with impressive arm strength in the army often use large bows and must wear these kinds of thumb rings when they are pulling the bowstring." Ji Gang scrutinized the thumb ring and said, "This kind of wear



and tear is most likely from drawing the Libei Cavalry's Great Bow of Heaven. However, this Second Young Master Xiao is not heading into war. So what is he wearing this for?"



Xiao Chiye slept in silence. It was Lu Guangbai who woke him up.

"You were really a piece of work last night." Lu Guangbai did not hold back. He sat on the chair and said, "You have only just gotten a post, and you have already gone and looked for trouble. I just saw Jiming leaving the residence earlier to head for the palace."

Xiao Chiye's throat felt uncomfortable as he lay covered under the quilt. He said, "I drank too much."

"In a few more days, we will leave the capital." Lu Guangbai said in all earnestness. "You can't continue drinking like this. What are you going to do if you drink until your martial art skills are rendered useless and your body collapses?"

Xiao Chiye did not reply.

Lu Guangbai continued, "They devastated your elder brother's heart at the banquet last night, so you should show him some understanding. He is busy with Libei's military affairs and, at the same time, concerned about your sister-in-law. And now he has to leave you behind here. He feels terrible. A-Ye, who doesn't speak highly of him before others? But all of them hope that he will never come back again every time he sets off for battle. For these people, he has to lead the troops to the battlefield year after year. He won't say it himself, but he's made of flesh and blood. So how would it not hurt him?"

Xiao Chiye lifted the quilt and let out a long sigh. He said, "Do I not understand all that you have said?"

"What do you understand?" Lu Guangbai threw the tangerine in his hand at Xiao Chiye and said, "If you understand, then get up and apologize to your eldest brother."

Xiao Chiye caught the tangerine and sat up.

Lu Guangbai looked at the bandaged wound on his hand and could not help but laugh. Sitting on the chair, he ate the tangerine and said, "Why did you provoke him? You just had to go and get yourself bitten before you are satisfied!"

"I told him to sing a tune." Xiao Chiye said. "But he said I wanted his life. How is this guy a pushover?"

“You are no pushover either to start a fight with a confined prisoner on the street. Fortunately, Jiming reached in time. Otherwise, there will be another uproar in the city again today. “Lu Guangbai asked, “Are you badly hurt?”

Xiao Chiye raised his hand for a look and said in irritation, “He’s born in the year of the dog.”<sup>2</sup>



Xiao Jiming came back only in the afternoon. Zhao Hui followed behind him and saw Xiao Chiye waiting under the eaves.

“Dage.” Xiao Chiye called out.

Xiao Jiming took off his cloak, and Zhao Hui took it. The maidservant came over, carrying a copper basin in her hands. Xiao Jiming washed his hands and ignored him.

Zhao Hui looked back at him and said, “Young Master, aren’t you going for the Imperial Army investigation today? Go get the Viceroy token<sup>3</sup> and come back for dinner tonight.”

Xiao Chiye said, “I’ll go if my elder brother tells me to.”

Xiao Jiming wiped his hands and finally looked at him. He said, “I didn’t tell you to go last night, but you still went ahead, didn’t you?”

Xiao Chiye said, “I ran in the wrong direction. I had meant to return home.”

Xiao Jiming placed the handkerchief back into the copper basin and said, “Go get the token, then come back for your meal.”

Only then did Xiao Chiye leave.



Since the Imperial Army was dismissed from its duty of guarding the capital, the former office had fallen into a state of desolation. Xiao Chiye spurred his horse over and saw several men in short jackets secured with waist sashes sitting around basking in the sun chatting. Their idle and lazy looks had none of the valor one would expect of an “army”.

Xiao Chiye dismounted his horse. Carrying his whip, he strode into the courtyard. There was a bald pine tree standing in the courtyard, with the accumulated snow casually shoved into a heap. No one removed the icicles hanging on the eaves of the veranda, and from the looks of it, the tiles on the rooftop were due for a retiling too.

Welp, they were poor.

Xiao Chiye continued to scrutinize the surroundings. The paint was already peeling off the plaque. He went down several steps to the main hall. Then, lifting the curtain with his whip, he bent over slightly to enter.

The men sitting around the stove cracking peanuts inside immediately turned their heads over to look at Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye laid down his horsewhip on the table and lifted over the chair to sit down without standing on ceremony. He said, "So, everyone's here."

The people around him all stood up with a clatter, stepping noisily over those peanut shells under their feet. Most of them were over forty years of age from old military households. Having muddled along in the Imperial Army for such a long time, they had no other capability to speak of, except for being adept at acting shamelessly to extort money. Seeing Xiao Chiye now, their gazes sized him up and down before they exchanged sneaky looks at one another with ulterior motives in mind.

"Second Young Master!" One of them wiped his hands on his robe and said with a smile, "We have been waiting for you to collect the token today!"

Xiao Chiye said, "I'm here now, no? Where's the token?"

The man said smilingly, "We waited for you this morning, but you didn't come, and the Ministry of Works were urging us to get to work, so Assistant Commander Cao took the token first to deploy the men. He will be back late. Once he's back, I'll send someone to deliver it to your residence."

Xiao Chiye returned his smile and said, "And you are?"

The man said, "Me? Just call me Lao Chen!<sup>4</sup> I used to be the Company Commander of Dicheng's Company.<sup>5</sup> Master Hua Shisan recommended me for a promotion, so here I am now in our Imperial Army."

"That's weird." With one hand on the chair's handle, Xiao Chiye leaned his body to the side and looked at Lao Chen. "Right below the Viceroy should be the Imperial Guards Regional Vice Commander. How did it end up in the hands of an Assistant Commander?"

"You aren't aware of it but...." When Lao Chen saw Xiao Chiye listening attentively, his body, which had been bent over in a bow, straightened up imprudently. "The Zhongbo's troops were defeated last year, and the grains from Jincheng could not be shipped over. That led to an emergency of food shortage in Qudu. The bureaucrats from the Ministry of

Personnel could not afford to pay out yearly salary, and so they cut the staff in the Imperial Army Office by half. At present, we do not have a Vice Commander. The closest is Assistant Commander Cao. All that's left are just the few of us."

"So you're saying," Xiao Chiye said, "Anyone can get their hands on the Viceroy's authority token?"

"Our usual practice in the past was to just take the token and go. The Ministry of Works's tasks can't wait, and it's all lifting lumber to the palace. We are in a humble position, and our words carry little weight. We can't afford to offend anyone. We don't have a choice." Lao Chen started pinning the blame. "If you think this is against the rules, you have to make it clear to the Ministry of Works."

"I'm a legitimate viceroy with a token of authority." Xiao Chiye said, "Why do I have to explain myself to the Ministry of Works? The one in command above the Imperial Army is the Emperor. It was on account of camaraderie that the Imperial Army helped the Six Ministries<sup>6</sup> out in the past without settling accounts with them when they wanted our help. But whoever wants manpower from today onwards, if they can't give a proper explanation of the tasks involved and a clear accounting of the schedules, then they better not count on the deployment of my men."

"You can say anything you want." Lao Chen and the others began laughing. He said, "However, we aren't in charge of patrols and defenses now; we are errand-runners and odd-job laborers! We could still prove ourselves useful by helping out at the Six Ministries. Besides, His Majesty the Emperor had never said a word about this over the past few years. Second Young Master, having money in your pocket is not as good as having friends in the imperial court. You lived in Libei in the past, but the situation of the Imperial Army differs from the Armored Cavalry of Libei. Some things simply won't work here! Moreover, our Imperial Army is no match for the Eight Great Training Divisions. Who—"

Xiao Chiye stood up and said, "Who did you say recommended you for a post here?"

Lao Chen's expression glowed as he straightened his back. How he itched to repeat it out loud thrice. "Master Hua Shisan! You know him too? He's the Empress Dowager's grandson of common birth. He's Third Missy Hua's—"

With a lift of his foot, Xiao Chiye gave him a kick! Lao Chen was still speaking with a glowing face, and the kick caught him off-guard and sent him toppling over and crashing into the table and chair. The teapot smashed onto the ground, splashing tea all over the floor. It startled Lao Chen back to his senses, and he trembled as he crawled and kneeled on the ground.

“The loafer raised by a concubine from the Hua Clan.” Xiao Chiye swept aside the peanut shells on the table. “He used to carry my boots in the past. What kind of influential backer do you think he is? At best, he’s just a small potato. I want the Viceroy’s token of authority. Instead, you tell me the rules. Are you so blinded that you can’t even tell who I am? From now on, I’m the one who has the final say in the Imperial Army!”

Lao Chen propped himself up with his hands and kowtowed to him. Having received a rude awakening, he hurriedly said, “Second Young Master, Second Young Master...”

“Who the fuck is your Second Young Master?” Xiao Chiye’s eyes were piercingly cold. “As the Imperial Army Viceroy, I’m your master who is in control of your life. Putting on airs before me and pretending to be some local ruffian? The Ministry of Works needs manpower for manual labor, and the men deployed are all from the Imperial Army. If there were no money exchanging hands in between, then would you have found it worthwhile for you to throw yourselves at their feet? Everyone at the bottom is working themselves to their deaths, but you sure have kept yourself fat without lifting a finger. What? Hua Shisan said he would protect you, and you really think of yourself as having the Death-Exemption Golden Token<sup>7</sup> in your possession?!”

“I wouldn’t dare. I wouldn’t dare!” Lao Chen shuffled a few steps on his knees and said, “Your Excellency! This humble servant was spouting nonsense...”

“Half an hour.”<sup>8</sup> Xiao Chiye said. “Authority token, register of names, and twenty thousand soldiers. I want to check them all. It’s fine if one is missing, you gentlemen can just substitute it with your heads.”

Lao Chen hurriedly rose to his feet and dashed out.



The various generals left the capital a few days later. Emperor Xiande led hundreds of officials to send off Xiao Jiming. He coughed intermittently as he held Xiao Jiming by the arms in the heavy snow.

“Jiming.” Emperor Xiande was wrapped in a cloak, and yet he was still frightfully skinny. He said, “We can only meet again next year once you leave today. It has been restless over at the Libei frontier. Although the Biansha Cavalry had beaten a withdrawal, they still refused to bow and submit to us. The rapacious ambitions of the Twelve Tribes are crystal clear for all to see. You are my trusted official, and also a valiant general of Dazhou. You must be cautious in everything you do.”

“We came to Your Majesty’s rescue late this time, and yet Your Majesty still showed favor to us. Both Father and this humble servant feel stricken. As long as Your Majesty gives the command in the future, Libei will surely risk life and limb for Your Majesty.” Xiao Jiming said.

“Ever since your father fell ill, he has not met with me for many years.” Emperor Xiande slowly turned his head back and gazed at masses of human heads within the city gates. Then he looked at the magnificent palace that had towered over Qudu for a hundred years. He said softly, “I’ve let all the loyal soldiers who have lost their lives on the battlefield down with the way the matter of the surviving member of the Shen Clan played out. But I have been on my sickbed for such a long time, and there are too many matters where my hands are tied.”

Xiao Jiming followed his gaze. After a while, he said, “The wind and snow are raging in Qudu. Your Majesty, please take care of your health.”

Emperor Xiande slowly released his grip on Xiao Jiming’s hand and said, “My good son, go.”

Lu Guangbai spurred the horse out of the city. As expected, he saw Xiao Chiye waiting alone at the pavilion at the foot of the mountain. He remained on his horse as he whistled at Xiao Chiye from afar and said, “Brat, we are leaving!”

Xiao Chiye led the horse and said, “Storms are rife in the martial fraternity; a vessel dreads its captain abandoning ship.<sup>9</sup> You must be careful!

“Just say it if you have something to say. Why recite a poem?” Lu Guangbai laughed heartily. “Just wait. You will eventually be able to return home one day.”

“That depends on fate.” Xiao Chiye smiled too.

The sound of horse hooves rang out behind them. Lu Guangbai looked back. The horse rider coming towards them in the snow was dressed in a simple old robe and had black hair tied up in a high ponytail. Lu Guangbai

quickly turned his horse around and shouted, “Commander-in-Chief! Let’s leave together.”

Qi Zhuyin slowed down. She was dressed light in an overcoat and an old outer robe while carrying a long sword on her back. If one were to look at just her appearance, then she could have been merely an ordinary woman in the martial fraternity. It was only after the wind passed that her face crystallized into a surprisingly lovely face.

“That horse of yours is second-rate.” She raised her eyebrows and smiled, instantly showing her might. “It can’t catch up with mine, can it?”

But Lu Guangbai liked it. He said, “It isn’t as agile and brave as the Commander-in-Chief’s steed, but it’s a good boy that has survived the battlefield. Let’s have a race, and we’ll find out if it can keep up or not.”

“Now, that one over there looks rare to me.” Qi Zhuyin raised her chin at Xiao Chiye. “Swap with me?”

Xiao Chiye stroked his steed’s mane and said, “No, thanks. No matter how I look at it, I’m the one losing out.”

Qi Zhuyin raised her hand and threw an object to Xiao Chiye. Xiao Chiye caught it with both arms. It was an unusually heavy executioner’s blade<sup>10</sup> still in its sheath.

“Before the new year, Libei raised a batch of fine battle steeds for Qidong, and the credits go to you. That thing was forged by the best craftsman in my account books. It cost me a lot of precious materials.” Qi Zhuyin said, “How about it? Not losing out now, huh.”

Xiao Chiye weighed it in his hands and laughed. He said, “Commander-in-Chief, from now on, you’re my dear jiejie! The blade I’ve brought from home might be good, but it’s too light. It’s not as smooth to wield as this one.”

Qi Zhuyin said, “Jiejie? Wait till you unsheathed the blade, and you’ll be calling me yeye!”

Xiao Chiye asked, “Has this blade been given a name?”

“I did think of one.” Qi Zhuyin said, “He who speaks of the ruthlessness of the wolf is himself insatiable and ruthless.<sup>11</sup> Isn’t that just perfect for you?”

But Lu Guangbai said, “The word ‘ruthlessness’ is a little too fierce. He’s just—”

“Fierce.” Qi Zhuyin flung the horsewhip out with a crack, and the steed under her saddle instantly galloped away. Without looking back, she said,

“What you’d want for a man of Libei is precisely for him to be fierce! ”

The main army on the other side had already started moving. The red tassels<sup>12</sup> from the sea of spears of the Qidong Garrison Troops followed closely behind Qi Zhuyin and surged towards the wilderness in the east. Lu Guangbai did not linger. He waved his hand at Xiao Chiye, then spurred his horse on to catch up with them.

The next moment, Xiao Chiye could hear the Armored Cavalry stomping across the ground. It almost seemed as if the earth beneath his feet was quaking slightly. Xiao Chiye looked out into the distance and saw his eldest brother in the lead. Like a wave of black tide, the familiar Armored Cavalry of Libei swept across the snowy plains and galloped north.

The gyrfalcon broke through the wind to chase after them. It hovered in the air over the Armored Cavalry of Libei and screeched. Xiao Chiye stood clenching his blade, watching on as the Armored Cavalry of Libei vanished amidst the boundless sea of snow.



Shen Zechuan’s mind was wandering, and Grand Mentor Qi knocked him back to his senses.

“Now that the various generals have returned to their positions, Qudu has once again lapsed back into a stage of impasse.” With his hair all disheveled, Grand Mentor Qi craned his neck and looked at Shen Zechuan. “You don’t have much time. You can’t keep on being willing to remain a trapped turtle in a jar!”<sup>13</sup>

“They are the butcher knife, and I’m the meat on their chopping board.”<sup>14</sup> Shen Zechuan looked up and said, “Teacher, do I really still have a chance to leave this place?”

“Fortune and misfortune are interdependent. Being confined is not necessarily a bad thing.” Grand Mentor Qi opened the gourd stopper and took a few gulps of wine. “It’s easier to lay low and bide your time if you remain behind closed doors. You will have plenty of opportunities in the future!”

The palace bell tolled in the distance. The new year had begun.



Footnotes



1. 外家拳 ‘external’ martial arts, originates from Shaolin, where one uses one’s physical strength in combat to go on the offensive. The opposite 内家拳 ‘internal’ martial arts originates from Zhang Sanfeng, where one mobilizes one’s internal energy instead. The latter is more concerned about the spiritual and mental aspects rather than the physical aspects. An example of internal martial arts is Taiji (Tai Chi).
2. The Chinese Zodiac is based on a twelve-year cycle, and each year in that cycle is related to an animal sign. These signs in order are the rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig.



- 3.
4. 腰牌 literally authority token or token, it’s a small tablet or token hung at the waist to prove one’s identity, especially for people in governmental posts or acting in an official capacity. I’ll also be calling this an authority tablet or tablet of authority.
5. 老陈 Lao Chen, or literally, Old Chen. Lao can be used as a prefix before the surname of an older person to indicate affection or familiarity.
6. 百户所 The “Company” here is a military unit.
7. 六部 Six Ministries, specifically the Ministry of Works, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Personnel, Ministry of Rites, Ministry of Revenue (or Finance in modern terms), and Ministry of War.
8. 免死金牌 Death-Exemption Golden Token; a tablet or token bestowed by Emperor which would allow a person to be exempt from the death penalty.

9. 半炷香 literally the time half an incense stick takes to burn. Some sources suggest that one stick (一炷香) takes 30 minutes or one hour (one hour is the generally agreed time), but it really depends on a variety of factors (the environment, wind, length of the stick, etc). So half a stick is presumably anywhere from 15 to 30 mins.
10. 《梦李白其二》·杜甫 Dreaming of Li Bai 2 by Du Fu.



- 11.
12. 鬼头刀 literally ghost-headed blade. It's a kind of blade used for beheading people sentenced to death in old times.
13. 凡言狼戾者，谓贪而戾也 by Yan Shigu (颜师古), a famous Chinese historian, linguist, politician, and writer of the Tang Dynasty. The full line is 「狼性贪戾，凡言狼戾者，谓贪而戾(也)。」 (A wolf's nature is insatiable and ruthless. He who speaks of the ruthlessness of the wolf is himself insatiable and ruthless.)

14.



15.

16. 瓮中之鳖 literally turtle in a jar. i.e., to be trapped in a tight corner

17. 人为刀俎，我为鱼肉, literally translated as “he’s the knife and chopping board; I’m the fish meat” (to be the meat at someone’s chopping board). i.e., to be at someone’s mercy.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 12 : DRAGON BOAT FESTIVAL



Eighth Year of Xiande.<sup>1</sup> Midsummer.

The round-collared robe<sup>2</sup> of the Secretary of the Ministry of Revenue, Wang Xian, was drenched in sweat. He sat uncomfortably on the chair as if he was sitting on pins and needles. It was not the first time he raised his *wusha* hat<sup>3</sup> to wipe his sweat.

“Your Excellency Xiao.” Wang Xian hemmed and hawed. “It’s, it’s not that the Ministry of Revenue doesn’t want to allocate the funds to you. It’s just that the expenditure of the treasury has yet to be tallied, and Pan-gonggong up there has not given his endorsement. There’s really no way we can allocate you the sum!”

“It takes time to work out the accounts.” Xiao Chiye held up the teacup to take a few sips. “Am I not waiting here now? Take your time.”

Wang Xian’s throat throbbed. He looked at Xiao Chiye, who was as cool as a cucumber, and at the Imperial Army standing still on the veranda outside.

“Your Excellency.” Wang Xian said almost pleadingly. “The weather is hot, and I feel really bad to let the soldiers stand outside. Let me invite the various gentlemen for some cold drinks. The ice in reserves—”

“We have not made any contribution to deserve it.” Xiao Chiye smiled superficially. “Our Imperial Army are sturdy and burly men who deal with manual labor. So what’s the harm in standing for a few hours? Pay it no mind, Your Excellency. Focus on your accounting.”

Wang Xian grasped the account book. For a long time, he could not bring himself to lower the brush.

That had been the beginning of spring, and the Emperor was seriously ill. For this reason, the Empress Dowager instructed men to carry out large-scale construction in the palace to build a temple so that she could chant the scriptures to accumulate blessings for him. The Ministry of Works, having received this assignment, had to receive large quantities of lumber from Duanzhou. To save money, they ordered the Imperial Army to transport them. The Imperial Army transported the lumber into Qudu, but the Empress Dowager withdrew her plan to build the temple upon receiving Secretariat Elder Hai’s memorial against it. The Ministry of Works was thus

short of this sum of money on hand. For two months, they had dragged this matter on, delaying settlement of payment to the Imperial Army.

Money was in short supply. If this had been a time where the state treasury was full, then this matter would not have been an issue at all. Who would be willing to offend Second Young Master Xiao for such a small sum? But right now, the Ministry of Revenue was suffering themselves. Last year, they had spent almost a million for the Empress Dowager's birthday just by hosting the banquet and giving out monetary rewards alone.

Wang Xian set aside his brush. He might as well stick his neck out. He said, "Your Excellency, there's no way the money can be settled now. To tell you frankly, the expenditure at the end of the year doesn't match up to our budget going by the current accounting. Even our salaries might not necessarily get paid out. We really have no money. Even if you give me, Wang Shoucheng,<sup>4</sup> a stab today, there's still nothing I can do!"

"The salaries and provisions of the Eight Great Training Divisions are paid out as usual without delay. But when it comes to our Imperial Army, you are always desperately broke. We are all officials serving the Emperor. It serves me, Xiao Ce'an,<sup>5</sup> right to be so lowly that all I can do is to hold on to this debt and wait for you guys to have enough money to pay us." Xiao Chiye threw the teacup onto the table with a "clatter". "The Ministry of Revenue cries about being poor every year. But what has it got to do with me? Pay up, and we'll work. It's all down in black and white. Once we are done with our tasks, you have to settle the payment. Don't talk to me about anything else; those aren't my responsibility. If all the problems of the Ministry of Revenue have to bank on the understanding of others, then what else is there for you people to do? Vacate the position earlier and let someone else take over."

His words turned Wang Xian's expression livid. Wang Xian stood up and said, "Since we are all serving the Emperor, then why does Your Excellency have to push us into such a tight corner? Who would be unwilling to settle the payment if we have the money? If the Imperial Army is so capable, then why do manual labor? Go serve as the Eight Great Training Divisions too! We'll see who would still not dare to pay up!"

Just as the atmosphere was hostile between both parties, a man outside the room lifted his robe and strode in.

"There's no need for Your Excellency Wang to get angry. The Second Young Master is just being a forthright man speaking his mind." He took off

his *zheyang* hat,<sup>6</sup> wiped his hands with a handkerchief, and said, “This humble one is the Chief Supervising Secretary from the Office of Scrutiny for Revenue,<sup>7</sup> Xue Xiuzhuo. I’m here regarding this account.”

The Chief Supervising Secretary of the Office of Scrutiny for Revenue was merely a seventh-grade<sup>8</sup> position. By all reasonings, it would not even be considered an official in Qudu. But it was special. Not only could he supervise the work progresses of the various ministries and *yamen*, he could also participate in the reviews and appraisals of the officials’ virtuous achievements that took place every six years at Qudu’s Chief Surveillance Bureau.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, he could sidestep the Six Ministries to submit a memorial directly to the Emperor himself.

Wang Xian could not afford to offend him, so he swallowed his anger and rolled along with it. He said, “How would I dare to get angry? The Imperial Army has done so much. I myself wouldn’t want His Excellency Xiao to have worked for nothing. But Yanqing, take a look at this account. The Ministry of Revenue can’t afford the funds at all.”

Xue Xiuzhuo’s courtesy name <sup>10</sup> was Yanqing, and he looked particularly scholarly and refined. Without looking at the accounts, he said to both men, “I’m aware of the Ministry of Revenue’s difficulties. Second Young Master, how about this? Quancheng supplied us with a batch of silk a few days back. We’ll have it converted into cash and settle your account with the same number of silk. Does that work for you?”

As soon as Xiao Chiye left, Wang Xian’s expression turned cold. He said to Xue Xiuzhuo, “Is he even asking money for the Imperial Army? More like he’s taking it for himself to squander away. Ever since this Second Young Master took up the post of Imperial Army Viceroy, he has been leading a life of debauchery all day long. Every time, he coerces us into a corner. He’s not in the least bit sympathetic!”

Xue Xiuzhuo smiled and said nothing to continue the conversation.



Xiao Chiye left the Ministry of Revenue office and mounted his horse to head for Donglong Street. He was obviously taller than he was five years ago, and the drive and vigor that could be seen in him in the past has diminished some.

Prince Chu, Li Jianheng, had been waiting for him an entire morning. On seeing him, he hurriedly said, “Where the heck have you been? The anxiety is killing me!”

“Fooling around.” Xiao Chiye sat down and gulped down the cold drink. On seeing the basin of ice in the inner part of the room, he stretched out his limbs and lay down on the Arhat bed.<sup>11</sup> He said, “This is so comfortable. It’s so hot outside it makes my head spin. I’m going to sleep for a while.”

“That won’t do!” Li Jianheng waved his moso-bamboo fan vigorously. With his clothes spread open, he sighed. “Wait for me to finish saying my piece before you sleep!”

Xiao Chiye had been up to something at night, and so he was unbearably tired and sleepy at the moment. He let out an absent-minded “hmm”.

Li Jianheng took a sip of the iced wine with his pampered, delicate hands and said, “Do you still remember that woman I told you about the last time? It’s the one I kept five years ago in my manor and was prepared to take her as mine. But that son of a bitch, Xiaofuzi, took her to give<sup>12</sup> to Pan Rugui, that castrated bastard!”

Xiao Chiye uttered an “oh”.

Li Jianheng said with even more gusto, “A few days ago, I went away to avoid the summer heat and saw her again around the manor! That little lady has kept herself so smooth and tender. She looks even more lovely than she was five years ago. My heart goes into overdrive just by looking at her. How I hate those eunuchs! Thieving son of a bitch wrestled away my love by force and broke up a potentially good marriage. He thinks that’s the end of it? No!”

Xiao Chiye yawned.

Li Jianheng fumed, “Are you my buddy or not? You have to help me think of a way to fix him! We can’t touch Pan Rugui, but Xiaofuzi needs a thrashing!”

Xiao Chiye was truly tired. He said, “How? Drag him out of the palace?”

Li Jianheng pushed aside the delicate concubine waiting on him and shut his fan. He said, “The Dragon Boat Festival<sup>13</sup> is around the corner. His Majesty wants to go to Xiyuan<sup>14</sup> to watch the dragon boat race. When the time comes, Pan Rugui will no doubt go along. If he follows, so will Xiaofuzi. When the Directorate of the Imperial Stables are racing horses, we can lure him out and beat him to death!”

Xiao Chiye seemed to be asleep. Seeing his silence, Li Jianheng said, “Ce’an, are you listening?”

“It won’t do to beat him to death.” Xiao Chiye said with his eyes shut. “If Pan Rugui comes to hate you because of this, all you’ll be having in the future is trouble.”

Resentful, Li Jianheng said, “Then we can at least give him a beating, right? If I don’t vent this anger, I won’t even be able to eat. That said, what’s up with you lately? You always look exhausted. What have you been doing at night? Why did you send away the virgin I picked for you the last time?”

Xiao Chiye said nothing more as he waved his hand to indicate his awareness of Li Jianheng’s words. There was no bone thumb ring on his thumb, but the teeth marks on the web between the thumb and forefinger had left scars. Li Jianheng went on to speak about something else, but Xiao Chiye turned a deaf ear to it all.



It was the Dragon Boat Festival a few days later. Emperor Xiande, who had not held court sessions for a long time, braced his sickly body and moved to Xiyuan in an imperial carriage. The imperial concubines accompanying him all donned muslin clothes, while Ji Lei and the Commander-in-chief of the Eight Great Training Divisions, Xi Gu’an, escorted the Emperor. The Imperial Army had free time, so they summoned Xiao Chiye over as well.

By the time Xiao Chiye arrived, it was already full of people. Emperor Xiande finished sticking in the willow<sup>15</sup> and was waiting for the Directorate of the Imperial Stables to start the horse race. The Court of Imperial Entertainments, which was also part of the retinue, served sticky rice dumplings<sup>16</sup> and pastries near the seat. Li Jianheng stayed on the Prince’s seat and waved his hand at Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye threw his horsewhip to Chen Yang behind him and entered his seat while undoing his arm guards.<sup>17</sup>

Still weighing the bamboo fan in his hands today, Li Jianheng said, “Why are you here only now? The anxiety is killing me!”

Xiao Chiye said, “You’re anxious every day. Are you really alright?”

Li Jianheng fanned himself and said, “I’m just used to saying it! Look, see that? Xiaofuzi is serving over there. “



Xiao Chiye looked and saw Xiaofuzi beaming as he spoke beside Pan Rugui's ear. He said, "Don't charge up later. Just get someone to beat him up."

An hour later, Xiaofuzi stepped at the edge of the latrine pit. He was preparing to relieve himself when everything went black before his eyes as someone threw a sack over him.

"Eh!" Xiaofuzi shrieked, wanting to shout, but someone dealt him a punch so hard that he saw stars.

On seeing the sack, Li Jianheng lifted his robe without demur and kicked him. Xiaofuzi, covered with the sack and gagged, groaned in pain as he writhed on the ground.

The race ahead was at its most crucial juncture right this moment, so no one heard the sounds.

They beat up Xiaofuzi for a little less than an hour, but before Li Jianheng could vent all his pent-up anger, Chen Yang stopped him. Chen Yang shot a glance at the guards from the Prince's Residence behind him, and they quickly lifted the sack and darted off.

"Your Highness." Chen Yang said, "He will die if you continue beating him. Perhaps next time."

Li Jianheng pulled on his robe to adjust it. He took two looks at Chen Yang and asked, "Where are you going to throw him?"

"The Viceroy has ordered us to throw him in the woods beside the lake. Once the banquet starts later, all the serving eunuchs will pass by, and he will then be freed of his bindings."

Li Jianheng spat at the spot where Xiaofuzi had rolled about earlier and returned to his seat.



By the time the banquet started, Li Jianheng had already forgotten all about him. Xiao Chiye kept his eyes open as he looked over at Pan Rugui, but he did not see any signs of Xiaofuzi.

Li Jianheng picked up the dishes with his chopsticks and said, "Most probably, he found it humiliating and ran back to change his clothes. Eunuchs like them who serve the Emperor fear getting dirty and disdained by their master the most. Do you want to go to my manor a few days later for some fun? I can let you see the little lady too. "

Xiao Chiye drank the cold tea and said, "I'm busy."

Li Jianheng let out a “heh” and said, “You still want to put on an act before me? You, busy? The Imperial Army is almost on the verge of getting disbanded. What’s there to be busy with in such an idle position?”

“Busy drinking.” Xiao Chiye laughed too. Those eyes of his stared at the tea in his hand. His side profile looked a tad flippant. “Once autumn arrives, it’ll be the inspection. It’s only by treating others to some wine that I can secure this idle position.”

“Being human,” Li Jianheng pointed at him with his chopsticks and said, “is to treat yourself as if you are living a life of luxury and to live life as if you are whiling the time away. What did they say about the Pan Rugui and those relatives of the Empress Dowager? Aren’t they tired of fighting one another to the death? What’s the joy in that?”

“Yeah.” Xiao Chiye’s smile grew wicked, “Isn’t that just making yourself more stressed and vexed? Having fun is still the most gratifying.”

Li Jianheng looked at that gaze of his and smiled too. He said, “So what’s with the Censorate? Who dares to deny my buddy his post? You were personally appointed by His Majesty. We are loafing around on imperial orders. How about this? Before autumn, I’ll host a flower appreciation feast at my residence. You go ahead and invite them all.”

“No hurry.” Xiao Chiye surveyed Xiyuan and saw the Hall of Zhao Zui Temple at the corner of the rising and falling tiers of eaves. He frowned and said, “This place is pretty near to Zhao Zui Temple.”

“You’re still thinking about it, huh.” Li Jianheng said, “That thumb ring has been lost for so long.”

Xiao Chiye stroked his thumb out of habit.

“That last member of the Shen Clan has been locked up for five years, and there has been no news of him. His Majesty has never even asked if he has died or gone insane.” Li Jianheng said, “If the one imprisoned inside was me, I’d have gone crazy in just half a month, let alone five years.”

Xiao Chiye’s purlicue ached. He had no wish to bring up that man.

Just then, the sound of drums rose by the side of the lake. Li Jianheng threw aside his chopsticks and rose to his feet to urge him on. “Let’s go! The dragon boat race. They are certain to bet money on it!”

Xiao Chiye was about to get up, but then he saw Ji Lei hurried his way through the crowd and leaned over to Pan Rugui to say something to him. Pan Rugui suddenly turned his head over for a fleeting instant. And then he slapped down heavily on the table.

Xiao Chiye immediately looked at Chen Yang behind him.

Stunned, Chen Yang said, "Vice..."

"Your Majesty!" Ji Lei was already kneeling before the Emperor. He spoke in a clear voice. "I'm afraid it's not possible to go ahead with the dragon boat race. This humble subject led the Imperial Guards on patrol earlier, and we unexpectedly fished out Xiaofuzi, who was on duty in the imperial palace, from the water!"

Emperor Xiande coughed violently and Pan Rugui stepped forward to stroke his back. It was only when Emperor Xiande's coughing eased a little that he asked, "What is he doing in the water?"

Ji Lei raised his head. One could not tell if he was looking at Emperor Xiande or the Empress Dowager. He said in a heavy voice, "He drowned."

A commotion rose from the entire seat of imperial concubines as they used their silk handkerchiefs to cover their mouths.

All at once, Li Jianheng knocked over the teacup on the table. He picked it up in a panic and looked at Xiao Chiye. "I was merely just saying..."



### **Author's Words:**

Timeline from the Third Year of Xiande to the Eighth Year of Xiande at the start of this chapter is exactly five years.

### **Footnotes**

1. This is the name of an era during which a specific Emperor (Emperor Xiande, in this case) reigned.



- 2.
3. 团领衫 or 圆领袍 round-collared robe/attire typically worn by officials in the Ming Dynasty.
4. 乌纱帽. *Wusha* hat, or black gauze hat, is the headwear of Ming dynasty officials, consisting of a black hat with two wing-like flaps of thin, oval-shaped boards on each side. (See image in the previous footnote)
5. 王宪 Wang Xian (name) vs. 王守成 Wang Shoucheng (courtesy name)
6. 萧策安 Xiao Ce'an, is Xiao Chiye's courtesy name.



7.

8. 遮阳帽 *zheyang* hat; a ‘sunshade’ hat typically worn by the literati, or scholar-official.
9. 户科 Office of Scrutiny for Revenue, one of the Six Offices of Scrutiny (六科) that was set up to inspect and supervise the Six Ministries (in the Ming Dynasty, these were respectively the Ministry of Personnel, Revenue, Rites, War, Justice, and Works).
10. 七品 Officials were classified in nine hierarchic grades, with grade one being the highest rank. Their salaries ranged according to their rank.
11. 都察院 Chief Surveillance Bureau, also known as the Censorate. (I’ll use both terms interchangeably). The Chief Surveillance Bureau was directly responsible to the Emperor, and their tasks involved impeaching officials for misconduct, checking judicial records, and making regular and unannounced inspections. While disciplining and impeaching corrupt officials, it also cooperated with the Ministry of Personnel to assess whether officials were able and deserving of promotion.
12. 表字 A literary name or courtesy name , also known as a style name, is a name bestowed upon one at adulthood in addition to one’s given name.



- 13.
14. 罗汉床 Arhat bed is a kind of a long and narrow wooden couch that also functions as a bed (榻). The arhat bed is distinguished by railings around the back and sides of the platform.
15. 孝敬 showering gifts on one’s superior, mostly to curry favor or bribe them.



16.

17. 端午 Dragon Boat Festival, also known as Duanwu Festival, is a folk festival with traditional customs such as dragon boat racing, eating sticky rice dumplings (*zongzi*) and so on.

18. 西苑 literally west gardens. 苑 is a garden or imperial enclosed ground for growing trees, keeping animals, etc.

19. 插柳 There's actually a saying “清明插柳，端午插艾”，Stick in the Willows during Qingming (Tomb Sweeping Day) and Mugwort during Duanwu (Dragon Boat Festival). But in some parts of China (e.g. the northwest), it's a common practice to hang up willows during the Dragon Boat Festival (Duanwu) to ward off evil and sickness. In the eyes of the ancients, mugwort and willow branches both have the same function of warding off evil.



20.

21. 角黍 jiaoshu, also known as 粽子 zongzi, a pyramid-shaped dumpling made of glutinous rice wrapped in bamboo or reed leaves (eaten during the dragon boat festival)

22. 臂缚 Iron armor that ancient soldiers tied to their arms to protect against blades.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 13 : LITTLE CICADA



Without looking at Li Jianheng, Xiao Chiye righted the lid of the teacup slowly with his fingers. He said, “Don’t fret.”

Li Jianheng sat back in his chair, scared out of his wits. He heard the Empress Dowager ask, “His Majesty the Emperor is here, and the patrol is strict. How could a person drown for no reason?”

Ji Lei said, “To reply Your Majesty, this humble subject has already sent someone to take the corpse to await the coroner’s examination. We will know the details soon.”

“What do you mean?” Being chronically sick had laden Emperor Xiande’s brows with an aura of gloom. He said, “Don’t tell me there is something fishy about his death?”

Ji Lei said, “Your Majesty, he was bruised all over when we fished him out of the water. It’s clear that he had received a beating. Although Xiaofuzi was a court eunuch of the palace, he didn’t hold any important post in the twenty-four *yamen*;<sup>1</sup> he was merely His Majesty’s personal eunuch. If he was tortured before he died, then I’m afraid the murderer might be plotting something major.”

Supporting himself on the table, Emperor Xiande stood up and said coldly, “I have only just stepped out of the palace, and already there are people who can’t wait.”

“Your Majesty.” Hai Liangyi stepped out and kneeled to say, “The Imperial Guards and the Eight Great Training Divisions are on rotation duty with one another today to conduct patrols. If the murderer was really plotting something, how would he have dared to do such a sloppy work of it? Xiaofuzi usually took on the job of leaving the palace to make purchases. It’s not impossible for him to make personal enemies out of others elsewhere.”

Secretariat Elder Hua, Hua Siqian, who had been sitting upright without moving, said, “Renshi,<sup>2</sup> you can’t put it that way. A man who dares to strike before His Majesty clearly has no regard for His Majesty and all the officials present. Who among the ordinary commoners outside the palace would have this kind of guts?”

Xiao Chiye sat still as the gears turned in his mind.

At the third quarter of the hour of Wu,<sup>3</sup> Chen Yang had dragged Xiaofuzi into the woods. In just an hour,<sup>4</sup> the eunuchs serving the dishes at the start of the banquet and the Eight Great Training Divisions taking over the patrol would pass by. All those present today were bigwigs. No one would remember everyone who left their seats to change attire, drink tea, or make a trip to the latrine. What's more, the accompanying soldiers and eunuchs all had the right to move around the garden too. Someone only needed to give Xiaofuzi a light kick in that timespan of an hour, and he would have drowned in the pond.

Looking at the situation now, the thorny issue was not explaining how the bruises on Xiaofuzi's body came about. Instead, it was that Ji Lei had changed the course of investigation and turned this murder case into a suspect case for rebellion.

Xiao Chiye tapped his fingertips on the lid.

This fire must never burn its way to Prince Chu.

The Emperor was gravely ill now, and the Imperial Physician was at his wits' end. No one could even predict the day of his demise. However, Emperor Xiande had no heirs. Once the unexpected happens, Li Jianheng would be the next one in line to the throne.

What happened today was all because he did not think things through. It was too brazen for Li Jianheng to leave his seat. This was something he could not simply dismiss with a perfunctory excuse.

The Xiao Clan was treading on thin ice. If they were to be suspected of being implicated in the tussle for the imperial throne again, then the one hundred and twenty thousand military forces of Libei would be the executioner blade on Xiao Jiming's neck.

This matter had come bearing down on him too fast; it was already staring at him right in the face. He could not let it continue burning.

Xiao Chiye suddenly flung down the teacup, shattering it. The clear, crisp sound of "clatter" rang out, attracting the sidelong glances of everyone at the banquet.

Li Jianheng looked at him in apprehension and said, "Ce, Ce'an..."

Xiao Chiye stood up and strode swiftly towards the Emperor. He kneeled and said in a clear voice, "Your Majesty! This humble subject dare not hide this from you. I was the one who ordered my men to hit him."

Emperor Xiande stared at him and asked, "He was a court eunuch. What grudge did he have with you that you would be so ruthless to him?"



Ji Lei also looked askance at him and said, “Your Excellency Xiao, this matter is one of grave importance. You mustn’t take the blame for someone else because of some personal relationship.”

“It’s no big deal, actually.” Xiao Chiye said frivolously. “Besides, this humble subject doesn’t think it’s a crime. So what if I beat an insignificant and lowly eunuch to death? I’m a second-grade Viceroy of the Imperial Army. Don’t tell me I still have to put up with this condescending dog of a slave?”

“For the Second Young Master to be this furious,” Hua Siqian said, “I’m afraid it’s not just any typical grudge. It’s just that Xiaofuzi normally had no dealings with you. So why are you this furious?”

“Secretariat Elder doesn’t know it, but...” Xiao Chiye said, “when I rode my horse to the military drill ground a few months ago, this dog’s sedan blocked my way. He looked like a big shot. If he had not lifted the curtain, I’d have thought him to be Pan-gonggong. I rebuked him a few words, and he mouthed off at me. I’m a real man, and yet I was humiliated by a wretched castrated eunuch right there on the street. If it had been someone else, I doubt they would have been able to swallow this humiliation either.”

Pan Rugui was still waiting on the Emperor at the outer side. The entire banquet of attendees all wiped their sweat for Xiao Chiye when they heard him say “castrated”.

As Emperor Xiande turned it over in his mind, the Empress Dowager said, “Even so, killing at the slightest provocation is not what a gentleman should do.”

Their words seemed to hit Pan Rugui’s sore point. The gray-haired man kneeled with tears in his eyes and said, “Slaves like us are all lowly creatures. How could we be compared to the Second Young Master? Her Majesty is already showing us favor with her compassion. Xiaofuzi had been spoiled so rotten that he didn’t know to observe the etiquette when encountering military officials of the court. Even with the Second Young Master’s advice, he remained unrepentant... This is all this slave’s fault for being tardy in my teaching of the child!”<sup>5</sup>

He spoke in such a conciliatory and accommodating way. Yet, the law stipulated that eunuchs had to dismount and step back to kneel and kowtow in a greeting whenever they saw a minister or major court official.

The Empress Dowager was a staunch Buddhist, so she was displeased with the killing of lives. As such, she said to Emperor Xiande, "There has been a saying since time immemorial that all men are equal in the eyes of the law. Xiao Chiye is so violent and wild. By all sentiment and reason, we can't let him off too lightly. Besides, the Xiao Clan are all loyal and upright men. The Prince of Libei sent his son into Qudu to be raised close to Your Majesty. If we indulge him to the extent that he thinks so highly of himself, then I'm afraid that we would have let down the Prince of Libei who has entrusted him to us."

Ji Lei was indignant. He was unwilling to let the matter go this easily, so he said, "The Second Young Master has always been on friendly terms with Prince Chu. Now that he has done such a thing, His Highness—"

"This humble subject still has something to say. I might be the one who beat him up, but I didn't kill him. Your Majesty, this humble subject originally had the intent to kill him to vent my fury. But when His Highness Prince Chu knew of this matter, he persuaded me against it. This humble subject was the one who ordered the guards today to drag him over and give him a thrashing on the quiet. Who would expect His Highness Prince Chu to get an inkling of what was happening midway and leave his seat to save Xiaofuzi's life? With His Highness giving counsel at the side, this humble subject would not dare to make His Highness lose face no matter how bold this humble subject may be. So, this humble subject let Xiaofuzi off. As for how he drowned, this humble servant finds it strange too. Who would want to vent my hatred on my behalf and do such an ill-advised thing? Your Excellency Ji." Xiao Chiye turned to Ji Lei, his eyes faintly gleaming with delight. "The Imperial Guards are usually meticulous and impeccable in their work. Today, he was lying by the side of the road. Yet he could still dodge the patrol squads and fall into the pond.... Perhaps he was the one himself who could not tell the direction with his head covered and rolled down."

Hai Liangyi said, "That's true. Such a big man fell into the pond, and the Imperial Guards never realized it even though they were coming and going on patrol. If assassins were to infiltrate Xiyuan today, the Imperial Guards probably wouldn't even notice it either!"

How would Ji Lei dare to muddy the water further? He kowtowed in a panic several times and said, "Your Majesty! The Imperial Guards can't do anything about it either. The Imperial Guards rotate with the Eight Great

Training Division today to conduct patrols, so we have to organize the manpower carefully when relieving each squad. We wouldn't dare to neglect even the tiniest detail!"

The Seal-holding Commander-in-Chief of the Eight Great Training Divisions, Xi Gu'an, knelt as well and said, "That's indeed the rule. The Eight Great Training Divisions do not dare to make light of it either. The rotation of the patrol follows a fixed schedule. It's not impossible for someone to memorize it and seize the chance to kill Xiaofuzi. This is a personal feud between a court official and eunuch. It should be handed over to someone to investigate exactly how many people have a grudge against this Xiaofuzi."

"Investigate." Emperor Xiande laughed scornfully and suddenly threw the teacup at Gu Xi'an. He said in a towering rage, "Someone died right under your noses. Instead of self-reflecting, you just want to shirk responsibility! To think I actually put my, my safety in all your hands... You..."

Emperor Xiande's voice went hoarse as he covered his mouth and started coughing again. He was so enraged that he had to support himself with the table before he toppled over backward.

"Your Majesty!"

The imperial concubines around him let out shrill cries of alarm. The banquet was thrown into complete chaos.

"Summon the Imperial Physician, quick!" The Empress Dowager held on to someone for support and said in reproach.



Li Jianheng looked as if he had seen his own mother when he saw Xiao Chiye again. He said, "My dear brother! You scared me just now!"

Xiao Chiye said, "I have been kneeling for so long that I'm starving now. Bring me some snacks."

Li Jianheng waved his hand to motion for someone to hurry and get the snacks. He stood with Xiao Chiye at the base of the long veranda in Xiyuan and looked at those bright lights in the palace hall.

"If His Majesty regains consciousness, he will summon you." Li Jianheng said, "How did that Xiaofuzi die? I'm really down on my luck! "

Xiao Chiye ate his snacks with herbal tea.

It was hard to say with this matter.

Pan Rugui has always favored Xiaofuzi. If someone had deliberately wanted to take Xiaofuzi's life, how could his timing coincide so perfectly with Li Jianheng's beating? If it wasn't a deliberate attempt to kill Xiaofuzi, then it was a spur-of-the-moment decision. Yet, it would have been far more advantageous to untie him than to kill him.

The thing was that Pan Rugui and Ji Lei reacted way too swiftly. Since the man was already dead, they might as well make full use of him. If they could frame it on Prince Chu, they would be killing two birds with one stone.

"Has His Majesty summoned anyone to his chamber recently to spend the night?"<sup>6</sup> Xiao Chiye asked off-handedly.

"Yeah." Li Jianheng answered. "The one he favors the most lately is the lady of the Wei Clan. The Empress Dowager likes her too."

Xiao Chiye looked thoughtful.

It was already dark by now, but no one dared to leave. All of them stood in small groups on the veranda and waited for Emperor Xiande to regain consciousness.

Xi Gu'an left the garden midway. When he returned, he received the Empress Dowager's orders and headed into the room to wait. After another hour, Xiao Chiye suddenly saw the Eight Great Training Division guards leading an errand-runner, who was dressed in clean cotton clothing, in from the side gate.

"Who is that?" Xiao Chiye asked.

Li Jianheng craned his neck and said, "An errand-runner. There aren't many errand-runners in Xiyuan. But what are they bringing an errand-runner here for?"

With the help of the dim light from the lantern, a sharp-eyed Xiao Chiye saw that the errand-runner had an ugly appearance with burn scars. He did not know why, but his heart suddenly leaped as an ominous speculation took hold in his mind and lingered.

"An errand-runner of Xiyuan." Xiao Chiye said. "Xiyuan is a noble ground used to receive the Emperor. It is a requirement for all those who wait upon him to look refined. Where would such a person come from?"

After a while, Pan Rugui strode out of the door and shouted, "Summon the eighth son of the Shen Clan! Hurry over for an audience with the Emperor!"

An uproar broke out amidst the throng of officials. The sound of discussion rose multifold.

There had not been a final judgment on whether Shen Wei had been guilty of treason after his death, but the name of Shen Wei had already spread across the country. The wounds of Zhongbo had yet to heal, and the blame for the defeat of the troops still existed. The fact that the remaining member of the Shen Clan had undeservingly got to keep his life had already roused resentment at the frontiers. So why was he still permitted to come out now?

“What’s going on?” A stunned Li Jianheng said. “Don’t tell me they discovered something? Ce’an, there’s enmity between you and him. Both of you see red whenever you meet. For the sake of the Xiao Clan’s face, they shouldn’t have let him out!”

Xiao Chiye said nothing. He merely shifted his gaze to the entrance and stared at it closely.

In less than half an hour, the guard at the lead strode in. A man followed not far behind him.

After five years, this man’s hair has grown long. It hung behind him, secured with a crude wooden hairpin. He did not wear a crown. His old wide-sleeved robe sheltered his wrists from view, while the rest that extended out of those sleeves were as fair and lustrous as that of white porcelain. The lantern obstructed Xiao Chiye’s sight. When the man walked out, the teacup in Li Jianheng’s hand tumbled off.

Li Jianheng muttered aloud distractedly. “You never told me this is how he looks like...”

Xiao Chiye’s thumb crooked slightly.

Shen Zechuan passed through the front of the veranda. At the very instant both of them crossed paths, Xiao Chiye looked at this man with coldness and detachment. Right that split second, he locked gazes with a pair of eyes that held deep memories.

These eyes were narrow and long, with the ends raised and curved into thin arches. Divine light shone in them. Even under the dim light of the lantern, those eyes still looked as if they were hiding the remnant of stars within.

In this rush of a moment, Shen Zechuan seemed to let out a hint of a smile at Xiao Chiye. But it was so faint that there were no traces of it left

behind after Shen Zechuan brushed past him, much like the wind of the night—thin and cold.



#### Footnotes

1. 二十四衙门 Twenty-four *yamen* was an institution of eunuchs serving the Emperor and his household in the Ming Dynasty. It consisted of the Twelve Directorates, Four Offices, and Eight Services—these are collectively referred to as the Twenty-four *Yamen*.
2. Hai Liangyi's courtesy name
3. 午时 Hour of Wu, i.e., 11 am-1 pm in the system of two-hour subdivisions used in former times.
4. 一炷香 the time an incense stick takes to burn. Some sources suggest that one stick takes 30 minutes or one hour, but it really depends on a variety of factors (the environment, wind, length of the stick, etc). One hour is the generally agreed time though.
5. There is this line in the Three Character Classic (三字经, San Zi Jing) 养不教, 父之过; the father is to blame for his son's faults (because he did not teach him well). It's also applicable to a teacher or a superior who mentors, since a teacher or a mentor is said to be just like a father. (一日为师, 终身为父; a teacher for a day, a father for a lifetime) .
6. 侍寝 basically to summon his concubines, palace maids, etc, for sexual purposes and to make babies.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 14 : PRAYING MANTIS



Shen Zechuan followed the man inside and kneeled outside the hanging screen.

Emperor Xiande leaned back partially against the head of the bed, while the Empress Dowager sat by the side of the bed. With both hands holding the bowl of medicinal decoction, Pan Rugui retreated a little to reveal Shen Zechuan's figure.

Emperor Xiande made an effort to gather himself and said, "The patrol squad of the Eight Great Training Divisions said that they saw your errand-runner appear at the side of the pond. I'm asking you, what is he doing there?"

Shen Zechuan said, "To reply His Majesty, Uncle Ge was waiting for Fu-gonggong from the palace."

"On whose orders?"

Shen Zechuan paused, then kowtowed. He said, "It was this sinful subject's."

Emperor Xiande let out a few coughs and said, "You are being imprisoned in Zhao Zui Temple. Every month, the palace will allocate and deliver food and clothing to you. How would you come to have connections with Xiaofuzi?"

"His Majesty showed concern and allowed this sinful subject to self-reflect at Zhao Zui Temple. Not only did His Majesty bestow kindness upon me, but even grant me food. This sinful subject recently came down with a cold. Coupled with my old ailment, it became increasingly harder for me to get up every day." Shen Zechuan looked sorrowful at this point. "Although the palace deliver my meals, they don't send medicine. Uncle Ge has been on duty in Zhao Zui Temple for a long time. Taking pity on this sinful subject, he asked Fu-gonggong, who left the palace to procure goods, for some medicine from the palace on behalf of this sinful subject. And that's how this sinful subject came to entrust Uncle Ge again this time to beseech Fu-gonggong to buy some blessing oil lamps<sup>1</sup> for me."

"You have no family." The Empress Dowager asked. "Why do you need oil lamps to pray for blessings?"

“This sinful subject is aware of my heinous sins, so I’ve been praying by the lamp in the temple day and night for His Majesty and Her Majesty. At the same time, I’ve also been chanting sutras all day for the loyal martyrs who lost their lives at the battle of Zhongbo’s Chashi.” Shen Zechuan said devoutly. He continued, “Having planted some vegetables on the temple’s grounds, this sinful subject entrusted Uncle Ge to sell them for some money at the morning market. The illness of this sinful subject is already in such a state. Instead of using the money to buy medicine, I might as well get some blessing oil lamps.”

The Empress Dowager gave a long sigh. “Although you are guilty of sin, it is not unpardonable.”

Emperor Xiande wearily closed his eyes and said, “Xiaofuzi is now dead. Do you know anyone who has a dispute with him?”

Shen Zechuan shook his head and said softly, “Although this sinful subject might be bold enough to beseech Fu-gonggong to buy lamps, I have never seen Fu-gonggong before or exchange letters with him.”

“What about you?” Emperor Xiande motioned to Ji Gang. “Tell me. Has he mentioned anything to you?”

Ji Gang did not dare to look at the Emperor directly in the face. Like any other ordinary errand-runner, he answered with fright and fear. “To reply Your Majesty, whenever Fu-gonggong left the palace, it was all for purchasing purposes. With such a busy schedule, he would usually send those serving him to meet this humble one.”

On hearing this, Emperor Xiande cast a self-mocking glance at Pan Rugui, who stood as still as a wooden statue.

Ji Gang went on to say, “But there was a time when this humble servant greeted Fu-gonggong before his sedan and heard him mention something to his attendants about His Highness flying into a rage out of humiliation and wanting to create trouble for him. At that time, this humble servant was anxious to give Fu-gonggong the money to buy the oil lamps, and so I moved closer to him. But Fu-gonggong was busy that day too, so he told this humble one to come to Xiyuan today to wait for him. That was how the military gentlemen came to see this humble servant pacing up and down by the pond.”

Pan Rugui said, “Did you hear it correctly? That it was ‘Your Highness’ and not someone else?”



Ji Gang kowtowed repeatedly and said, "I dare not deceive His Majesty. Many people saw this humble servant in the market that day. All you have to do is to ask around to know that this humble one isn't lying."

Emperor Xiande said nothing for a long time. The smell of medicine in the room was heavy. The Empress Dowager covered her nose and mouth with her handkerchief and leaned over to say to Emperor Xiande, "Your Majesty, whether or not Xiaofuzi's death was premeditated, you can't just listen to Xiao Chiye's side of the story. The case happened just a few steps away from Your Majesty. If it was Prince Chu who wanted Xiaofuzi's life like this person said, then why would Xiao Chiye prevaricate to such an extent?"

"Your Majesty." Pan Rugui said softly as well, "Xiaofuzi's life is insignificant. Never mind if Prince Chu killed him because of personal grudges. But I'm afraid things are not that simple. His Majesty hardly steps out of the palace, while Xiaofuzi frequently did so. Why didn't Prince Chu choose some other day? Why did it have to be today?"

Emperor Xiande suddenly broke out in a violent coughing fit again. He pushed aside Pan Rugui's hand and used his own handkerchief to wipe away the bloodstains. Without looking at anyone, he said, "Jianheng is my own brother. I understand his temperament best. Since this case is already at this stage, then let Ji Lei settle it. This all happened because Xiaofuzi used his own position to lord it over others and overstepped his boundaries when it came to the rules of propriety, thereby causing resentment and envy among others. Punish Xiao Chiye by grounding him in his residence for half a month, and punish Ji Lei and Xi Gu'an by docking their salaries for three months! Pan Rugui, go relay the message. Once you are done, dismiss them."

"This..." Pan Rugui looked at the Empress Dowager.

The Empress Dowager said nothing.

Thus, Emperor Xiande looked at the Empress Dowager and said earnestly, "Imperial Mother, we are currently in troubled times. Autumn is approaching, and the frontier is in a precarious position. Trade conflicts at the frontier are increasing day after day. Libei, Qidong, and the Bianjun Commandery all need to stabilize and maintain the soldiers' morale. If we pursue this matter, and it ends up implicating too many people and causing casualties at the frontier, then the ones to suffer will be the common folks. Although the pain of Zhongbo has passed, its humiliation has yet to be

avenged. Imperial Mother, it's not advisable to drag this matter on for too long, lest we lose the faith of the commoners."

Expressing concern, the Empress Dowager tucked in the quilt for Emperor Xiande and said, "It's truly a blessing for the empire that His Majesty is still worrying about state affairs when His Majesty has yet to recover. Pan Rugui, go."

Pan Rugui acknowledged her orders and gingerly retreated out of the door.

The Empress Dowager continued. "The way I see it, this eighth son of the Shen Clan truly wants to repent and mend his ways. He is completely different from Shen Wei. He is a child you can use."

Emperor Xiande said, "His health isn't good. I'm afraid he's unable to take on any duties. Maybe it'd be better for him to remain in the temple for recuperation."

However, the Empress Dowager slowly put her hand down and said, "What His Majesty has said is logical. But he is already out. If we send him back again for no reason, it will inevitably arouse suspicions about the case. Isn't that contrary to what His Majesty wants?"

Emperor Xiande smiled and turned to Shen Zechuan. He said, "The Empress Dowager likes and thinks highly of you. You must keep this in mind in the future. Don't go down the same path that disloyal and unfilial father of yours did. Let's send you to the Imperial Bodyguards then. The Twelve Offices have varying degrees of duties. There will naturally be something you can do."

Shen Zechuan prostrated himself and kowtowed to thank the Emperor for his benevolence.

After all the others had left, Emperor Xiande leaned over the edge of the bed and vomited out all the medicine he had drunk earlier. The quilt covering his hand had been wrung until it was all creased. Under the dim light of the candles in the room, Emperor Xiande's face was ashen. His illness was evidently already at the critical stage.

With Pan Rugui supporting her, the Empress Dowager walked along the water veranda.<sup>2</sup> Hua Xiangyi held the newly picked lotus in her hands and followed behind them at a distance together with the other maidservants in attendance.

"Since his last bout of illness, His Majesty has been acting more and more arbitrarily." The Empress Dowager strolled and said, "How can a

critically ill person work so hard for the state?"

"As they say, illness comes like an avalanche."<sup>3</sup> Pan Rugui said, "His Majesty is getting anxious."

"Back then, when I chose Jianyun, it was because I valued his gentle and refined ways, as well as his deference and submissiveness. Although he has been ill over the years, he could be said to have done his best." The Empress Dowager looked at Pan Rugui and said, "But who would anticipate that he would be so fearful of the Xiao Clan? Every time he has to make a choice, he would always prefer not to offend anyone. But how in the world would things always go the way he wishes it to be?"

"When all is said and done, your orders are the ones we obey when it comes to the matters in Qudu." Pan Rugui said, "Wait for a few more days for the Imperial Concubine, Wei-niangniang,<sup>4</sup> to get pregnant with a son, then Your Majesty will no longer need to worry."

The Empress Dowager turned her hand over and patted Pan Rugui on the arm. She said meaningfully, "Before Imperial Concubine Wei is with child, we'll still need you to keep watching over His Majesty's health."

"Ever since receiving Your Majesty's order," Pan Rugui responded, "This slave has been paying attention."



The people outside had already more or less dispersed by the time Shen Zechuan came out. He walked with Ji Gang in a single file down the stairs and saw Xiao Chiye leaving on his horse.

"Wasn't the Imperial Army written off?" Looking at Xiao Chiye's waist and legs, Shen Zechuan said, "But from all appearances, he clearly has not fallen behind on his martial arts."

"An expert in horseback archery." Ji Gang squinted his eyes and sized him up for a moment. "But without exchanging blows with him, I won't know the extent of the lad's strength. If he could already draw the Great Bow of Heaven five years ago, then I'm afraid he's even stronger now. Chuan-er, don't engage in a fight with him unless absolutely necessary."

Shen Zechuan did not answer. But he was taken by surprise when the man who was about to turn the corner suddenly reined in his horse and turned back to charge straight at him.

Shen Zechuan looked at Xiao Chiye without dodging or giving way. When Xiao Chiye's horse was right before him, it suddenly brushed past

him. Shen Zechuan's sleeves and robe went fluttering from the gush of wind, falling back down after a moment.

"What does this case have to do with you?" Xiao Chiye's horse circled around Shen Zechuan.

"It has nothing to do with me." Shen Zechuan smiled at him again. "But it has a great deal to do with the Second Young Master."

"Pan Rugui lost his lapdog, and I took a tumble. No one benefits from it today, and yet you get to reap from it." Xiao Chiye leaned over from his horse and looked at him. "How does someone who is a tough cookie still get to be so lucky?"

"It's all by virtue of the Second Young Master's noble aura." Shen Zechuan also looked at him and said with humility, "If it weren't for the move the Second Young Master made, then how would I have made it out?"

Xiao Chiye's eyes were cold. He said, "You are well-informed."

"Just a cheap little trick." Shen Zechuan said.

Xiao Chiye looked at the sky. The gyrfalcon had caught a sparrow back and was hovering in the air to seek its reward.

"There's no harm in letting you out." Xiao Chiye whistled, and the gyrfalcon immediately landed on the tile. It stepped on the sparrow and tore it apart. He looked at Shen Zechuan again. "Qudu is so big. One has to find entertainment somehow."

"A noble is truly a noble." Shen Zechuan said. "Even the entertainment you seek differs from others. Dining, wining, whoring, and gambling are all beneath your notice. You just had to have your fun with people. However, having fun alone isn't as good as having fun together. How boring would it be if I'm the only one accompanying you?"

"Look at you." Xiao Chiye grasped the horsewhip and lifted the corners of his mouth. "You are such a delight. Why would I want others to butt in between us?"

Shen Zechuan said, "That would be too much for me to bear. I have even found so many friends for the Second Young Master."

"Better worry about yourself than worry about me." Xiao Chiye retracted his gaze. "There are good career prospects in the Imperial Bodyguards, and Ji Lei thinks so highly of you. I'm sure he will be looking forward to your presence."

Shen Zechuan chuckled aloud. He looked at Xiao Chiye with smiling eyes and said in a gentle tone, "You and I are but birds in a cage. I may have

good future prospects, but aren't you having it easy too? I have no worries and concerns, and being all alone, I'm free from constraints. But Second Young Master, can you do the same?"

Against the backdrop of hanging lanterns on both sides, Shen Zechuan looked increasingly pretty, like that of jade. The gyrfalcon finished feeding on flesh and blood and landed back onto Xiao Chiye's shoulder.

"Since we are all caged birds," Xiao Chiye flicked away the dust on the gyrfalcon's feathers. "Then why pretend to be carefree?"



Shen Zechuan returned to the temple at night. Once he took his medicine, he sat across Grand Mentor Qi in the courtyard with a small table between them.

Ji Gang had built a small courtyard in Zhao Zui Temple and acceded to Grand Mentor Qi's request to plant some bamboo and set up a vegetable garden. It was truly a refreshing experience to be sitting outside on a summer night.

"His Majesty has no wish to pursue the matter." She Zechuan said, "Just so he could protect Prince Chu. That was why he allowed me out. Teacher truly has incredible foresight."

"Incredible or not, it's still too early to come to a verdict yet." Grand Mentor Qi tapped the chess piece on the table and clicked his tongue. He said, "Last time, they said that His Majesty had been so sick since the beginning of the year that he could not get up. He is now in the prime of his life, and there is the Imperial Academy of Medicine to take care of him. And yet he is even weaker now than he was in his former residence.<sup>5</sup> It may well be said that Pan Rugui deserves the credit for this."

Ji Gang squatted at the entrance grinding a stone. He said, "His fury was most likely directed at them. Even Ji Lei was punished with them. Obviously, he has been harboring hatred against them for a long time."

"If one feels that time is running out for him, then he will grow bolder." Grand Mentor Qi said, "All along, he has been an Emperor who spends his entire life making concessions for the sake of overall interest."

"The Empress Dowager doesn't like Prince Chu, but there is only Prince Chu left to ascend to the throne. Today, Ji Lei kept incriminating Prince Chu. If this was because Pan Rugui put him up to it," The bitterness of the medicine lingered in Shen Zechuan's mouth. He scrunched up his forehead and said, "Then, I'd believe it. Since Pan Rugui has the intent to

send Prince Chu to his doom, it must be because he no longer has any concerns about future consequences. There is another heir in the palace. One who is far easier to manipulate than Prince Chu.”

“The former Emperor exercising self-restraint?” Ji Gang blew away the dust and said, “I seriously doubt that. Furthermore, if there is really an heir, how would they have been able to hide him all these years? “

“As long as the Li blood runs in him, he’s the imperial heir.” Grand Mentor Qi knocked the chess piece and said, “The former Emperor might not have one, but can’t the current one beget another? Once his harem gives birth to an heir, and he breathes his last, then the Empress Dowager will be able to carry the baby in her arms to hold court and administer affairs of the state without even hanging up the bead curtain.<sup>6</sup> When the time comes, they can appoint Hua Siqian as the minister in custody of the infant. By then, Dazhou will truly take on the surname Hua.”<sup>7</sup>

“But Xiao Chiye is on good terms with Prince Chu, and the Xiao Clan has everything to gain and nothing to lose if Prince Chu ascends to the throne.” Shen Zechuan stroked his chess piece. “Libei will not simply sit idle and do nothing. As long as Prince Chu is still alive, Xiao Jiming and Liu Guangbai from the Bianjun Commandery can command their troops to storm Qudu. How could the Eight Great Training Divisions afford to fight this battle?”

Grand Mentor Qi pressed down on the small table with his elbows and scratched his messy hair. He said, “Lanzhou,<sup>8</sup> how muddle-headed are you?! You think the Empress Dowager wouldn’t have thought of that? Then what would they want Xiao Chiye five years ago for? With Xiao Chiye in their hands, Xiao Jiming would not dare to make a rash move. Qudu’s Eight Training Divisions can’t win if they come up against Libei’s Armored Cavalry, but what about Qidong’s Garrison Troops? There is no reason for the Qi Clan to get involved in this fight. Just for the sake of the words “loyalty to the sovereign”, Qi Zhuyin would still have to deploy the troops to stop Xiao Jiming.”

Seeing Shen Zechuan contemplating it in silence, Ji Gang said, “Isn’t the current Emperor still alive? So why worry about it?! What’s more crucial is tomorrow. Tomorrow, Chuan-er will join the Imperial Bodyguards, right under Ji Lei’s command. I’m worried.”

“That’s why I said I didn’t have incredible foresight!” Grand Mentor Qi said irritably. “His Majesty assigned Lanzhou to the Imperial Bodyguards to

achieve his own purpose and to acquiesce to Her Majesty's wish. But does he really not remember who was the one who interrogated Lanzhou in the Imperial Prison? What do you think he's planning by having adversaries come face to face with one another? There's still something I want to ask you, Ji Gang! When you found Xiaofuzi today, was he really still breathing?"

Ji Gang wiped the stone with his fingertip. After a moment of silence, he said, "It's hard to say. The timing was too tight for me to take a careful look."

"That's right." Grand Mentor Qi looked at Shen Zechuan. "Think about it carefully. If Xiaofuzi was already dead before we could lay our hands on him—then who did it?"



#### Footnotes



- 1.
2. 福油灯 Oil lamps used to ask for blessings.



- 3.
4. 病来如山倒. The full line is 病来如山倒，病去如抽丝  
sickness comes like an avalanche, but goes like spinning silk; i.e.  
illness hits fast but heals slow.
5. 娘娘 *Niang-niang* is a term used when addressing an empress or  
an imperial consort
6. 潜邸 the place the Emperor resided in before he ascended to the  
throne.
7. 垂帘听政 literally to hold court behind a screen or curtain. A  
practice in ancient China, where the Empress or Empress Dowager  
was allowed to preside over the imperial court without actually  
being seen by her subjects since women were prohibited from  
politics. This would usually be done by a child emperor's mother,  
who would serve as regent and rule in place of the Emperor.
8. At this point in time, it's the Li who rules the country. The  
Empress Dowager is from the Hua Clan, so it's saying here that the  
entire empire will fall into the hands of the Hua once that happens.
9. Shen Zechuan's courtesy name.



## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 15 : ORIOLE

Note:

The titles in chapter 13, 14, 15 – Little Cicada (小蝉), Praying Mantis (螳螂), and Oriole (黄雀) – are from the idiom “the mantis stalks the cicada, unaware of the oriole behind.” (螳螂捕蝉，黄雀在后). i.e., to covet and pursue gains before oneself without being aware of (or neglecting) a greater danger behind.



The next day was the day Shen Zechuan ought to make a trip down to the Imperial Bodyguards to receive his post. It coincided with the day Xi Gu'an's younger brother of the same parents, Xi Hongxuan, hosted a banquet. He had invited all the up-and-coming scholars and promising talents in Qudu to have a civilized discourse at the Chaodong Tavern.

Xi Hongxuan was an obese man. When he sat down, someone had to attend to him at the side and fan him. Grasping on to a bamboo fan, he said, “This year is this humble one's lucky year. Although I did not get to invite Yanqing<sup>1</sup>, I managed to invite Yuanzhuo!”

Xue Xiuzhuo had to attend to his official duties, so he could not make it this day. The “Yuanzhuo” Xi Hongxuan mentioned was the current Secretariat Elder's, Hai Liangyi, beloved disciple—Yao Wenyu. These three men could address each other with such familiarity as they were all from the Eight Great Clans of Qudu and had forged a friendship since childhood.

Just then, the bead curtain was lifted, and in walked an elegant scholar as gentle and as pure as jade. He was dressed in a raven blue, wide-sleeved robe with slanting collars, along with a *zhaowen* bag<sup>2</sup> hanging on his waist. On hearing that, he merely smiled. The various Confucian scholars<sup>3</sup> at the feast rose in a welcome. For a moment, the sounds of conventional greetings being exchanged rang out.

Yao Wenyu said his greeting to them one at a time. It was only after he invited everyone to take their seats that he sat down and responded, “We meet every year. How am I worthy of the two words, ‘rare presence’?”

As humble as he was, none of those present dared to belittle him. Because Yao Wenyu was the child prodigy of Qudu in his early years. He composed poems at eight years of age, and eulogies<sup>4</sup> and proses<sup>5</sup> at twelve. He was the “jade” the Old Master of the Yao Clan held in his palms. In order not to let his talents wane, he took Hai Liangyi as his teacher. Hai

Liangyi was, by nature, inflexible and stern. To this day, he only had this one student—one that he prized greatly.

After the small talk, they began to discuss the current situation.

Xi Hongxuan waved his hand to signify to his attendant to stop fanning him and said, “There is indeed something strange going on lately in Qudu. I wonder if the various brothers still remember the Prince of Jianxing, Shen Wei, who set himself on fire for fear of punishment five years ago?”

“The vile man who colluded with the enemies and cowered without fighting!” One of them seated in the row straightened up and said, “He should have been beheaded under the law. Even executing his entire clan wouldn’t be too much. It is regrettable that His Majesty is so benevolent that he just had to spare the life of that last remaining member of the Shen Clan. This morning, I heard that he had been released. The evidence for Shen Wei’s crime is conclusive. As the son of a criminal-official whose troops had suffered a defeat, how could he take up a post? How do they expect the virtuous talents from all over to accept this?!”

“Exactly.” Xi Hongxuan said, “How is this going to work out? There has never been such a precedent before.”

“Most likely, it’s Her Majesty who wants to protect him.” Someone else said, “I have long heard that this remaining member has some relationship with the Hua Clan. But how could personal relationships prevail over state laws? Isn’t this a violation of the law itself?”

Xi Hongxuan sighed, heavy-hearted. “I’m afraid this will set a precedent that will give all the future heirs of officials guilty of crimes a loophole to exploit.”

This immediately stirred up the Confucian scholars. Owing to the severity of Shen Wei’s crimes, they could not allow Shen Zechuan to be released.

“What does Yuanzhuo think?”

Yao Wenyu drank his tea and said amiably, “I haven’t been in the capital for a long time, so I am not aware of the details. I’m not in the position to say a word.”

Xi Hongxuan said in understanding, “That’s right. You are often away for studies, so you aren’t aware of what’s happening in Qudu.”

Someone among them spoke, “All of us here are learned men who are widely read in the classics and literature. We are all men with a sense of

honor and shame, and we are all well-acquainted with the law. We mustn't simply sit and do nothing."

Xi Hongxuan said, "Then, what should we do?"

That person answered, "We are all students of the Imperial College.<sup>6</sup> If the public sentiment is roused, then His Majesty would have to reconsider it. Why not let us return and kneel together before Mingli Hall to beseech His Majesty to retract his order and punish the remaining member of the Shen Clan severely?!"

Sounds of assent rose among those at the feast. Xi Hongxuan clapped his hands and said in commendation, "Excellent! All of you here are indeed the pillars of the country. You will be remembered throughout the ages for this kneel today! This humble one is ashamed. Although I'm not a student of the Imperial College, I'm still willing to join all of you."

The Confucian scholar who had spoken earlier said, "That wouldn't do. Brother Hongxuan's elder brother is the Seal-holding Commander-in-Chief of the Eight Great Training Divisions. If you get implicated in this matter, then you would only stand to lose. Gentlemen, let's us be the ones to go!"

As the feast came to an end, Yao Wenyu called the shopkeeper to steam some tender and palatable meat dishes. As he waited, he listened to the whisperings of the Confucian scholars who had gone downstairs.

"What 'Yuanzhuo the Unpolished Jade'?<sup>7</sup> Isn't he just a coward? Look at him earlier. He didn't even dare to say a word. How can he be compared to Brother Hongxuan's benevolence?"

Yao Wenyu sent a pine nut to his mouth and let loose a soundless laugh. However, he did not step out to contend with them. By the time he came out after his meat bun was ready, the scholars had already more or less dispersed.

Xi Hongxuan said, "Yuanzhuo, shall I give you a lift?"

"No, thanks." Yao Wenyu lifted the meat in his hand. "I'm heading for Teacher's residence."

Both men bid each other farewell. Xi Hongxuan looked at Yao Wenyu's departing back and sneered for a moment before he said, "Let's go."

On the other side, Shen Zechuan had already arrived at the Imperial Bodyguards' courtyard. He strode across the threshold and earned himself the gaze from everyone all around. The entire compound of hurrying and busying Imperial Bodyguards just had to catch a glimpse at him even when they were just passing by.

The one leading the way was Ge Qingqing. He took Shen Zechuan to the duty records room and said, "The Imperial Bodyguards are sorted into four groups of men. The first group is selected from civilian households,<sup>8</sup> where their sister is the 'female head of household'<sup>9</sup> who sweeps<sup>10</sup> in the palace. The brother would then come to the Imperial Bodyguards and put on a temporary authority token.<sup>11</sup> Although he is exempt from service, he is not paid a salary. An example of this group is Xiaowu. The second group are those who have received a recommendation by the palace-gonggong, called 'Conferment by Eunuch's<sup>12</sup> Recommendation'. A case in point is the Commander-in-Chief. The third are those born of military households, with the position inherited. I'm a prime example of this. The fourth group are those with specialized skills and talents in different fields. These are chosen by His Majesty himself irrespective of their backgrounds. This category of men are all very formidable. You will naturally get your chance to meet them in the future." [1]<sup>13</sup>

As Ge Qingqing spoke, he lifted the hanging screen and informed him, "This is the place where you need to register in the official records to receive your post."

When Shen Zechuan entered, the noise in the records room came to an abrupt halt. All the Imperial Bodyguards with different attires and different authority tokens turned their heads over. A strange silence descended upon the hall.

"Shen Zechuan?" The man sitting behind the table with his legs crossed pushed aside the book before him and looked at him. "That's you, huh?"

Shen Zechuan saw him dressed in a flying fish attire.<sup>14</sup> Imperial Bodyguards whose ranks were not of Assistant Regional Commander and above were not allowed to wear this attire. So he gave a slight bow and replied, "That's me."

This man's hair was hanging over his forehead, and his stubble had yet to be tidied. His behavior and bearing were rather unconventional. He touched his chin and smiled. "As expected of the son of a dancer-courtesan. Shen Wei's extravagant spending all just to win the smile of the beauty back then had not been in vain. Qingqing, give him the token."

Saying so, he tossed the token on the table that had already been prepared to Ge Qingqing.

Ge Qingqing caught the token and handed it to Shen Zechuan. He said, "Lanzhou, this is the Judge<sup>15</sup> of the Imperial Bodyguards. He made a special

trip here today just to deliver the token to you.”

“This humble servant is Qiao Tianya.” Having said that, Qiao Tianya motioned for Shen Zechuan to look at his token.

Shen Zechuan turned the authority token over and looked at Qiao Tianya again.

Qiao Tianya said, “The Domesticated Elephants Office, is it? That’s where you will be going. Qingqing will lead you there later. But first, there are some rules I have to tell you. Our Imperial Bodyguards tokens are as precious as the tokens from the Eight Great Training Divisions. When you are not on duty on your days off, you have to keep it properly. You cannot lend it out to outsiders. Although everyone is assigned to duties in the Twelve Offices, those aren’t your main job. Our job is to serve His Majesty. We do whatever His Majesty tells us to do. Other than the assignments in the Twelves Office, we also have to take turns to serve as ‘eyes and ears’. If something major happens, such as our arrest of you five years ago, we will need His Majesty’s ‘imperial edict’.<sup>16</sup> Only when we have the document and the special tokens for arrests in hand that we can proceed. Allocation for any missions we get will not be decided by me or the Commander-in-Chief. Instead, everyone will ‘draw lots’ and let the lots decide.” [2]<sup>17</sup>

Ji Gang had briefed Shen Zechuan on this before. So he nodded his head and said nothing.

“One last thing.” Qiao Tianya stood up and looked around everyone in the hall. He said, “The Imperial Bodyguards are all of one mind. Once you hang our authority token, you are our brother. All kinds of grudges in the past will disperse with the wind. There will be no secret attempts to frame or make a fool of our own brother. If there is, and you are discovered, then all your tokens will be revoked with your names struck off, and you will all be kicked into the Imperial Prison to be dealt with severely.”

Everyone around them turned their gazes away and focused on their own work.

Satisfied, Qiao Tianya turned and said to Shen Zechuan, “You may go.”

Shen Zechuan bowed in farewell and followed Ge Qingqing out of the door.

“I thought it would be an Imperial Regalia post like the Fan Office.”<sup>18</sup> Ge Qingqing looked at Shen Zechuan and said, “The Domesticated Elephants Office... works fine too.”

“I have had many conjectures too.” Shen Zechuan smiled and said, “But I never thought that I’d be going to raise elephants.”

“The Domesticated Steeds Office is currently a good place to be posted to. The golden saddled horses are all raised on behalf of the nobles. It’s easy to get a recommendation for a promotion once you have contacts with them and go on to be on familiar terms with them. As for the Domesticated Elephants Office...” Ge Qingqing had an odd expression on his face. “... It’s not really an idle job. You even have to attend morning court sessions.<sup>19</sup> And those batches of elephant lords are really a pain in the ass to serve. But the Commander-in-chief hardly goes there, so it won’t be easy for him to create trouble for you.”

The Domesticated Elephants Office was close to Mingli public road in Qudu’s Imperial City, which led right to Kailing River. When the weather was hot, they had to herd the elephants over to the river to drink and bathe. Not only that, during the daily morning court sessions, they also had to lead six elephants to stand at both sides of the imperial stairs. If there was a major festive court meet, or a hunting extravaganza, then they had to increase the number of elephants. These elephants would not only attend morning court sessions like the morning court officials did, but they would also be dismissed from court sessions together with the morning court officials. But while the morning court officials would find it a challenge to recuperate if they were to fall ill, the elephants could, since they were just like the Imperial Bodyguards who took turns to be on duty. [3]<sup>20</sup>

Shen Zechuan had never even raised a dog before, and now they were giving him the impossible challenge of raising elephants. All he could say was that, *life’s unpredictable*.

Both men were still on their way when they heard someone running after them.

Ge Qingqing looked back and asked, “What’s the matter?”

The Imperial Bodyguard who came after them looked at Shen Zechuan and said with a solemn expression, “The token is suspended. He can’t take up the post today. Return to the records room quickly!”

Shen Zechuan asked, “Is there a new deployment order from the palace?”

“There’s no new order from the palace. But three thousand students of the Imperial College are on hunger strike and kneeling in protest to beseech His Majesty to retract his order and to deal with the Shen Clan severely!”

Ge Qingqing's countenance changed as he looked at Shen Zechuan.

Having been grounded for punishment, Xiao Chiye lay on the couch and flipped through the storytelling script.<sup>21</sup> Even when he heard Chen Yang announce Prince Chu's arrival, he could not be bothered to get up.

"I'm being grounded." Xiao Chiye ate a fruit without raising his head. "So why are you swaggering in this brazenly?"

Li Jianheng tossed down Xiao Chiye's viceroy token and said in agitation, "Ce'an! Something big has happened!"

Xiao Chiye's eyelid twitched.

Li Jianheng continued, "Three thousand students have kneeled to ask His Majesty to punish Shen Zechuan severely! They kneeled until it was dark and went on a hunger strike to force His Majesty to retract his orders. When His Majesty heard of this during dinner, he was so angry that he collapsed back onto the bed again!"

Xiao Chiye looked at that authority token and said, "Toss it out."

"... The Eight Great Training Divisions won't break the students up. So they told me to deliver the token back to you. If the Imperial Army can disperse the students tonight, then your score with them will be written off!" Anxious, Li Jianheng stamped his foot and said, "The Imperial Army can't do anything else, but isn't it easy to deal with a few students who don't even have the strength to truss a chicken? It's a good thing!"

Xiao Chiye lifted the book to cover his face. After a moment of silence, he said through clenched teeth, "And what a fucking good thing it is."

The students of the Imperial College were future candidates for the Imperial Court, and they could influence the way the wind blew among the local Confucian scholars. Xi Gu'an knew that they were hot potatoes he could not lay a hand on. If Xiao Chiye really moved these three thousand students today, then the first one to be buried under their brushes and spit in the future would be him!

"Where is Shen Zechuan now?" Xiao Chiye suddenly sat up and asked with his hands on his knees.

"I heard that he went to the Imperial Bodyguard's records room early in the morning." Li Jianheng looked at him putting on his clothes and followed up with a question, "Where are we going? Are we going to look for Shen Zechuan?"

Xiao Chiye went down the stairs where Chen Yang had already prepared his horse. He mounted it and spurred it on to depart.



### Author's Notes:

(I've split up the three author's notes and affixed it to the relevant paragraphs for easier reference. Please refer to [1], [2], [3] for the translations of Tang Jiuqing's author notes.)

### Lianyin's Notes:

Those titles of sources with \* are translated by me and are not official titles in English. If you wish to search for those sources, please use the Chinese names in 《》 instead.

### Footnotes

1. Xue Xiuzhuo's courtesy name
2. 招文袋 a small bag hung at the waist for keeping documents or money.
3. 儒生 Confucian scholars; these scholars, whose exemplar was Confucius, were schooled from an early age in the canonical literature and the philosophical works of the Confucian traditions in preparation for the civil service examinations, especially if they had the ambition to become government officials.
4. 颂 *song*; one of the three sections of The Book of Songs (《诗经》), comprising songs in praise of imperial ancestors sung on sacrificial occasions.
5. 赋 *fu*; commonly translated as “rhapsody” or “prose poetry”; it is an intricate literary form combining elements of poetry and prose, much cultivated from Han times to the Six Dynasties period.
6. 国子监 Directorate of Education which evolved from the Imperial College (or Academy), the highest educational body in imperial China. I'll use the term Imperial College here from the students' point of view.
7. 璞玉元琢 literally, Unpolished Jade Yuanzhuo (Yuanzhuo is Yao Wenyu's courtesy name); unpolished jade here refers to a talent who is still unknown but with the potential to be “polished” into someone that shines, like a top scholar (also known as a *zhuangyuan* (状元), who would have a bright future before him.)
8. Households were classified and recorded into the *Huangce* or yellow registers/yellow book (黃冊) according to their occupation to



provide basic data for taxation and recruitment. It was mainly divided into three categories: civilian (民户), military (军户), and craftsman.

- 9. 女户 Female(-only) household where there is no man in the household and the woman is the head of the household.
- 10. 洒扫 to sprinkle or splash water over the ground before sweeping and cleaning.



- 11.
- 12. 腰牌 literally authority token, it's a small tablet hung at the waist to prove one's identity, especially for people in governmental posts or acting in an official capacity.
- 13. 中官 Zhongguan, may refer to eunuch
- 14. **Author's Notes [1]:** For relevant information, please refer to the "Summary of the Imperial Bodyguards' Roles"\* 《锦衣卫职能略论》, "Imperial Bodyguards"\* 《锦衣卫》, and the "Imperial Bodyguards Selection Book"\* 《锦衣卫选簿》. In fact, there were eight kinds of Imperial Bodyguards selection if we were to go into details. But here, the plot only called for the introduction of four kinds.



15.

16. 飞鱼服, literally “Flying Fish Attire” (no idea what its official name in English is). It’s the official outfit of the imperial court’s secret service (锦衣卫), who not only serve as elite bodyguards but were also given authority to overrule judicial proceedings in prosecutions with full autonomy in arresting, interrogating and punishing anyone, including nobles. ([Extra Pic](#)).

17. 镇抚 Judge of the Imperial Prison, which specialized in using torture to suppress corrupt officials. During the Ming Dynasty, there were a Southern and Northern Prison (镇抚司) subordinated to the Imperial Bodyguards. The Southern Prison was in charge of interpreting military laws and managing military craftsmen while the Northern Prison was responsible for cases entrusted by the Emperor.

18. 钦提, orders of the imperial edict penned and approved personally by the Emperor himself to arrest criminals of serious crimes.

19. **Author’s Notes [2]:** When it came to undertaking missions, the Imperial Bodyguards indeed decided by “drawing lots”. This was to prevent anyone from leaking relevant intelligence in advance.

20. 扇手司 A bureau or office in charge of fanning duties. This office was originally a subordinate organization under the former Imperial Procession Guards (銮仪卫) during the Qing Dynasty. Here the author mentioned it under the Imperial Regalia Bureau (仪銮所). Historically, the Imperial Bodyguards (锦衣卫) were originally known as the Yiluan Si (仪銮司), or Imperial Regalia Service. It was only changed by Emperor Hongwu during the Ming Dynasty in 1382 to the Imperial Bodyguards Command (锦衣卫亲军指挥使

司). Thus, the Imperial Bodyguards came to be responsible for being the Emperor's bodyguards, and at the same time, inherited the ceremonial duties for the morning court sessions or the Emperor's inspection tour processions from their Imperial Regalia times, including this Fan Club Office in this novel. (Sorry, Lianyin sucks at naming stuff.) **Long story short**, remember that this is a work of fiction. The author combines elements from both the Ming and Qing Dynasties in the novel; it's not a 100% accurate/factual historical novel.

21. 早朝 Court sessions held in the morning for the Emperor to discuss state affairs with his ministers.

22. **Author's Notes [3]:** For details about elephants bathing with the entire city watching, you can refer to "A Summary of the Imperial Capital Scenery"\* 《帝京景物略》. The Imperial Bodyguards is a miraculous organization. Those who were spies included not only those who could write in shorthand but also painters. They had painters, physicians, beast trainers, silversmiths, blacksmiths, explosive-makers... and even translators. (No, Lianyin is not one of the Imperial Bodyguards). Their selection requirements were high, and most were top-notch professionals in their fields. Under normal circumstances, they required recruits to be tall, with long legs and powerful arms. In "Ming Dynasty in 1566" 《大明王朝1566》, Liu Heping mentioned that the Imperial Bodyguards asked for men with "arms like tigers, waists of bees, and legs like mantises", as well as those who "would be able to brisk-walk over one hundred and sixty *li* a day". They could cross a two-*zhang* high wall just by climbing over it with their arms, break another man's throat with just their bare hands, and forfeit sleep for as many days their missions remained incomplete. So, from the looks of things, Ce'an was actually more suited to be in the Imperial Bodyguards.

23. 话本 Script for storytelling; Song and Yuan literary form based on vernacular folk stories.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 16 : RAINSTORM



The wind rose a while later, followed by the fall of rain.

Xiao Chiye braved the rain and galloped his horse through it. He arrived at the Imperial College just in time to hear Gao Zhongxiong shouting with his head raised. “As long as the traitor is not executed, the wrath of the public will not be appeased!”

The students at the back kowtowed and echoed in unison. “As long as the traitor is not executed, the wrath of the public will not be appeased!”

The rain spattered upon the earth, soaking the students’ robes and hair.

Xiao Chiye reined in his horse, and the horse trod its hooves on the same spot. He looked at them for a moment, then said in a loud voice, “What have you been doing earlier? If all of you gentlemen here had kneeled to make your case back then when that surviving descendant entered the capital, then he would never have lived to this day.”

Gao Zhongxiong’s chest heaved. He said, “Viceroy, as they say, it’s better late than never. This surviving descendant is still wet behind the ears, and he has yet to spread his wings. As long as His Majesty is willing to retract his order and deal with him severely, it will still be a consolation to all the loyal souls of Zhongbo!”

“There is absolutely no reason to rescind an imperial edict of the Son of Heaven.”<sup>1</sup> Xiao Chiye said, “By kneeling, you are not beseeching His Majesty to revoke his decree, but forcing him into it. The various gentlemen here are all loyal and filial men of the world. There are a hundred ways you can use to make your appeal, so why insist on making such an unwise move?”

“Your Excellency.” Gao Zhongxiong looked up. “Men who wield brushes die in remonstrations, while men who wield swords die in battles! If we have to watch helplessly as His Majesty is deceived into handling affairs in such a muddleheaded way, then we might as well spill our blood on the imperial terrace tonight to die for our beliefs!”

Xiao Chiye said, “Using the threat of death at every turn. Is that all civil servants since ancient times are capable of?”

The rain intensified. The students did not budge.

Xiao Chiye dismounted and squatted before Gao Zhongxiong. The heavy rain poured like a waterfall. He leaned in and asked, “Who is the instigator?”

With a look of great resolve, Gao Zhongxiong said, “My loyalty to my sovereign is what drives me!”

Giving off the air of a ruffian, Xiao Chiye said, “I don’t think so. Of course, if you want to protect an outsider, you can. It’s just that your action tonight has implicated all those three thousand fellow students behind you. If the Emperor flies into a rage and turns tonight into a bloodbath, then you will be no different from that last descendant of the Shen Clan—all of you will be sinners condemned through the ages. And this isn’t even the scariest thing. What’s worse is that His Majesty would still be unwilling to rescind his edict even if your head rolls. You persevered in your studies despite the hardships for twelve years, all just to do the dirty work for another?”

Gao Zhongxiong lifted his arm and wiped away the rainwater on his face. He said, “What I’m doing is a matter of loyalty and righteousness. It’s completely different from the Shen Clan’s traitorous act! Even if all three thousands of us were to die here tonight, even if our blood were to overflow the imperial terrace, we are doing it all for His Majesty!”

Xiao Chiye said, “The situation now is that the palace has neither withdrawn its order for Shen Zechuan to take up post, nor have they sent out an imperial edict to appease the students. Do you still not understand His Majesty’s intention from this?”

“For each day His Majesty does not retract his decree.” Gao Zhongxiong persisted, “We will neither eat, rise, nor retreat!”

The thunderstorm rumbled. Xiao Chiye rose to his feet. Chen Yang wanted to hold up an umbrella for him, but he raised his hand to stop him. Rain seeped into his robe. Even the token hanging on his waist was dripping water.

“Viceroy.” Chen Yang suddenly spoke in a soft voice. “The Imperial Bodyguards are here!”

Xiao Chiye turned his head back in the rain and saw Qiao Tianya arriving on his horse. The latter dismounted and cupped his fists together from afar to pay his obeisances.

A sudden commotion rose among the students when they saw the Red Cavalry.<sup>2</sup>

“This is a knotty issue. It wouldn’t do to trouble the Viceroy over it.” Qiao Tianya held on to his blade and smiled. “One of the Imperial Bodyguards is the target here. So naturally, the Imperial Bodyguards should be the one to resolve this ourselves.”

“Resolve.” Xiao Chiye raised his arm almost thoughtlessly and placed it on Qiao Tianya’s shoulder. He said, “How does the Judge<sup>3</sup> want to resolve this matter? They are just a bunch of unarmed students; there’s no need to trouble the Imperial Bodyguards over them.”

“The Emperor is the highest authority in Qudu.” Qiao Tianya looked askance at him. “Whoever has the gall to defy His Majesty’s orders are the enemies of the Imperial Bodyguard.”

Xiao Chiye looked at him right in the eyes. After a moment, both men burst into laughter.

“My man.” Xiao Chiye said. “You are gutsy.”

“It’s raining hard and cold.” Qiao Tianya tightened his grip on his blade and said, “I’ll send someone to escort you back to your residence.”

“I just arrived a moment ago.” Xiao Chiye’s hand remained on Qiao Tianya’s shoulder to hold his arm, which was grasping the hilt of his blade, in place. He was still smiling as he said, “There’s no harm in staying a little longer.”

Qiao Tianya said, “This matter is a difficult one. Why muddy the waters?”

Xiao Chiye said, “It’s precisely because it’s tough to handle that we can’t get rid of them all at once. These students are all great minds of the state. None of us can take responsibility for it if there’s one of them less.”

The man dismounting his horse at the back was dressed in a thin, wide-sleeved garment. He did not carry a blade with him. Sandwiched between the pack of Imperial Bodyguards, he stood out conspicuously like a sore thumb.

Qiao Tianya loosened his grip on his blade and shouted, “Lanzhou, come here.”

Shen Zechuan turned around and exchanged glances with Xiao Chiye.

Qiao Tianya leisurely shifted Xiao Chiye’s arm away and said, “The Viceroy’s worry is valid. However, the Imperial Bodyguards don’t merely know how to bulldoze our way through our jobs. I still have some other arrangements on my end. In a while, the Emperor’s order will arrive... Oh.

Both of you are old friends, aren't you? Lanzhou, stay here with the Viceroy for a moment. He's scared."

Shen Zechuan gathered his sleeves and looked at the students in the rain.

Xiao Chiye took a few glances at him and commented, "Your authority token has been hung up pretty fast."

Shen Zechuan said, "The Second Young Master's token has been returned pretty fast too."

Xiao Chiye's expression was cold, but he smiled and said, "You may seem to be the target of this matter, but the truth is that the real target is the palace. So how's it? Because your gains were too little yesterday, you have to stir up trouble the moment you get out of your cage?"

Shen Zechuan tilted his head slightly and looked at him with pure, kind eyes. He said, "The Second Young Master thinks too highly of me. Where on earth would I have the capability to stir things up? Since the target is the palace, then wouldn't the Second Young Master know better than I who currently harbor the most desire to see His Majesty fall out with the Hua Clan?"

Xiao Chiye said, "I don't get what you mean. Circuitous stuff is all beyond my understanding."

Shen Zechuan smiled at him and said, "We are old acquaintances; you don't have to stand on ceremony with me."

Xiao Chiye did not answer him. Instead, he offhandedly lifted a finger to flick Shen Zechuan's authority token. He said, "The Domesticated Elephants Office is a good place. You must be happy, huh?"

"I am." Shen Zechuan said, "It just happens that I have some experience in taming ferocious beasts."

"Not really an experience." Xiao Chiye said. "That was a deep conversation between the same kind."

"How would I dare to call it such?" Shen Zechuan coughed softly and said, "If the talks break down and I receive yet another kick, then wouldn't all my previous efforts go to waste?"

"Use your teeth then." Xiao Chiye took the umbrella from Chen Yang's hand and held it up above his head. At the same time, he blocked Shen Zechuan and said, "You have a sharp tongue and a smart mouth, don't you? So what are you afraid of?"

"I value my life." Shen Zechuan sighed as if with emotion. "As they said, the kindness of a drop of water given in times of need should be repaid multifold with a gushing spring.<sup>4</sup> There is so much more I wish to repay the Second Young Master with."

"Have you gotten the wrong person?" Xiao Chiye scoffed.

"That can't be." Shen Zechuan cast a sidelong glance at Xiao Chiye and said calmly to him, "I recognize you."

"Fine, then." Xiao Chiye looked askance at him as well and said, "I want to see how much I owe you too."

The voices outside the umbrella were cut off. Both men stood shoulder to shoulder, accentuating the height difference between them.

"Actually, there is no way you can stay out of this matter." Xiao Chiye gazed at the students in the rain. "If one dies tonight, there will naturally be someone who will lay the blame on you."

"There will only be more and not less of the forty thousand souls who have died unjust deaths." Shen Zechuan played it down. "Since they are afraid of death, then why be someone else's weapon? Even if someone wants to pin this on me, it doesn't mean I have to plead guilty, do I?"

Both men fell silent again.

Qiao Tianya sat astride under the shed and cracked melon seeds. Seeing as it was almost time, he shook the seeds off his robe and rose to his feet. Sure enough, he saw a sedan chair coming towards them amid the color of the night.

The curtain lifted. Unexpectedly, it was Pan Rugui who came.

The little eunuch supported Pan Rugui with a hand, while Ji Lei followed at the side holding up an umbrella for him. Wearing a robe with a *tiger, mugwort, and five poisons*<sup>5</sup> mandarin square<sup>6</sup> and a *yandun* hat<sup>7</sup> on his head, Pan Rugui let Qiao Tianya lead him to the students.

"Such a heavy downpour." Qiao Tianya reined in his smile and said, "To think they actually sent the Director to grace us with your presence."

Pan Rugui looked askance at Gao Zhongxiong and asked Qiao Tianya, "He won't retreat?"

Qiao Tianya replied, "Scholars are all bull-headed. They are neither enticed by the carrot nor brow-beaten by the stick."

"Then, I'm afraid the stick isn't hard enough." Pan Rugui had lost his right-handed man yesterday, and he had nowhere to vent all his pent-up anger. With the little eunuch supporting him, he came to stand before Gao



Zhongxiong. "You are all men who are well-read in the classics and literature. How is it that you can't understand the words 'overstepping your authority'? The affairs of the imperial court are to be discussed in the imperial court itself. It is not something brats like you who are still wet behind the ears can influence!"

On seeing this well-known lackey of the 'Hua Faction', Gao Zhongxiong could not help but straighten his back and say, "Every man has a duty to his country. Since the Imperial College students receive a stipend from the sovereign, then they must serve him loyally! Treacherous toadies abound all around His Majesty now. If we still don't..."

"Treacherous toadies!" Pan Rugui laughed coldly. "What a fine way to put it! Who instigated you to slander the imperial court and malign His Majesty?"

"A loyal..."

"Cut the crap." Pan Rugui suddenly commanded, "You act upon the instigation of those with sinister motives and publicly defy the imperial decree. You incite your clique to slander the imperial court and the people. If this man goes unpunished, then what's the use of the law? Men, take him down!"

Gao Zhongxiong had never expected Pan Rugui to be so daring that he would indiscriminately take others down. He immediately braced himself in the rain and shouted himself hoarse, "Who dares to? I was chosen by His Majesty himself to study at the Imperial College! The villain stands before us, and eunuchs endanger the state! The Empress Dowager wields control over the state affairs and refuses to return governance to its rightful master. The ones who should be taken down are treacherous ministers and traitors like you!"

"Drag him away!" Ji Lei immediately said in reproach when he saw Pan Rugui enraged.

The Imperial Bodyguards stepped forward to drag him away. Gao Zhongxiong's attempt to climb to his feet was thwarted. He raised his arms in the direction of the palace and shouted, "My death today is truly a remonstrance to the death! Since the eunuch wants to kill me, then let him kill! Your Majesty..."

Qiao Tianya gripped Gao Zhongxiong by the neck. Unable to breathe, the latter struggled and shouted intermittently.

“Your Majesty— The treacherous ministers are in power. Then, what’s the point of loyalty and righteousness?!”

Xiao Chiye said inwardly to himself, *oh shit*.

What happened next was just as he expected. Sorrow and indignation ran high among the three thousand students. Life and death had no place here right this instant as it was forced out by this vehement elegy. Rising to their feet in the rainstorm, the students charged at the Imperial Bodyguards.

“Eunuchs endanger the state!” They pulled their *zhaowen* bags<sup>8</sup> off their waists and flung them at Pan Rugui. Bitter cries rang out.

“Treacherous ministers are in power!”

Ji Lei hurriedly shielded Pan Rugui and guarded him as he ushered the latter back in a retreat. He chided them furiously, “What are you doing? Staging a rebellion?!”

“This is the real traitor to the nation!” The students threw themselves against the Imperial Bodyguards as the Imperial Bodyguards held them back. Their fingers almost jabbed Ji Lei’s face, while specks of saliva sprayed towards them. “Traitor! Traitor!”

Xiao Chiye swiftly tossed the umbrella to Shen Zechuan and hurried down the stairs.

Shen Zechuan stood alone on high ground and watched the chaos with cool detachment. Pan Rugui had been shoved back into his sedan, and Ji Lei even lost his shoe in the melee.

“Storms are rife in the martial fraternity.” From a distance away, Shen Zechuan said softly to Ji Lei, “Your Excellency Ji, what a truly wonderful sight.”

A chuckle rose from under the umbrella. He leisurely turned the umbrella and looked at Xiao Chiye’s back.

Grand Mentor Qi and Ji Gang were drinking wine and tea under the eaves.

Ji Gang drank his tea and said, “Was killing Xiaofuzi a ploy to let Chuan-er out?”

Grand Mentor Qi took small sips of the wine as though he could not bear to drink it. He hugged the gourd and said, “Who knows? Make a guess yourself.”

Ji Gang turned around and said, “No matter what, his safety is the most important.”

Grand Mentor Qi shook the gourd and said, “It is only by making a risky move that a soldier can take his foe by surprise. You taught him martial arts so that he could stay calm in hours of peril. Sometimes, we have to put safety aside. It is only when you leave no room for maneuver or escape that one will put up a desperate fight for survival and emerge victorious.”

Ji Gang watched the rain intensify with a worried frown and said, “I have already made proper arrangement for the task you entrusted me with.”

“This is called casting a long line.”<sup>9</sup> Grand Mentor Qi scratched his foot. “If you don’t let it brave the water for a few years before you haul in the net, then all you will catch are lousy fishes and prawns.<sup>10</sup> Should there come a day you and I both lose our lives in the midst of this, the arrangement today will be the killer move that will preserve his life.”



#### Footnotes

1. 天子 Son of Heaven, refers to the Emperor. An Emperor was as good as his word, so they would very rarely retract their orders or go back on their words.
2. 缇骑 *tíqí*; a subordinate of the Imperial Bodyguards. They are mounted cavalry of the Imperial Bodyguards that wear red uniforms and are commonly guarded escorts of an official’s retinue or entourage.
3. 镇抚 Judge of the Imperial Prison, which specialized in using torture to suppress corrupt officials. During the Ming Dynasty, there were a Southern and Northern Prison (镇抚司) subordinated to the Imperial Bodyguards. The Southern Prison was in charge of interpreting military laws and managing military craftsmen while the Northern Prison was responsible for cases entrusted by the Emperor.
4. 滴水之恩当涌泉相报 i.e. to repay a favor one has received multifold.
5. 五毒艾虎 a festive pattern of tiger, mugwort, and five poisons (the centipede, scorpion, toad, lizard, and snake) used on mandarin squares, or rank badges, of the official garbs (see next footnote). Courtiers in the Ming Dynasty wore robes with this badge from the first to the thirteenth day of the fifth lunar month in celebration of

the Dragon Boat Festival (Duanwu Festival) and the Summer Solstice.



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7. 补子 rank badges or mandarin squares, was a large embroidered badge sewn onto the surcoat of an official to indicate the rank of the official wearing it. E.g., the use of squares depicting birds for civil officials and animals for military officials; there were even “seasonal” squares like the gourd (mentioned in chapter 2) and the tiger, mugwort, and five poisons (see the previous footnote).
8. 烟墩帽 a hat worn by eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty. It was made of velvet or crape in winter.
9. 招文袋 a small bag hung at the waist for keeping documents or money.
10. 放长线 (钓大鱼) literally casting a long line (to catch a big fish); i.e., to set in motion a long-term plan for major returns in the future.
11. 臭鱼烂虾 literally smelly fishes and rotten prawns. It’s also used to refer to a good-for-nothing who is so worthless and useless that he can only be cast away like rotten meat.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 17 : STORM

Note:

The “storm” here also refers to a crisis or turmoil.



It was in the middle of the night that the Empress Dowager draped her clothes over herself and asked through the bed canopy, “What’s that din about?”

Hua Xiangyi nudged the canopy aside and helped the Empress Dowager out of the incense-scented-and-warmed bedding. She replied in a soft voice, “The students of the Imperial College want the Emperor to retract his appointment edict.”

The Empress Dowager got up, and the maidservants on both sides quietly lit the lamps and raised the curtains. Hua Xiangyi helped the Empress Dowager to the Arhat bed with a girdled waist, horses’ hooves legs, and plain boards at the sides.<sup>1</sup> A soft cushion and heater were presented together to the Empress Dowager, while fermented milk<sup>2</sup> was warmed up for her.

The Empress Dowager stirred the spoon with a light frown on her face, “How did that happen out of the blue?” She pondered it over for a moment. “The appointment order was only given yesterday, and they came to stir up a ruckus tonight. Isn’t that way too fast?”

“What’s more, the ones creating a commotion are those from the Imperial College.” Hua Xiangyi went along with the Empress Dowager and said, “Auntie,<sup>3</sup> all the literary talents in the world look to the Imperial College. Even the Secretariat Elder himself would find it ill-advised to step in.”

The Empress Dowager scooped up the fermented milk. Although her makeup-less face showed signs of aging, it added character to her looks. She gradually put aside the bowl and leaned back against the cushion to stare at the glazed lampshade. After a short while, she said, “That’s right. Shen Wei is now notorious for his crime. By all sentiment and logic, the Secretariat Elder cannot come forward to rebuke the students. If the students force His Majesty to rescind his order, then I’ll have to swallow this bitter pill in silence this time.”

“Auntie.” Hua Xiangyi said, “It wasn’t His Majesty’s original intent to release Shen Zechuan. Now that he has earned himself the infamy of being

‘muddle-headed’ for no reason because of this order, I’m afraid it will create a distance between you both.”

“It doesn’t matter.” The Empress Dowager said, “Once Imperial Concubine Wei is with child Dazhou will have an heir. The imperial heir is the foundation of the empire. As long as I have the heir in my hands, I’m still the Empress Dowager of Dazhou. His Emperor has long been at odds with me ever since he fell ill. Even if he flies into a rage this time, it’s merely a tantrum thrown during a moment of illness. Let him vent.”

After his illness, Emperor Xiande gradually stopped going along with the Empress Dowager’s will. Although these were all trivial daily matters, it was already an indication of his dissension. The Empress Dowager had assumed command in the palace with Pan Rugui at her side and Secretariat Elder Hua in the imperial court. If she wanted to ensure the continuation of the burgeoning power and authority of the Hua Clan, then she needed a submissive and obedient Emperor.

If Emperor Xiande could no longer fit the role, then all she had to do was to replace him.

The sole reason the Empress Dowager did not like Prince Chu, Li Jianheng, was because he had already come of age.<sup>4</sup> He was not a weak child, nor was he a child who had grown up under her. How could such a person, if he were to ascend to the throne, be as obedient as an imperial grandson raised by her?

“What’s more, the appeal today is a blow to His Majesty’s dignity.” The Empress Dowager said calmly, “The nine years His Majesty has been on the throne, his food and clothing, as well as all other matters, whether important or trivial, have to go through me. But now, he wants to be an independent and imperious Emperor. For this, he emboldened himself to show goodwill to the Xiao Clan. Not only did he refuse to release Shen Zechuan, he even wanted to protect the Prince Chu. But I understand him. He is outwardly strong and inwardly weak. He fears me. That’s why he always aimed to be on both parties’ good sides. Instead, he appears to be of two minds, and ends up thoroughly offending both parties.”

“Didn’t His Majesty imprison Shen Zechuan for so many years for the sake of the Xiao Clan?”

“What does imprisonment mean?” The Empress Dowager took Hua Xiangyi’s hand and said soberly. “Imprisonment is a reprieve from death. His Majesty thought he did a favor to the Xiao Clan, but he’s really just

sowing the seed of disaster. Xiao Jiming lost his younger brother. What Libei wants is for Shen Zechuan to die. As long as Shen Zechuan remains alive, His Majesty will let down all those one hundred and twenty thousand Armored Cavalry who came to his rescue. Think about it. Xiao Jiming worked himself to the bone all to prove that he harbors no thoughts of disloyalty. He even dares to leave his younger brother behind in Qudu. He has conducted himself with frankness and sincerity towards His Majesty. Yet, in order not to offend me, His Majesty turned around and dismissed Shen Zechuan's death penalty and locked him up instead. If Shen Zechuan doesn't die, he will become the root of trouble. This is the period of the struggle between life and death, and yet His Majesty is still so naïve. And need I mention the incident this time? To protect Prince Chu, His Majesty was not willing to launch a full investigation into Xiaofuzi's case and consequently cut off Pan Rugui's subsequent move. At the same time, he's afraid I'd harbor ill-feelings against him, so he reluctantly let Shen Zechuan off—He thought the Xiao Clan would understand his difficulties, but Xiao Jiming is far away in Libei. Once he learns about this matter, he will not be happy."

"If that's the case." Hua Xiangyi said, "Could it have been someone from the Xiao Clan who incited the Imperial College students to stir up trouble? Forcing His Majesty to rescind his edict this time would not only drive a wedge between His Majesty and the Hua Clan, it would also prevent the Secretariat Elder and Auntie from stepping forward. At the same time, it can also eliminate Shen Zechuan through the hands of another."

"If it's so clear-cut." The Empress Dowager brushed aside Hua Xiangyi's stray hair and said dotingly, "Then what's the need for Xiao Jiming to be one of the Four Generals of the world? That lad has always been prudent in his conduct. If he were the perpetrator, he would not be found out this easily. Besides, Libei has no dealings with the Imperial College."

"I can't guess." Hua Xiangyi leaned against the Empress Dowager and said like a pampered child, "Tell me, Auntie."

"Alright." The Empress Dowager was childless this life, and she was not close to those on her maternal grandparents' side. The only one she doted on was Hua Xiangyi. She said, "Auntie will teach you. Look at the surrounding Eight Cities established beyond Qudu. The Eight Cities are where the current Eight Great Clans<sup>5</sup> originated. Our Hua Clan resides in

the city of Dicheng at the south of the capital. It has always been the city of choice for imperial concubines. But it's only during my time that the Hua Clan was considered to be at the height of its glory and came out tops among the Eight Great Clans. A few years earlier, when the former Emperor had only just ascended to the throne, it was the Yao Clan who was the most favored and honored. This was because the Yao Clan had been conferred as the Emperor's tutor thrice. If it weren't for Old Master Yao's lack of literary talents during his time, that Qi Huilian from Yuzhou might not even get to be the Grand Mentor of Yongyi.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, of the current Xi Clan, only Xi Gu'an has been promoted to the post of Commander-in-Chief of the Eight Great Training Divisions to manage the younger generations of the Eight Great Clans. Just think of him as a teacher of the military camps. The Xi Clan has always been men of inferior morals and virtues; they will not achieve great things. Meanwhile, the Xue Clan has already begun its decline after the glorious death of Grand Master Xue. Xue Xiuzhuo is the only one now who has an official post in the Central Administration. As for the remaining Wei, Pan, Fei, and Han Clans, I'll tell you about them next time."

"I've heard Father mention these before." Hua Xiangyi said, "So Auntie is telling me these to suggest that the secret instigator of the Imperial College this time might be someone else from the Eight Great Clans."

"That's what I suspect." The Empress Dowager said. "Glory is enjoyed in turn. It has been many years since the Hua Clan has enjoyed its rise following my ascend. It's possible for someone to harbor some other intent on seeing how gravely ill His Majesty is now. Summon Pan Rugui over tomorrow morning and let him have the Imperial Bodyguards conduct a thorough investigation in secret. Qudu is such a big place. I don't believe there is not a single loose lip within."

Xiao Chiye wrung away the water on his clothes and entered Mingli Hall together with Ji Lei.

It was already late at night, and Emperor Xiande was still awake.

"You have been grounded to self-reflect on the errors of your ways." Emperor Xiande held a memorial<sup>7</sup> as he glanced at Xiao Chi Ye and asked in a hoarse voice, "So why are you running around with the Imperial Bodyguards?"

Xiao Chiye was really wronged. He said, "The Commander-in-Chief was the one who asked this humble subject to go. This humble subject



thought that it was Your Majesty's verbal orders."

"After you went," Emperor Xiande asked, "How did it go?"

Ji Lei immediately kowtowed and said, "To reply to Your Majesty, the students of the Imperial College acted upon someone else's instigation and not only spoke presumptuously on state affairs and slandered Your Majesty, but also lay their hands on Pan-gonggong. The scene was a chaotic mess. This humble subject wanted to take them into custody, but Viceroy Xiao was unwilling to."

And he wasn't just unwilling. That Imperial Army was simply cast in the same mold as Xiao Chiye! They had acted shamelessly to obstruct the Imperial Bodyguards to prevent them from rounding up the students. All that was left of them was to lie on the floor and roll around! This bunch of idle military ruffians sure had skins as thick as the city wall.

Emperor Xiande asked Xiao Chiye, "You obstructed the Imperial Bodyguards from arresting the students?"

Xiao Chiye said, "They are just a group of students. If they are really taken to the Imperial Prison, most of them might not survive. We can disregard their lives, but what are we to do if it damages Your Majesty's virtuous name?"

"They banded together for selfish purposes and colluded with malicious people. They clearly intended to throw the Imperial Court into chaos! If we do not take these kinds of people to trial, then what's the use of the Imperial Bodyguards in the future?" Ji Lei said indignantly.

Emperor Xiande coughed for a long time before he said, "Ce'an has done well."

"Your Majesty!" Ji Lei could not believe it. "This group of students rallied to stir up trouble. They even dared to shout the word 'rebellion'. If we do not deal with them severely, it will endanger the empire and state!"

"I'll be frank." Emperor Xiande said in a lukewarm tone. "If they hadn't been forced to this pivotal moment, why would they come to blows with the Imperial Bodyguards and yell such words instead of attending classes? That remaining descendant of the Shen Clan should have never been released! If it weren't for... If it weren't for!"

Emperor Xiande cast aside the memorial and started to cough. He was back to normal after his coughing eased up a little.

"... No matter what, they have to be punished. Reduce the Imperial College's fund for provisions by half and change their meals from twice a

day to once. Impose the punishment on them for half a year.”

Knowing that Emperor Xiande had already made up his mind, Ji Lei said nothing more. He kneeled in silence, but Emperor Xiande knew what he was thinking.

“The Imperial Bodyguards are dogs of mine.” Emperor Xiande stared at Ji Lei, “As the Commander-in-Chief of the Imperial Bodyguards, why are you going around acknowledging others as your godfather, god-grandfather? I have never brought this up on account that you were still considered deferential! Tonight, I want you to appease the students of the Imperial College. Do you understand?”

Ji Lei kowtowed and said, “This humble servant obeys. The Imperial Bodyguards serve only Your Majesty!”

By the time they came out, the rain had already lightened. A little eunuch from the bailiff office came to hold up umbrellas for both of them.

Ji Lei did not look good as he raised his hand at Xiao Chiye and made to leave. But Xiao Chiye was unconcerned as he said, “Old Ji, I had no choice too. I was grounded yesterday. Even if I wanted to come out and play, I wouldn’t dare to lay a hand on the students without careful consideration.”

Looking at how much of a jerk Xiao Chiye was made Ji Lei furious, but there was nowhere for him to vent, so he merely nodded his head at random, hoping that Xiao Chiye would leave.

“But what do you think of my Imperial Army?” Xiao Chiye took the umbrella from the little eunuch’s hand and dismissed him. He continued to head out of the palace with Ji Lei.

Ji Lei thought, what else? Aren’t they all nothing more than a bunch of scoundrels?! They are even worse off now that they are following you!

But he said politely, “They seemed to be much more spirited than before.”

“Right?” Xiao Chiye said shamelessly, “I think the Imperial Army’s drill ground is too small to be put to good use. Can you ask the Commander-in-Chief on my behalf if he could allocate a place for the Imperial Army?”

Ji Lei had heard a long time ago that Xiao Chiye had led the Imperial Army to play polo at the drill ground. He never expected the latter to have the guts to ask for more land. But it wasn’t good for him to turn the latter down right in the face, so he said, “I’m afraid that would be tough. Prince

Chu expanded his residence last month, and his forcible seizure of civilians' residences had even been reported to the prefectural *yamen*. There are people everywhere in Qudu now, so where is Gu'an going to find the place for you to use as a military drill ground? Besides, even if there's a spot in the city, it has to be granted to the Eight Training Divisions."

"Oh." Xiao Chiye said under the umbrella, "Even if it isn't the turn of our Imperial Army to get a piece of land within the city, we can also make do with land outside of it. As long as the place is big enough to let us play to our hearts' content."

It was then Ji Lei grasped the intent of his words. He looked at Xiao Chiye and laughed. He said, "Alright, Second Young Master. You've long taken a fancy to a piece of land, haven't you? So why still play dumb with me?!"

"I'm already here to ask you for a favor, am I not, Old Ji?" Xiao Chiye said, "You're the one people give face to the most in Qudu. How would the Commander-in-Chief turn you down if you put in a request to him? We can negotiate if it's a done deal."

"There's no need to talk about money with me." Ji Lei finally softened his attitude. "I've acknowledged a godson, and I was just wondering where to find a good horse for him! When it comes to horses, there's no one who is more knowledgeable than the Second Young Master, is there?"

"I'll send him a few horses to play with." Xiao Chiye said, "The horses bred from the Hongyan Mountains are no worse than mine. In a few days, I'll send someone to deliver them directly to your residence."

"I'll speak to Gu'an." Ji Lei said. "How big can the matter of a drill ground be? Just wait for my news!"

The rain had stopped by the time both men parted ways. Xiao Chiye got into the horse carriage. Chen Yang looked at Ji Lei's sedan and said, "Is the Viceroy really going to give the residence's horses to him? What a pity!"

"There's no free lunch."<sup>8</sup> Xiao Chiye kicked off his boots. His feet had long been soaked. "We need to have a drill ground. It's too conspicuous in the capital. If that old crook can't deliver after accepting the horses." He said coldly, "Then I'll send his son to meet his ancestors."

The carriage began to sway. Xiao Chiye wiped his face with a handkerchief and asked, "Where is that man?"

Chen Yang repeated, "That, that man?"

"Shen Zechuan!"

“He went back a long time ago.” Chen Yang poured tea for Xiao Chiye and said, “His steps seem weak and unstable to me... With that kind of health, how is he going to take up a post in the Imperial Bodyguards?”

“Rearing elephants.” Xiao Chiye took the tea and gulped it all down. “Invalids are only too anxious to dodge manual labor. He’s most definitely the kind of person who will want to loaf on the job.”

The man who wanted to loaf on the job sneezed. He sat in the dimness for a short while, wondering if he had caught a cold.

Suddenly, the door was pushed open, and a rotund figure strode in. Xi Hongxuan marveled in wonder the moment he entered. “This place sure is fine. Even the Imperial Bodyguards won’t be able to figure it out.”

Without turning his head back, Shen Zechuan said, “Just a dilapidated house with a courtyard that no one wants to rent. That’s the only good thing about it.”

“But this compound isn’t easy to get your hands on.” Xi Hongxuan rubbed his hands and sat down. He looked at Shen Zechuan. “This was the old courtyard that the former Emperor bestowed to the Crown Prince, who then awarded it to Qi Huilian. It was later sold away after Qi Huilian’s death. How did you get your hands on it?”

Shen Zechuan sipped his tea as he exchanged a meaningful look with Xi Hongxuan for a moment.

Xi Hongxuan raised his hand unhurriedly and said, “Look at this cheap mouth of mine, always trying to pry into others’ backgrounds. I heard on the way here earlier that Pan Rugui was hit too. This move of yours is truly delightful.”

“Eldest Master Xi is the Commander-in-Chief of the Eight Training Divisions.” Shen Zechuan said. “After this incident, he will rouse the Empress Dowager’s suspicions. His life in the days ahead will not be easy.”

“I’ll feel good if Xi Gu’an has a hard time.” Xi Hongxuan placed his fleshy palms on the table and said, “Instead of waiting for the major figures in the Imperial Court to say a word, we might as well get the students to do so first as a preemptive move. After this incident, you could be said to be truly released.”

Shen Zechuan took the chopsticks and picked up some vegetarian food, “Just a small trick. I’ve made a mockery out of myself before the Second Young Master.”<sup>9</sup>

Xi Hongxuan watched Shen Zechuan eat before he touched his own chopsticks. He said, “What are you going to do in the future?”

“Just trying to get by in the Imperial Bodyguards.” Shen Zechuan said, “Ji Lei is Pan Rugui’s godson and Xi Gu’an sworn brother. You want to kill Xi Gu’an, but how are you going to get past Ji Lei? Why not you and I split their lives each among us and let them be good buddies for life?”

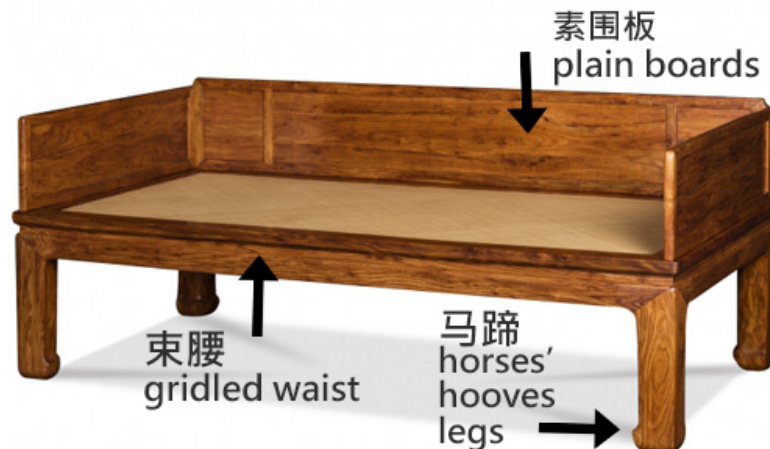
Xi Hongxuan sniggered for a moment. He leaned over the table and asked Shen Zechuan sinisterly, “What’s your grudge with Ji Lei?”

Shen Zechuan picked away the Sichuan peppers.<sup>10</sup> Without even lifting his eyelids, he said, “I don’t like those shoes he’s wearing.”



Credits: Many thanks to eggy (@[peachiprint](#)) for the correction! ♥

Footnotes



- 1.
2. 罗汉床 Luohan or Arhat bed is a kind of long and narrow wooden couch that also functions as a bed (榻). The arhat bed is distinguished by railings around the back and sides of the platform. 束腰马蹄素围板(罗汉床) is a type of Arhat bed with specific designs, something like the picture above. You can also put a small table (for tea, chess, etc) in the middle so that it can seat two people. ([Example](#))
3. 乳酪 is typically translated as cheese but in ancient times, it was a kind of fermented milk, kind of like yogurt in modern days.
4. 姑母 Gu-mu, paternal aunt, i.e., father’s sister.
5. 及冠 or 弱冠, a man’s 20th birthday, i.e., coming of age at 20 for a male.
6. Eight Great Clans: Yao, Hua, Xi, Xue, Wei, Pan, Fei, Han

7. Yongyi, i.e., the former Emperor.



8.

9. 折子 *zhezi*, also 奏折 *zouzhe*, is a memorial presented to the Emperor in folded, accordion form

10. (吃人嘴软,) 拿人手短 Literally, “(The mouth that eats the meals of others is softened;) the hand that takes the gifts of others is shortened.” When someone gives another person something out of the blue (e.g. a gift or a meal), they usually have something to ask. And since the person has taken their gifts, it’d be harder to turn them down, so they (usually) end up doing them the favor. The closest modern adage to explain this is “there is no such thing as a free lunch”, that is, there is nothing people will let you take or eat (or drink) for free.

11. This is referring to Xi Hongxuan here, not Xiao Chiye. Xiao Chiye is the second young master of the Xiao Clan, while Xi Hongxuan is the second young master of the Xi Clan.



12.

13. 花椒 Sichuan pepper is a spice from the Sichuan cuisine with a unique aroma and flavor. No relations to Zechuan.

# QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 18 : DONKEY ROAST



## WARNING

**Animal abuse in this chapter.**

**If this is a trigger/landmine for you, please stop reading now.**

Xiao Chiye had a quiet time for half a month before he finally received a reply from Ji Lei informing him that the matter of the military drill ground was a done deal. He immediately headed out of the city with Chen Yang to take a look at the place.

It was a piece of wasteland that was originally a mass burial site. The platform used for execution by decapitation<sup>1</sup> was later shifted away to another place, and so this place became empty.

“Although Mount Feng stands between it and the city,” Chen Yang dismounted the horse, sized up the area, and continued, “it’s still too far.”

“We just have to run for three hours before dawn to reach it.” Xiao Chiye pointed his horsewhip at one end. “We have to treat those wily old men from the Ministry of Works to a good meal to cobble together some materials so that we can fill up this side. Tidy it up a little and make do with it. This place is so remote that even the patrols of the Eight Great Training Divisions will not make it here. “

“Viceroy, for us to spend money on them.” Chen Yang said, “I can’t even say how uncomfortable that makes me.”

“Hold it in even if you are uncomfortable.” Xiao Chiye said. “Even if they squat on our heads to pee on us, we still have to fix up this place.”

“Okay.” Chen Yang did not dare to say a word more.

Xiao Chiye stayed until it was evening before he rode his horse back. The moment he entered the city, he saw Li Jianheng’s guard waiting for him at the entrance.

“What’s the matter?” Xiao Chiye reined in his horse and asked.

The guard paid his obeisances and said, “His Highness has organized a feast at Huixiang Tavern on Donglong Street. He’s waiting for Your Excellency to go over for a meal.”

Xiao Chiye thought for a moment, then spurred his horse over.

The main street of Donglong faced Kailing River. Lanterns blazed the moment night fell. Wine taverns and pleasure houses flanked both sides of the street, while all kinds of gaily painted pleasure boats and small, light boats parked on the river.

Xiao Chiye dismounted his horse at Huixiang Tavern. The shopkeeper followed at his beck and call and personally led him up upstairs. It was only when he raised the curtain for a look that he realized this feast was not simple.

Everyone present at the feast was either well-known or young masters whose fathers or elder brothers were working as governmental officials. Next to Prince Chu was a fair-faced little eunuch who looked delicate and pretty. This should be the grandson Pan Rugui had found for himself again after Xiaofuzi's death.

"Ce'an is here!" Li Jianheng called out to him. "Come and take a seat. We're waiting for you!"

Xiao Chiye picked a vacant seat at random to sit. He said with a smile, "What a large turnout."

"Let me introduce. This is Pan-gonggong's grandson, Feng Quan, Feng-gonggong!" Li Jianheng said to Feng Quan, "This is my good buddy, the Second Young Master of the Libei's Xiao Clan, and the Viceroy of the Imperial Army, Xiao Ce'an."

Feng Quan was more pleasing to the eye than Xiaofuzi had been. He bowed respectfully to Xiao Chiye and said, "I've heard a lot about the Viceroy."

Xi Hongxuan sat opposite them with one leg crossed over the other. He took up two seats and was so warm that his plump face was perspiring profusely. He said, "Let's dispense with the formalities. Your Highness, which other guest has yet to arrive today? If everyone is here, let's start the feast!"

Li Jianheng raised his eyebrows at Xiao Chiye and said, "I have also invited a distinguished guest whom everyone wants to meet."

Xiao Chiye was baffled by his unexpected gesture. Just then, he heard the waiter behind him lift the curtain and announce, "The distinguished guest has arrived!"

Everyone at the feast fell silent.



Xiao Chiye looked back just in time to see Shen Zechuan, dressed in his Imperial Bodyguards' robe, striding in. Shen Zechuan was visibly stupefied on seeing him. However, his expression was so obvious that Xiao Chiye did not believe it at all.

Everyone present knew that there was discord between them. For a moment, the atmosphere was strange. Those waiting to watch the drama exchanged meaningful glances at one another.

Li Jianheng said warmly, "This is Shen Lanzhou. Everyone knows who he is, right? Lanzhou, take a seat. Shopkeeper, start the feast!"

Xiao Chiye felt that Li Jianheng must have been possessed to invite Shen Zechuan over just because of that face of his.

Of all places to sit, Shen Zechuan just had to pick the seat beside Xiao Chiye. Both men looked at each other as he sat down.

"So, this is Shen Lanzhou, whose name has been making waves in Qudu lately." Xi Hongxuan looked askance at Shen Zechuan. "Seeing is truly believing."

"I heard that Lanzhou's..." Li Jianheng said, "... mother was an unparalleled beauty in Duanzhou back then. Shen Wei had to stake half of his princely residence before he won her heart! So how could Lanzhou not be born pretty?"

A scattering of laughter rose in the room. Everyone openly and surreptitiously glanced at Shen Zechuan's face. Even Feng Quan made noises of appreciation and lamented, "If this Master had been born a female..."

"Then what will the lady of the Hua Clan be good for?!"

The group of rich young masters tacitly burst into laughter. Out of the corner of his eye, Xiao Chiye saw Shen Zechuan with his head partially lowered. He could not read the latter's emotions.

The nape of this man's neck was shrouded under the dim light of the glazed lamp beside him. It extended under his collar like white jade, looking as if one could taste ecstasy by kneading it. It waited defenselessly for someone to make a move. The contours of his side profile were smooth and beautiful, and the arch of the bridge of his nose was gorgeous. The corners of his eyes were the most devastating; everything that could make one's heart itch all lay within them. A faint hint of a smile followed as those corners curved upward.

Xiao Chiye took another look.

Shen Zechuan was indeed smiling.

“Have you mistaken me for someone else?” Shen Zechuan tilted his eyes towards Xiao Chiye.

“Just looking at you in a different light.” Xiao Chiye retracted his gaze.

Shen Zechuan raised his eyes and smiled subserviently at the various gentlemen present at the feast. He said, “I’m just of average looks. Everyone has been too kind to me.”

On hearing his words, those who were still carrying themselves with decorum loosened up. The more they spoke, the more vulgar their words.

Xi Hongxuan said, “Wasn’t there a new trick that had come into vogue recently on Donglong Street? It’s called ‘playing with cups’. Fill up a golden cup with top-grade wine and place it in the fragrant shoe of a beauty and pass it around to drink for fun. Your Highness, have you played it before?”

Li Jianheng laughed and said, “I have the wine, but I can’t find a beauty.”

Xi Hongxuan motioned flippantly, “Isn’t one sitting right here?”

All along, Shen Zechuan looked as if he was not acquainted with him. He forced a smile and said, “I’m not worthy of the ‘beauty’ label. If everyone really wants to have fun, then I’ll invite everyone to the brothel tonight to play to your hearts’ content.”

When all is said and done, Shen Zechuan still had the Hua Clan to back him. On seeing this, the others did not dare to push it. Only Xi Hongxuan seemed as if his eight characters<sup>2</sup> conflicted with Shen Zechuan’s. The more ruckus he created, the uglier the situation became. There had been news lately that Xi Gu’an had lost favor with the Empress Dowager, so all of them simply thought that Xi Hongxuan was venting his anger on Shen Zechuan for his elder brother.

Shen Zechuan was about to speak when he suddenly heard Xiao Chiye say beside him, “How can you ask His Highness Prince Chu to play what others have played before? This drinking from shoes and playing with cups is such an old game from centuries ago. Even the prostitutes in the south aren’t interested in it. How about we try a different way of playing? Second Young Master Xi, take off your shoes, and we can use them as boats to fool around with.”

Those at the feast roared with laughter. Xi Hongxuan was obese, and his feet were much bigger than the average man. No one usually dared to

bring it up, so they did not expect Xiao Chiye to poke fun at it.

“That works too.” Xi Hongxuan rolled with it and graciously raised his legs. He ordered, “Men! Remove my shoes!”

Li Jianheng started to have fun and cussed a few words.

Shen Zechuan did not expect Xiao Chiye to help him out of a fix either. He and Xi Hongxuan had been putting on a show. He looked at Xiao Chiye again.

Xiao Chiye ignored him and picked up his chopsticks to grab some food to eat.

The little eunuch, Feng Quan, sat for a moment. When he saw that the dishes were more or less served, he said, “Having fun is a matter for you gentlemen here. So let me add another dish for everyone tonight.”

As he spoke, he clapped his hands. The waiters downstairs who were already prepared a long time ago hurriedly entered to serve the dish.

However, this “dish” was a small donkey that was still alive.

Feng Quan said, “Of all the delicacies in the world, donkey meat is the best. Gentlemen, have you ever tried ‘donkey roast’?”

The noise in the room died down. Everyone looked at the donkey in the center.

Li Jianheng asked, “What’s ‘donkey roast?’”

The waiters dumped some soil on the ground and deftly made a small circular plot of land out of the soil. They chased the donkey onto the soil and buried its four hooves in it so that the donkey’s belly was touching the soil. Then, they covered the donkey with a thick padded quilt.

“Gentlemen.” Feng Quan said amicably. “Watch.”

A waiter half-crouched as he took the ladle and scooped out the boiling soup that came fresh out of the pot and poured it all over. Those assisting beside him held down the quilt and wiped it down over the head of the braying donkey to scald off its fur while it was still alive. But they were still not done. The waiter who had poured the boiling soup set aside the ladle and gouged the meat out of this seared donkey’s body.

The meat was placed in the dish, and the man by the side of the stove roasted it on the spot. After he was done, he passed the plate one at a time to everyone present.

The braying of the donkey grew even more tragic. Even the people downstairs were alarmed.

The color drained from Li Jianheng's face. He looked at this donkey meat and covered his nose and mouth to say, "Feng-gonggong, isn't this dish a little too..."

"Your Highness, why don't you try it first? This donkey meat is the most delicious when it is gouged out right after boiling soup has been poured over it. Food must be eaten fresh." Feng Quan pointed out. "There's a meaning to this 'donkey roast'. Let's take a certain person as an example. If said person were to fall into the hands of others, then he must put himself at the mercy of others. If the master tells him to kneel, he must kneel. If the master wants him to cry, he must cry. And if the master is eyeing his flesh, he must let others gouge him like this."

Shen Zechuan's situation was like this donkey. He looked at the bloodstained quilt. The blood trickled into the soil until the stench of it permeated the air. It was as if he was looking at Ji Mu and himself five years ago.

"Excellent taste!" Xi Hongxuan ate a few slices. He seemed like he did not grasp the meaning behind and was only concerned about proclaiming how much of a thrill it was.

All this time, Shen Zechuan's chopsticks did not move, while Xiao Chiye's chopsticks never touched the meat.

Li Jianheng felt something odd about those words when he heard it. He said apprehensively, "It's really too depraved. Take it away!"

"Hold on." Feng Quan finally looked at Shen Zechuan. "Young Master Shen, my godfather was the one who specifically asked me to serve this dish. Why aren't you eating it?"

Pan Rugui was his god-grandfather, so by extension, Ji Lei could really be considered his godfather! Exactly what connection or backing did this lad have for him to get Pan Rugui's favor and trust this quickly? Not only did he take over Xiaofuzi's duties, he even got into Ji Lei's good graces.

Ji Lei could not kill Shen Zechuan. And now that Shen Zechuan had come under his command, he could not touch him either. Coming up with such a lowdown way to humiliate Shen Zechuan tonight was to make it clear that the grudge between them was not over.

Shen Zechuan picked up the chopsticks.

"I..."

Before Shen Zechuan could finish his words, the chair beside him was suddenly pushed aside as Xiao Chiye rose to his feet. He picked up the plate

containing the donkey meat and flung it in Feng Quan's direction. It crashed to the ground with a "clatter".

Li Jianheng hurriedly stood up and said, "Ce, Ce'an..."

Xiao Chiye stared at Feng Quan.

Whoever Feng Quan wanted to humiliate on Ji Lei's behalf was not something he could interfere with. But he, Xiao Chiye, was also a caged beast right this hour and day. He was no different from this donkey.

This was a slap in his face too. And it hurt.

Feng Quan looked at him in puzzlement and asked, "Is it not to the Viceroy's liking?"

Xiao Chiye pressed his thumb down on the hilt of Langli Blade<sup>3</sup> at the side of his waist. Screams rose in the entire room as he drew his blade. His hand rose, and the blade fell to decapitate the donkey, killing it. Its miserable braying ceased. Blood seeped out of the soil onto the ground, turning the floor vividly red. The others all held their breath, not knowing what Xiao Chiye would do.

With his back to the dim light, Xiao Chiye wiped the edge of his blade clean with the tablecloth. Only then did he casually turn around and smiled at all those present. "—Gentlemen, please continue."

Li Jianheng stared at his blade and said softly, "Ce'an, Ce'an, keep, keep it away."

Xiao Chiye kept the blade back into its sheath and threw a look at Feng Quan. He raised his foot to lift a chair over and sat unreservedly in the middle. He said, "Roast it all together. I'll be here tonight to watch Feng-gonggong eat."

In the end, Feng Quan called for his sedan chair and left in a hurry.

Li Jianheng drank some wine and wept as he said to Xiao Chiye, "Ce'an, I really didn't think of this. Who would know that castrated crook to be so despicable? We are buddies. You mustn't let this matter hurt our friendship!"

Xiao Chiye tugged at the corners of his mouth and said, "There's a distinction between those close to you and those distant from you. I understand. You go on ahead first."

Li Jianheng tugged at his sleeves, wanting to say more. Xiao Chiye simply got Chen Yang to stuff Li Jianheng into the sedan.

"Send Prince Chu back." Xiao Chiye said. "I'll walk back myself."

In no way would Chen Yang ramble on when he saw the unhappiness in Xiao Chiye's expression, so he got on his horse and left with Prince Chu's sedan.

Xiao Chiye alone stood under a lantern. After a moment, he kicked over somebody else's potted plant.

The potted plant, which was worth a lot of money, tumbled on the ground and hit the bottom of the stairs. A hand gently held it up.

Shen Zechuan stood on the stairs and said unperturbedly, "Are you that rich? You'll have to compensate for this, you know?"

Xiao Chiye replied coldly, "I have lots of money."

With that, he felt around his waist. But it was empty.

Shen Zechuan waited for a while, then turned to the shopkeeper and said, "Put it on this master's tab. He has lots of money."



Note:

The dish (or a variation of it) mentioned in this chapter is one of the top 10 forbidden dishes in China known as Huo Jiao Lu (活叫驴) meaning "Live-braying Donkey" (literally). The animal would have its legs tied and its body held down, while the chef would cut its body and serve it immediately to the diners who then ate it among the ear-splitting cries of the animal. A variation of this dish is called JiaoLu Rou or "Water Donkey Meat", where the donkey's skin would be pulled off, and boiling water poured on its raw flesh until it is cooked alive.

Footnotes

1.



2. Typically, a raised wooden platform or stage where executions by beheading were carried out.
3. 八字 Eight Characters, one's birth data for astrological or fortune-telling purposes, combined from year, month, day, hour, heavenly trunk, and earthly branch. People whose eight characters clashed with each other would be deemed to be at odds with one another.
4. 狼戾刀 Langli Blade, the name of Xiao Chiye's blade, which was a gift from Qi Zhuyin (see chapter 11).

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 19 : TRUTH VS. LIES



The breeze caressed past the hot summer night, whilst the moon hung over the lush treetops.

Xiao Chiye was in tiptop form, so the rush of wine promptly made him hot. At the moment, he was irritable. He stared at Shen Zechuan as the latter made his way down. He said, “So Zhao Zui Temple can still teach one to purify one’s heart of desires and change one’s temper.”

Shen Zechuan dismissed the waiter and said, “I’m the best at grinning and bearing it.”

Xiao Chiye accepted the waiter’s tea to rinse his mouth. Then he wiped his mouth and said, “At least do a decent job if you want to make it up. You probably don’t even know how to spell those last four words.”

“We are all just playing along for fun.” Shen Zechuan wiped his hands and smiled at him. “Yet, you took it seriously.”

Xiao Chiye did not look at him. He simply threw the handkerchief onto the tray and said, “The show is over. Who would believe that? Someone has to play that particular role, no? I, Xiao Ce’an, was just perfect for it. Didn’t you feel good watching it too?”

“That blade is a treasure.” Shen Zechuan’s eyes wandered down.

Xiao Chiye raised his hand to block his view and said, “And the person isn’t?”

One of the lanterns upstairs went out. Shen Zechuan sighed and said “How do you expect me to reply to that? That’s rather inappropriate.”

“You have a good eye.” Xiao Chiye moved his hand away and stared at him ruthlessly and fiercely. “Few people can recognize a good blade.”

“The man himself is precious.”<sup>1</sup> Shen Zechuan went along with his words, “So naturally, everything he wears is quality stuff. Even a blind cat can stumble upon a dead mouse.”<sup>2</sup> I was merely guessing.”

“Why is it that when you praise me,” Xiao Chiye said, “I feel as if I’ve seen a ghost?”

“You hardly get praised, huh?” Shen Zechuan comforted him and said, “I haven’t even voiced my most sincere ones yet.”

The surrounding people had all dispersed.

Xiao Chiye said in a lukewarm tone, “You sure can endure.”



“Grand plans are ruined by a lack of forbearance. There’s more of my capability to come.” Shen Zechuan smiled, “Don’t be so anxious.”

“Grand plans.” Xiao Chiye said, “Qudu is only this big. What else is there for you to strive this hard for?”

“I was just saying.” Shen Zechuan paused and looked affectionately at Xiao Chiye. “And you really believed it. Second Young Master, I really couldn’t tell that you are the kind who are naïve and artless.”

“I’m just a frivolous young master who’s just loafing around drinking and dining and waiting to die.” Xiao Chiye said. “How would I know how treacherous the world is? There’s even someone like you to coax me.”

“My bad.” Shen Zechuan moved a step. “I saw how pitiful you were with your talons and fangs sealed off. Slaying with your blade tonight must have been pretty gratifying for you.”

“A little.” Xiao Chiye lifted his leg to block Shen Zechuan’s way and said, “Where are you going? We aren’t done talking yet.”

“Sending you back to your residence.” Shen Zechuan said, “You helped me out a tight spot tonight. I’m so grateful I’m shedding tears. There is no way I can ever repay you for this kindness.”

Xiao Chiye smiled and said, “You are so full of lies. You must have deceived quite a number of people, huh?”

“There aren’t many who have been taken in.” Shen Zechuan looked back. “A man always has to tell a few lies, like ‘I’ve lots of money’ that kind.”

Xiao Chiye withdrew his leg and said, “I’m nothing compared to you.”

“See.” Shen Zechuan said gently, “You’re being polite again.”

There was simply no way to chat with this man.

Because there was no way he could tell which of his words were the truth and which were the lies. Every sentence was like the superficial surface of muddied water. Even if he circled around it, he could still not pry anything out of it.

Xiao Chiye turned around and whistled for his horse. He said, “It was because of the incident tonight that you speak on such close terms to me. Everyone is gone now. It’s meaningless to keep on pretending.”

“Then what can I do?” Shen Zechuan picked up the lantern and looked at him gently and obediently. “Give you another bite?”

Xiao Chiye swiftly took a step closer and said with ease, “You use this mortal flesh of yours to bewitch others. What do you want me to think by

looking at me like that?”

Unperturbed, Shen Zechuan said to him in a soft voice, “I was born with such a pair of expressive eyes.”

Xiao Chiye used his whip to point between Shen Zechuan’s eyebrows without touching it. He said derisively, “What a waste of those eyes. All they contain within are machinations.”

“I was born to be lowly.” Shen Zechuan lifted his finger and slowly pushed aside his whip. He said, “If I don’t machinate, then how am I going to have my fun?”

“I did what I did tonight for myself.” Xiao Chiye said mercilessly. “Don’t you go around thinking it was because I’m interested in you.”

“The moon is so beautiful tonight.” Shen Zechuan said, “Why do you have to spoil the mood and stop me from thinking so?”

Xiao Chiye flipped onto the horse and looked at him for a moment as he held the reins. He said frivolously, “I fear that you will latch on to me because of this bit of kindness and get on my nerves with all those weeping and wailing.”

“Did you have too much to drink?” Shen Zechuan insinuated. “You are beyond cure.”

“Who knows about that?” Xiao Chiye said. “It’s not like you have never made such an unreasonable scene before.”

The night quietened down.

Xiao Chiye withdrew his eyes. This could be said to be a small victory. He spurred his horse on a few steps when he suddenly heard the man behind him say with a smile.

“Have you found what you lost five years ago?”

Xiao Chiye abruptly looked back and instantly reined in his horse. He demanded in a frosty voice, “Return me the thumb ring.”

Shen Zechuan looked at him, but Xiao Chiye found the expression in his eyes wicked.

Shen Zechuan said, “Want the thumb ring? Easy. Bark twice like a dog, and I’ll give it back to you.”

The gyrfalcon swooped down and landed on Xiao Chiye’s shoulder. Together with its master, it stared frostily at Shen Zechuan. It was in the dead of night. An unnamed watchman<sup>3</sup> struck his clapper<sup>4</sup> and startled the lantern in Shen Zechuan’s hand into extinguishing.

The road went dark.

It was several days later before Li Jianheng dared to show his face before Xiao Chiye. He was surprised to find that Xiao Chiye's anger had yet to subside. Ice fragments kept scattering all around them while they were listening to the music, scaring those delicate, smooth-skinned ladies so much that not one of them dared to come over to wait upon them.

Li Jianheng held the teacup in his hands to shield himself and whispered, "Are you still angry?"

Xiao Chiye chomped the ice to pieces and said, "Nope."

Li Jianheng's hair stood on end as he heard those "crunch" sounds. He said, "Autumn is right around the corner, so don't eat ice like that. It's rather terrifying."

"Such a big cellar of ice is prepared every year. It'd be a waste to leave it there." Xiao Chiye propped up both his legs and leaned back.

"Then, I'll tell you something happy." Li Jianheng could not help but shift his butt over. He said, "That Feng Quan. You know who he is?"

"Who?"

"Remember that little lady I told you about." Li Jianheng beamed and said with shifty eyes, "Feng Quan is her younger brother. She has now won the favor of Pan Rugui, so how could Pan Rugui not promote Feng Quan? This Feng Quan is such a glib talker. He even coaxed Ji Lei until Ji Lei was over the moon and wanted to take him as his son!"

"From the looks of it." Xiao Chiye propped up his head with one arm and glanced at Li Jianheng. "You really have your heart set on that little lady."

"Of course." Li Jianheng said, "So, the incident that day was all done by that bastard, Ji Lei. As his son, how would Feng Quan dare to defy his father's order?"

"So, you are saying you want me to let him off?" Xiao Chiye asked.

Li Jianheng was a flexible man who did not have the aspirations expected of the descendants of the imperial clan. He hurriedly slipped down from his chair and squatted before Xiao Chiye to implore him. "Buddy, please let him off this once for the sake of my romance. Besides, didn't we make him eat until he puked? He's Pan Rugui's man, after all. It isn't good not to give him face. It has only been a few days since Xiaofuzi's incident. His Majesty is still watching us."

Xiao Chiye suddenly stared at him. He sat up and asked, "Did you touch her?"

Li Jianheng hummed.

Xiao Chiye said, "You touch Pan Rugui's woman right under his nose?"

"If he were a real man, I wouldn't do it." Li Jianheng reluctantly stood up and said, "He's just an old eunuch with just that bit of trick to liven things up. He beat up a delicate and ravishing beauty all day long until she wept! This beauty was originally mine. If you were in my shoes, would you do it or not?!"<sup>5</sup>

Exasperated at Li Jianheng's failure to live up to expectations, Xiao Chiye said, "No!"

Li Jianheng pleaded again, "Ce'an, we are buddies! How big an issue can it be? Hm? Just turn a blind eye. If you let Feng Quan off, I'll give you something else to play with!"

Xiao Chiye lay back again and said nothing.

If Pan Rugui found out about this incident, then Xiaofuzi's episode would be nothing in comparison. That old dog would definitely think of ways to kill them both. His promotion of Feng Quan alone was sufficient for anyone to get a glimpse of how much he doted on that woman.

Pan Rugui was already sixty-five years of age. He had no biological son, and none of the pretty women around him these years could remain by his side for so long. If he truly regarded this woman as his wife or concubine, then he might even dare to hack Li Jianheng to death.

Xiao Chiye listened to Li Jianheng's incessant chatter and said, "Since you dared to do this, does it mean you already have a plan thought out?"

Li Jianheng sat on the carpet and lowered his head to study his moso-bamboo fan. He said in a small voice, "... Not really... It's just that I've heard, heard that Pan Rugui had once kept a toy boy. All I have to do is to just have to send him one to play with, no?"

Xiao Chiye said, "There aren't many who could surpass that beauty of yours, are there?"

Li Jianheng was on tenterhooks and did not dare to hide it from him. He said, "Lately, quite a number of people have been asking around about that... Shen Lanzhou."

"Asking about what?"

"Asking about his price, and whether they could afford to raise him." Seeing Xiao Chiye's expressionless face, Li Jianheng hurriedly grabbed the chair and said, "Money is not an issue. But I don't dare to look for him. If

he were to take desperate measures after being pushed into the corner... Ce'an, help me this once! You just need to send him to Pan Rugui. After the job is done, I'll give him silver! Or even gold!"

Xiao Chiye rested his hands on his knees in silence.

Thinking there was hope, Li Jianheng said again, "Don't you hate Shen Wei? Once you fix him this time, Shen Zechuan would not dare to throw his weight before you in the future! Think about it. If he didn't die, he would be able to turn things around. But if he were to be involved in such a shady deal in Qudu, he would lead a life worse than death! Furthermore, isn't the Empress Dowager also thinking of..."

"I thought you were using your brain while speaking." Xiao Chiye slowly pulled out his legs and said, "Turns out it's all fucking mush inside."

"Ce'an, Ce'an!" Seeing him leave, Li Jianheng lifted the hem of his robe and chased after him out of the door.

Xiao Chiye stepped out of the building and mounted his horse. Without even turning his head back, he left.

Even if they let Shen Zechuan be Pan Rugui's forbidden pleasure, would Pan Rugui dare to accept him? This man was the man the Empress Dowager was always watching with the intent to protect. If Pan Rugui dared to take him, then he would be burning his own bridges. Li Jianheng was out of his mind!

But, if Li Jianheng really dared to do that.

If Li Jianheng really dared to do that...

How would he suddenly dare to do that?

Shen Zechuan got off work. He had only just removed his authority token and stepped out of the door when he saw that excellent, handsome steed of Xiao Chiye.

He descended the stairs and asked, "Here to ask for your thumb ring back?"

Xiao Chiye snapped off a branch with leaves and held it between his teeth. He looked at him for a moment and said, "It's broad daylight, and you are still not sober? Return it to me. Stop bullshitting me."

"You weren't this short-tempered that other night." Shen Zechuan looked at the sky. "It would be too humiliating for the Viceroy if you were to stand here and bark like a dog. Which means you aren't here for the thumb ring. So what's the matter? Spit it out."

“Aren’t you well aware of what’s the matter?” Xiao Chiye sat on the rock with his long legs to prop up his elbows and arms. “Prince Chu wanted to give Xiaofuzi a thrashing, and you could even get a line on it from inside the temple. I forgot all about it at the turn of the head. But now that I think about it, you must have planted a man by his side, right? If he wasn’t an informer, then he was the instigator who told him to do so.”

“If I were that capable.” Shen Zechuan said, “I would not have been reduced to raising elephants.”

“Who knows if that’s the truth or a lie?” Xiao Chiye’s eyes were aloof and cold. “You have to give me a clear account before I can decide whether or not to believe it.”



#### Footnotes

1. 宝贝 *baobei*; treasure, or precious, but can also mean darling or baby. e.g., parents may call their children *baobei*, or lovers may address each other as *baobei* too.
2. 瞎猫撞上死耗子 literally, a blind cat stumbling upon a dead mouse. i.e., by sheer luck.
3. 更夫 (or 打更人) A night watchman who typically patrolled the streets at night with a wooden clapper or a g/ong and a mallet and regularly sounded the instruments at certain intervals to remind the others of the time and to look out for potential fire hazards. (See next footnote for a watchman with a clapper.)



- 4.
5. 梆子 watchman's wooden or bamboo clapper.
6. 干 the word means "do" (an action), but it can also mean to screw (someone sexually). So when Li Jianheng said "do it", it could also mean "screw her" or "do her".

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 20 : DECISION



“I’m so wronged.” Shen Zechuan said, “If anything were to happen now, it’s definitely all Shen Lanzhou’s fault.”

“There has been trouble after trouble ever since your release.” Xiao Chiye said, “Xiaofuzi, the Imperial College, Pan Rugui... How is it that every incident has something to do with you?”

Shen Zechuan said wryly, “That’s right. Why is it that they all have something to do with me? Don’t you know the reason for this? Back then, the Hereditary Prince found me in the Chashi Sinkhole. If he had used his blade to end me, then these incidents today would never have happened. “

Xiao Chiye took down the branch of leaves and said, “Back then, you fought to survive and drag out an ignoble existence. Did you only come to realize what it feels like to live today?”

The calmness in Shen Zechuan’s eyes was so placid that Xiao Chiye found it surreal.

This man was extremely odd.

It was the same that day during the feast. His every move carried with it an undercurrent of “having left behind the past.” But Xiao Chiye could still clearly remember the look in Shen Zechuan’s eyes when the latter had bitten him five years ago on that snowy night.

Such disconnect from reality seemed to be like a bottomless abyss he could not get a grasp of. Those spurts of hatred seemed to have been worn away until others had no way of telling where his limit lay. Everyone at the feast humiliated him, and yet he merely lowered his head and smiled. When Xiao Chiye had said that he was seeing him in a different light, he had truly meant it.

If a man could grin and bear it to this extent, then that darkness under that calm was, on the contrary, all the more disturbing to Xiao Chiye.

“What it feels like to be alive.” Shen Zechuan smiled again. “I can feel it every single day and night while I was in Zhao Zui Temple. Now that I’ve been released, all the more I find that living isn’t easy. I treasure my life. And I’m afraid. But they want me to shoulder this sin and pay for all those human lives with my own. I, Shen Lanzhou, has only this one life. How is that even enough to pay for them all? I ingratiate myself with everyone in so many ways all in the hope that Second Young Master and the various



nobles will be magnanimous and won't be too hard on me. Today, you want me to give you an account. Second Young Master, at least give me a reason."

By the time Xiao Chiye listened to this point, he had already changed his mind. He has a keen nose and he always vaguely felt uneasy every time Shen Zechuan cooperated in such a compliant and docile manner. But Shen Zechuan yielded to neither cajolery nor coercion. No matter how hard Xiao Chiye tried to pry it out of him, he could not tell the truth from his lies.

He did not believe a word of what Shen Zechuan said. Just as Shen Zechuan had said that night, everyone was just playing along for fun. Since that was the case, so why take it seriously?

But although people could lie, the traces left behind could not. He just had to mingle among the Nine Schools of Thoughts<sup>1</sup> in Qudu, and ten to one he would be able to pry something loose. Shen Zechuan wanted to plant a man by Li Jianheng's side, and it was certain that this person would not be an expert. Based on Shen Zechuan's current circumstances, he could only bribe an errand-runner or an attendant.

This Li Jianheng's matter was questionable both on the inside and on the outside. If he could not investigate this thoroughly, then there will be no end to troubles in the future. Ever since Xiao Chiye cast his lot with Prince Chu, he found himself sleeping less.

"I came looking for you to play. How did it become an interrogation?" Xiao Chiye changed the topic. He blew the leaves on the branch and lamented, "I heard that someone is making enquiries about you recently. This involves Prince Chu's dignity, so naturally, I have to come and ask you."

"Each time you come finding me to play." Shen Zechuan said, "I'll lose sleep for a night."

"You can't put it that way." Xiao Chiye said, "You aren't having an easy time, and I'm not having a good time either. We can turn the page on the old grudges between us and let bygones be bygones."

Shen Zechuan laughed and said, "Tens of thousands of lives in the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo were lost. And the Second Young wants to bury the hatchet with me."

"Times are different now." Xiao Chiye finally threw away the branch. He rose to his feet and said, "You have now received the favor of the Hua Clan, and you're the man in the Empress Dowager's good graces. How

would I still dare to offend you? Calling me Second Young Master sounds so distant. We could be said to be nodding acquaintances now. Right? Lanzhou.”

Shen Zechuan merely smiled and said, “Second Young Master, goodbye.”

Xiao Chiye got on his horse and looked at him from above. He said, “When are you going to return the thumb ring to me, Lanzhou? A worn-out thumb ring isn’t worth a cent and keeping it will just revolt you. But why is it that instead of returning it to me, you seem like you have come to treat it as a treasure?”

“I wear it on me.” Shen Zechuan said to Xiao Chiye, “Just to rely on Second Young Master’s ferocious aura to ward off evil. So how would I bear to return it to you this easily?”

Xiao Chiye lashed his horsewhip with a “crack” and said, “Don’t you know? It’s exactly evil aura that Your Second Young Master has.”

Shen Zechuan stood where he was and watched him gallop away into the distance. His smile faded away, leaving only an unfathomable stillness. The setting sun dipped, and the orange light reflected under his feet extended into the shadow of Xiao Chiye’s gradually disappearing back.

Stars adorned the night sky. Grand Mentor Qi opened the newly drawn map and showed it to Shen Zechuan.

“The former Eastern Palace did not have the authority to deploy troops at the frontier. But it came to receive intimate knowledge from the Ministry of War on the setups of the various lands’ garrison troops. This is of the Libei Great Commandery’s.”

“It’s backed by Hongyan Mountains, and its west leads to Luoxia Pass, while the east overlooks the Biansha Twelve Tribes.” Shen Zechuan pointed at the Hongyan Mountains on the east side. “Autumn is around the corner. There is an under-supply of pasture for the Biansha Cavalry, so they are bound to rob the mutual trade market at the boundary. Xiao Jiming wants to deploy his troops. So why isn’t there a memorial<sup>2</sup> seeking instructions being sent to Qudu these days?”

“Because His Majesty is severely ill.” Grand Mentor Qi pondered over it. “This year Spring, Xiao Jiming had only submitted one memorial. He surely has an informant in Qudu. Since he still has yet to submit a memorial for the deployment as of today, then it could only mean one thing.”

Shen Zechuan said under his breath, "His Majesty doesn't have long to live."

"So, exactly who is it that can secure the imperial court is Xiao Jiming's reason for biding his time now." Grand Mentor Qi took out a brush, dipped it in ink, and drew a circle around Li Bei. "Prince Chu's accession to the throne will only benefit the Xiao Clan. They have been at odds with the Hua Clan for too long. Because of the Zhongbo incident, they have fallen to the disadvantageous position of being under the control of others, and the opportunity to turn the tide in their favor is now right before them. Xiao Jiming will definitely not pass up this opportunity."

"But Teacher has also said that day." Shen Zechuan pointed to Qudu. "As long as the gates of Qudu remain closed, Xiao Chiye remains the hostage from Libei. With him in the Empress Dowager's hand, how is Xiao Jiming able to act?"

"Since you mentioned this matter." Grand Mentor Qi cast aside his brush. "Then, I will tell you of another matter."

"Teacher, please speak."

"In your view, what kind of man is this Xiao Chiye?"

Shen Zechuan lowered his eyes to look at the map and replied, "Sharp. Smart. Doesn't like to follow the steps."

"I think he is." Grand Mentor Qi scratched his head as if he could not think of a suitable word. After a moment of frustration, he sprawled over the table and said mysteriously to Shen Zechuan, "I think he is the opportunity Heaven sent to Libei to turn things around. He's a natural-born talent."

Shen Zechuan swung his brush and asked, "Why does Teacher say so?"

Grand Mentor Qi immediately got under the table and pulled out the book he had written with his own hands. Over the years, he sensed himself becoming old and forgetful, and so he had recorded down many matters on paper. With swishing sounds, he flipped through several pages, then leaned over the table again and pushed the book to Shen Zechuan.

"These are the details Ge Qingqing managed to pry from the Ministry of War. In the first year of Yongyi,<sup>3</sup> that is, eight years ago, Xiao Chiye was fourteen years of age when he followed Xiao Jiming into battle at Biansha. In the middle of the summer, Xiao Jiming was besieged by three Biansha Tribes at the eastern side of the Hongyan Mountain Ranges. His retreat route was cut off, and he was trapped before the Hongjiang River. The

Prince of Libei's reinforcements did not arrive for three days, and Xiao Jiming pressed on with his desperate battle for survival. But the cavalries of the three Biansha Tribes were nimble. As you know, Libei has a legion of Armored Cavalry. They can deal a powerful blow head-on like a wall of iron, but they can't respond agilely enough to a battle that entails back-and-forth pursuits. Drag it on for too long, and the one exhausted will be Xiao Jiming's troops."

Grand Mentor Qi downed a few mouthfuls of wine.

"But on the third night, Biansha retreated like the ebbing of tide. Because their heavily guarded army provisions were set on fire. The fire spread from the center and threw their rear formation into disarray. Xiao Jiming seized the opportunity to fight a decisive battle and broke through the siege in one night. However, the statement from Libei was cut off at this point. The following details were all information that your Shifu took a lot of effort to find out. Can you guess how the heavily guarded army provisions were sent up into flames? Allegedly, the three Biansha Tribes constructed and dug a trench for lavatory purposes near the river. Xiao Chiye silently felt his way from the Hongjiang River to the trench and crawled in that filthy and stinky ditch for half a night."

At this point, Grand Mentor Qi stroked his chin.

"Yet, Libei suppressed such a meritorious service and did not report it. Not only that. Xiao Chiye came to Qudu and became an idle hoodlum—but how could a loafer have such endurance? Just imagine. Under that kind of circumstances, if he fails, then his eldest brother would be the one to die. Yet, he could lay dormant for two days until the Biansha troops let their guards down before he set the fire. Did he know that his eldest brother's life was at stake during those two days? And what if he had not set the fire correctly, or if he failed to grasp the timing accurately? One minute earlier, and Biansha would strengthen. One minute later, and Libei would weaken! Yet, he struck right at that exact timing. How could he have done it if he didn't have extraordinary insight?"

Shen Zechuan seemed to be moved.

At last, Grand Mentor Qi said, "Moreover, this lad is insanely wild. When he did this, he only brought with him this many people."

Grand Mentor Qi extended two fingers and paused for a moment.

"Lanzhou, I thought Pan Rugui transferred him to the Imperial Army to avoid trouble, but it turned out to be a blunder. They thought the Imperial

Army was already written off, but what was the Imperial Army's background? They were all from military households who followed the Emperor back then to get into the Eight Cities. The Eight Great Clans did not think much of them, so they relied on the backing of the Emperor alone. But now, the Emperor doesn't want them anymore, and so these twenty thousand men became weapons without a master. It's fine if they really fall into the hands of a hedonistic young master. But if they fall into Xiao Chiye's hand... then what else is there to deter Xiao Jiming from deploying troops to protect Prince Chu?!"

So that's it!

The part where Shen Zechuan had been puzzling over previously suddenly cleared up.

He had thought that since Xiao Jiming left Xiao Chiye in the Qudu, then he should understand that this was a pawn under the control of others. Either he abandoned it, or acted with prudence. If he was being prudent, then he should not and must not let Xiao Chiye get so close to Prince Chu. Otherwise, he would be asking for trouble. No matter what he did, he would always be on tenterhooks and cleaning up messes.

"This bout of autumn chill in Qudu is about to break out in full fury. We lack influence and power, so it'd be best to steer clear of it." Grand Mentor Qi's mouth was parched. He continued, "Because of the Imperial College incident, a distance has already formed between the Empress Dowager and Xi Gu'an, as well as with His Majesty. In order to ensure that her authority does not decline, the matter of the imperial heir would be of emergency. If anything were to happen to Prince Chu these days, then the Xiao Clan's efforts would have been in vain, much like drawing water with a sieve. So it would seem that Xiao Chiye's urgency to meet you today must have been because he was already on the alert. However, the Empress Dowager herself is more wary and sensitive. Back then, to let Prince Ning ascend to the throne, she did not hesitate to exterminate everyone from the Eastern Palace. So, today, to guard against the unexpected, she will also wipe out Prince Chu. Xiao Chiye wants to ensure Prince Chu's safety, but I'm afraid that it won't be an easy feat to achieve."

"Since the Empress Dowager will not use Xi Gu'an, then the only one left is Ji Lei." Shen Zechuan's eyes were calm. "The experts in the Imperial Bodyguards are as plentiful as clouds. And they are clean and efficient in their jobs."

“The fight between those in power is one thing.” Grand Mentor Qi said. “It’s time for you to decide whether to pursue Prince Chu or follow the Empress Dowager.”

Shen Zechuan extended his hand and covered the map.



Note:

To make it easier to distinguish between the Princes, I have made some small changes to the naming:

– Imperial Princes (i.e. legit princes with the surname Li): Prince Chu, Prince Ning

– Conferred Prince (i.e. princes of other surnames; as mentioned in chapter 1 footnotes, these are titled and salaried officials of the imperial bureaucracy during the Ming Dynasty with nominal lordship over various fiefs throughout the empire, typically conferred by the Emperor and can be inherited by their descendants (traditionally, the eldest son of legitimate birth, i.e. the first son of lawful birth)): Prince of Libei, Prince of Jianxing

#### Footnotes

1. 九流 Nine Schools of Thoughts, i.e., Confucians, Daoists, Yin-Yang, Legalists, Logicians, Mohists, Political Strategists, Eclectics, Agriculturists.
2. 折子 *zhezi*, also 奏折 *zouzhe*, is a memorial presented to the Emperor in a folded, accordion form
3. This is the name of an era during which a specific Emperor (in this case, Emperor Yongyi) reigned. 元年 is the first year of the era/reign of an Emperor.



## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 21 : AUTUMN HUNT



It rained several times in the tenth month of the lunar year, following which the maple leaves in Mount Feng turned red. Shen Zechuan had already caught sight of some slight frost while herding the elephants during the morning court. Emperor Xiande's illness improved somewhat along with the coming of autumn. Word had it that his meals had resumed, and his coughing during the morning court had eased off a lot.

According to tradition, the Emperor could only head to the Nanlin<sup>1</sup> Hunting Grounds only in the eleventh month. But Emperor Xiande seemed to be worried that traveling might prove difficult in cold weather, so he gave orders for the preparations of the Autumn Hunt to be carried out at the start of the tenth month.

"The ones responsible for patrol duty are still the Eight Great Training Divisions and the Imperial Bodyguards." Chen Yang carried the blade for Xiao Chiye and said, "Viceroy, didn't His Majesty flew into a rage the last time?"

"That was last time." Xiao Chiye had just come from the military drill grounds. He wiped his sweat. "His Majesty was furious last time because he felt that there were safety concerns both on the inside and on the outside. But it's different this time. Xi Gu'an had been despised and shunned by Her Majesty. Having been left out in the cold for two months, he will be desperately wanting to put himself back into the limelight."

"Are such small favors able to move Xi Gu'an?" When Chen Yang saw no one nearby, he said, "After all, Her Majesty has been gaining power for a long time, and His Majesty is ill. Even if he is willing to hand Xi Gu'an an olive branch, Xi Gu'an wouldn't dare to accept it, would he?"

"You said it yourself, that it's a small favor." Xiao Chiye put on the outer garment he had grabbed. "What if His Majesty gave Xi Gu'an great power and authority? A few days ago, His Majesty even asked about the age of the Xi Clan's daughter. Prince Chu does not have a Princess Consort. If he really bestowed marriage upon them, then even if Xi Gu'an did not have the intent to, it would appear differently to Her Majesty."

Chen Yang said, "A pity we don't have a Missy at home."



“It’s better that way.” Xiao Chiye said, “If I were to have a sister, she would have to be like Commander-in-Chief Qi. Otherwise, she would have no control over her life. Most likely, she will be forced to marry a husband she has never seen before.”<sup>2</sup>

Having said to this point, he slowed his pace.

“The Hua Clan has always been the first choice for imperial concubines. At this age, Hua Xiangyi, who has been raised and nurtured by the Empress Dowager, has yet to be bestowed a marriage. Even His Majesty does not dare to offend her and could only call her his younger sister. When it comes to whom she will be betrothed to in the future, it’s Her Majesty’s arrangements that they still have to go along with.”

Chen Yang said, “Fortunately, our Hereditary Prince is already married... But who else can Third Missy Hua be betrothed to? Viceroy, I really can’t tell at all. “

“The Qi Clan is the best choice.” Xiao Chiye smiled. “If Qi Zhuyin was born a man, the Empress Dowager would have long betrothed Third Missy Hua to her. A pity Qi Zhuyin is a girl, and the Hua Clan does not have any man of lawful birth in this generation. So they can only eye this piece of meat but not move their chopsticks. They are getting anxious.”

The horse was led over, and Xiao Chiye stroked it.

“Come on. Let’s go to the East Market on Donglong Street again.”

Shen Zechuan had only just stepped into Donglong Street.

Having been released from his imprisonment, he could naturally no longer stay in Zhao Zui Temple. As no one mentioned it at the outset, this matter was set aside. But in the eighth month, Qiao Tianya suddenly took notice of it and followed him to Zhao Zui Temple. When he saw Grand Mentor Qi all covered in mud acting like a lunatic, he got Shen Zechuan to open an account in advance with the Imperial Bodyguards so that he could find a proper place to live in. Thus, at the end of the ninth month, Shen Zechuan moved to an old alley. The rent was cheap, and the place, suitable for his current status.

“Who exactly is this person Shifu wants me to find?” Shen Zechuan took the indenture<sup>3</sup> and looked at the word “Songyue”. The place of origin above was blank.

Ge Qingqing looked around the crowd and said, “Uncle didn’t mention it either. He only said that the teacher has permitted it. That is, to let this person take care of your daily living in the future.”

After Shen Zechuan moved out of Zhao Zui Temple, it became inconvenient for him to communicate with Grand Mentor Qi. He was unwilling to raise messenger pigeons. Firstly, it was too easy to expose themselves, and secondly, Xiao Chiye's gyrfalcon was too fierce—it left a deep impression on him. At present, they could only rely on Ji Gang and meet up when Ji Gang used his identity as an errand-runner to venture outdoors to make purchases. It was extremely inconvenient, but they had no better option for the time being.

"He should be in the East Market." Shen Zechuan said to Ge Qingqing. "Let's go for a look."

Donglong Street was near Kailing River. It was a pleasure district. There was a trading market set up on the eastern side to deal in "human goods". Those who were selling themselves to bury their parents would also choose this place to kneel.<sup>4</sup> Because the common households and residences would all come here to pick errand-runners or maidservants.

Xiao Chiye gripped a register of names from Prince Chu's residence with the intention to come here to investigate some of the men's origins.

He had only just strode out of the middleman's place when he saw a familiar nape.

Chen Yang said, "Isn't that..."

Xiao Chiye raised his hand, and Chen Yang fell silent.

Shen Zechuan kept the indenture. Feeling a chill on his nape, he looked back. Xiao Chiye was already standing behind him.

"Oh, a bigwig." Shen Zechuan said, "Why are you standing behind me?"

"Looking at you." Xiao Chiye stuffed away the register in passing and strolled over to Shen Zechuan's side. "Are you here to buy servants?"

Shen Zechuan said, as if in jest, "I'm selling myself. How on earth can I afford to buy someone?"

"Already reduced to such a state, huh?" Xiao Chiye sized him up. "Isn't it said that many people are seeking you at high prices?"

"It's all about the feels." Shen Zechuan continued to walk. "They have to catch my eye before I can decide whether to receive them or not."<sup>5</sup>

Xiao Chiye knew what kind of men they were and said, "It sure isn't easy to choose between the ugly and the repulsive, is it?"

"I'm no match for the Second Young Master." Shen Zechuan looked askance at him. "Following Prince Chu must have given you your fair share

of flesh.”<sup>6</sup>

Xiao Chiye said, “Envious? Come look for me.”

Shen Zechuan smiled too and said, “I haven’t been reduced to that stage yet.”

Both men had almost arrived at the end. Shen Zechuan turned aside and said, “Then I won’t bother Second Young Master to accompany me further. I’m heading back.”

“No hurry.” Xiao Chiye remained where he was. “This Autumn Hunt, we still have to look out for each other.”

“The Imperial Bodyguards and the Imperial Army have no common ground.” Shen Zechuan looked at him. “So what is there for me to look out for you?”

Xiao Chiye said, “How distant. If I often go over to you to stretch my legs, we can come to share a common ground.”

Shen Zechuan did not answer him. After he left, Xiao Chiye was still rooted at the same spot.

“Who is he looking for in this place?” Xiao Chiye gently stroked the hilt of the blade with his thumb. “Ge Qingqing... As expected, it’s Ge Qingqing. Chen Yang.”

“Here!”

“Go and check it out.” Xiao Chiye said, “Look into all eighteen generations of Ge Qingqing’s ancestors.”<sup>7</sup>

After Shen Zechuan’s search for the man had been disrupted by Xiao Chiye, he was placed on consecutive rotational duties, and so he did not manage to find any more free time. On the eve of the Autumn Hunt, it was finally his turn to receive an assignment. Sure enough, it was to accompany the Emperor to the Nanlin Hunting Grounds.

One day, Shen Zechuan got off work and returned home. Before pushing the door open, he sensed the presence of someone else in the house.

With a cloak around him, Feng Quan drank his tea with his fingers sticking up<sup>8</sup> and said from the other side of the door, “Aren’t you coming in?”

Shen Zechuan pushed the door open. There was no light lit in the house. With his snow-white face immersed in the darkness, Feng Quan looked like a wandering soul.

He set aside the tea and said, “I’m here to convey a message from Her Majesty.”

Shen Zechuan threw his dirty robe on the small clothes rack<sup>9</sup> with curvy raised ends and said, "Thank you for the trouble."

"Yeah." Feng Quan looked at Shen Zechuan maliciously and tossed him an object. "If it weren't a matter of urgency, would I have needed to come in person? You have been graced with so many favors from the Empress Dowager. And now it's time to repay it all one at a time. If this matter falls through this Autumn Hunt, then you won't be able to survive through it either."

Shen Zechuan caught the object. It was an eastern pearl<sup>10</sup> wrapped in a strip of cloth. A wipe of his fingertip revealed the ink traces of half a character on the strip of cloth—*Lin*.<sup>11</sup>

—Chu.<sup>12</sup>

Shen Zechuan's eyes shifted back to Feng Quan's face.

Feng Quan stood up and walked over to Shen Zechuan. He said, "If you succeed, the Empress Dowager can still spare your life and treat you like a dog to order around. But if you fail, then there's no point in keeping you."

"Martial arts experts will be as plentiful as trees in a forest." Shen Zechuan said. "I'll try my best."

Feng Quan stared daggers at him for a while before he let out a mocking smile. He strode out of the door, shook on his cloak, and melted away into the darkness of the night.

Shen Zechuan lit a lamp and stood by the side of the table as he burned away the strip of cloth.

The tongue of the flame licked the fabric, turning the word "lin" into ashes.

The Nanlin Hunting Grounds was located on the southeast side of Qudu and encompassed a wide area. Half of the usual ingredients used by the Court of Imperial Entertainments came from this place. The Eight Great Training Division forces, half of which had been mobilized, followed after the Emperor in a grand display of might.

Shen Zechuan was herding the elephants when he heard the thunderous sounds of galloping horse hooves. He did not have to look back to know whose horse it was. Sure enough, he saw the gyrfalcon swoop over his head and haul up a wild mouse from among the grass before it went soaring into the sky again.

Xiao Chiye and Li Jianheng, along with a group of rich young masters from Qudu, spurred their horses past him and noisily dashed straight ahead.

The jet-black steed with a snow-white patch on its chest under him was truly a conspicuous sight.

Xiaowu looked up in envy and said, "This Viceroy Xiao's eagle and horse are all wonderful treasures!"

Shen Zechuan said, "All wild animals."

Xiaowu was young and could not stand loneliness, so he was always wanting to converse with Shen Zechuan. Sitting on the horse, he munched on dried sweet potatoes<sup>13</sup> and said in a Huaizhou accent, "Chuan-ge, do you know the names of that horse and eagle?"

Shen Zechuan smiled and said, "They are wild... there's only so much they can be called."

Xiaowu stretched his body out and said expressively, "That eagle is called Meng! Don't you think it sounds fierce? But that horse's name isn't fierce. It's called Lang Tao Xue Jin."

He enunciated each word, sounding so childlike that it amused the group of adults.

Gasping for breath, Li Jianheng looked back and said to Xiao Chiye, "Man, each time I see him, I always wonder why he wasn't born a woman!"

Xiao Chiye turned around the horse and looked at Li Jianheng.

Li Jianheng said, "I know, I know. I'm not befuddled to that extent!"

"When we arrive at the venue in a moment." Xiao Chiye said, "You have to tell me when you venture out. Don't stray away from the guards around night time. Not one of the women you brought must be allowed into the tent either."

"I didn't bring a woman along." Li Jianheng put on a bold front to quibble.

Xiao Chiye threw him an indescribably wicked smile.

Behind them, Chen Yang spurred his horse on and caught up to them. He said, "Viceroy, I've gotten someone to send all those women back."

Upset, Li Jianheng bit the tip of his tongue. After a while, he said, "Ce'an, honestly speaking, if you won't even let me sleep with them, then what fun is there to be had at the Autumn Hunt?"

"Plenty." Xiao Chiye said, "Even basking in the sun is more interesting than you being cooped up in the tent."

Li Jianheng kept sighing as he continued on, listless and dejected, with the rest of the journey.

When they arrived, it was nearly dark.

Shen Zechuan was not on duty on the first day, so he stayed behind to do odd jobs. Qiao Tianya came too and called the Imperial Bodyguards over to treat them to some meat.

He saw the bowl in Shen Zechuan's hand and suddenly said, "So you can drink, huh."

Shen Zechuan said, "Just a bowl."

Qiao Tianya did not expose him. This man did not look like an Imperial Bodyguard. He was more like someone from the martial fraternity. He used a dagger to wipe the roast meat and said, "Eat all you can now that you are at the hunting ground! This happens only once a year. What you are eating is all stuff the palace usually uses. So seize the opportunity before you miss it."

He chewed on the meat and said.

"You have to bring a blade while you are on duty. When your turn comes tomorrow night, use Qingqing's blade. Why didn't you bring one? Didn't the Domesticated Elephants Office teach you two stances?"

"The blade is too heavy." Looking as though he was too weak to lift it, Shen Zechuan said, "It's too much for me to carry it along with me."

"The bones in your body..." Qiao Tianya said, "Couldn't have been broken by that kick of Second Young Master Xiao, could it? What a pity. That's a first-grade hoodlum, we can't extort him. Otherwise, with that one kick, this older brother can fleece him out of all his family fortune."

The Imperial Bodyguards around them laughed.

Shen Zechuan moved the corners of his lips. As he sipped the wine, he took a quick look around along the rim of the bowl.

All of them were inseparable from their blades.

Other than him, who else was here to kill Prince Chu? Apart from those present here, there were still the assassins in the unseen shadows, and how many of them were lying in wait with cool detachment? Even if Xiao Chiye was a natural-born talent, what were the odds that he could successfully protect Prince Chu under this heavy siege?

Several tents away, Xiao Chiye and Li Jianheng were still drinking wine and playing dice with the others.



## Footnotes

1. Literally Southern Forest
2. Marriages in those days were mostly decided by the parents. In families of status or power (e.g. nobles, officials, the wealthy, etc), parents would usually find someone equal to (or better than) them in status. It was common for such families to use marriages between their children to form alliances to strengthen or benefit both sides, and children, especially girls, have no say over who they will marry.
3. 卖身契 more specifically, it's an indenture or a deed of sale of oneself or one's family member to someone else (e.g. into slavery, etc)



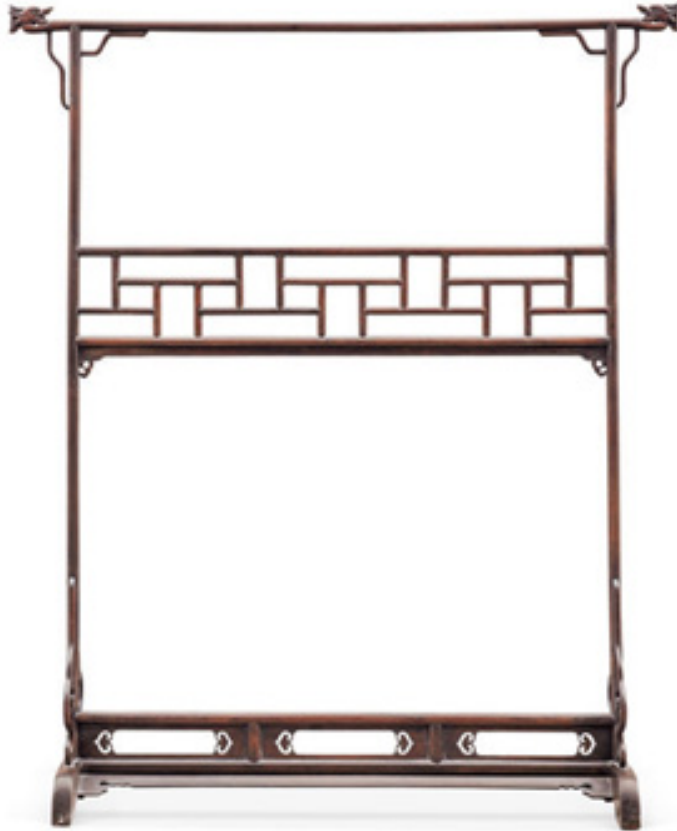
- 4.
5. 卖身葬父 literally selling oneself to bury one's father (parents). Filial piety was a big thing in those days. When the poor had no money to give their deceased parents a decent burial, they would sometimes kneel by the roadside with a sign to sell themselves as slaves (girls sometimes end up as concubines) to the person who can pay for the burial. There were sometimes practical considerations too, e.g. if the person selling themselves had younger siblings to raise after the death of their parents, etc. Selling themselves would then be a 'better' alternative compared to all of them starving to death, etc.
6. As in receive them as patrons; i.e., selling his body.
7. 开荤 to begin or resume a meat diet after abstinence or break a vegetarian diet (especially as a practice observed in certain

religions). It also refers to someone who has a novel experience.

Here it refers to him getting his taste of (ㄟ ㄛ ㄟ)

8. 祖宗十八代, literally eighteen generations of ancestors, i.e., he's asking him to do a complete and thorough background check.

9. Considered an effeminate gesture, which was typical of eunuchs



10.

11. 翘头衣架

12. 东珠 literally eastern pearl, a rare treasure also known as the northern pearl (北珠) or *tana* in Mongolian. During the Qing Dynasty, pearls produced in northeast China were called the eastern pearl to distinguish them from the southern pearl produced in the south. The rulers of the Qing Dynasty regarded the eastern pearls as treasures and used them to inlay their crown and clothing with it to represent authority and honor.

13. 林 (Lin). The word 林 also means woods or forest.

14. 林 (Lin) is also a radical used in 楚 (Chu) i.e. the 林 form up half of Chu 楚. This is the same Chu in Prince Chu.





15.

16. 红薯干 dried sweet potato (strips)

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 22 : THUNDER



The next morning, Emperor Xiande assumed personal command over the Autumn Hunt's arena. His health did not permit him to go hunting on a horse, so he prepared some rewards and ordered the men present to head to the hunting grounds to try their luck at winning a prize.

Li Jianheng could not get on his horse and had to make several attempts before he could hoist himself onto it. Emperor Xiande looked at him and said, "Jianheng will lead by example. I'll be waiting to have a taste of your prey!"

Li Jianheng gripped the reins. He had already given instructions to his guards. Even if he could not hit a target, he would not return empty-handed. So he set out in high spirits with a bunch of guards following closely behind him. Xiao Chiye rode his horse beside him.

There was a stretch of forest at the end of the vast expanse of grassland at the Nanlin Hunting Grounds. Morning dew hung on branches and leaves that had yellowed. Startled by the shouts and sounds of horses' hooves, prey of all sizes that had been set loose scattered among the undergrowth.

Clenching his bow as he sat on his horse, Li Jianheng drew the string apart with great effort and fired an arrow at a rabbit. The arrow jabbed feebly into the ground some distance away from the rabbit. Blind applause and cheers first rang out at the sides, then the guard who had gone over to take a look brought back a rabbit that had been prepared in advance.

Satisfied, Li Jianheng said to Xiao Chiye, "My archery skill isn't bad, right? It was Imperial Grandpa who taught me back then!"

Xiao Chiye said sincerely, "I have never seen such a display of archery prowess even in Libei."

Li Jianheng immediately laughed and said, "You have been in Qudu for so long, you couldn't have forgotten how to draw a bow, could you?"

Xiao Chiye had only brought an ordinary bow along. It was not even as good as the ones the Imperial Bodyguards used. He said, "Let me show you my skill too."

With that, Xiao Chiye drew his bow and fired an arrow at the clearing before him. His shot was even weaker than Prince Chu's; it did not even stab into the ground. Blind cheers and exaltation rang out from the sides again. Xiao Chiye reveled in it.

Qian Tianya had already grown impatient waiting behind them. Amused when he saw this scene, he said, “See that? If you don’t train well, you’ll be treated like a fool!”

Looking at Xiao Chiye’s shoulders and arms, Shen Zechuan was once again reminded of that piece of bone thumb ring. He could not help but smile.

Prince Chu had not ridden for long when his back ached. It dampened his willingness to go further. This was the result of having too much to drink last night. At the moment, he was not feeling well all over. He led the horse and wandered around aimlessly for a while, enduring it until it was almost time before he urged his men back.

The guards at the back had not even finished shooting all their arrows when they escorted him back like a gust of wind. They did not even head to the forest in the east.

Li Jianheng dismounted the horse and kneeled before the Emperor. At the side, Pan Rugui made an inventory count of the prey for Emperor Xiande. The more Li Jianheng heard, the more pleased he was. He said, “Imperial Elder Brother! There’s even a red fox. What an excellent fur color. It’ll make the perfect fur collar for you.”

Emperor Xiande was pleased too. He said, “I feel even more spirited now than I was back in Qudu! Pan Rugui, give the stuff to Prince Chu.”

Li Jianheng lifted the silk fabric with great delight, only to see a great bow no ordinary man could draw presented underneath. He instantly lost interest, although he still had to say, “Thank you Your Majesty for the reward!”

Emperor Xiande laughed and coughed a few times before saying, “You don’t like it? This isn’t meant for you to use either. This bow was left behind by the Great Ancestor Emperor<sup>1</sup> in the early years. It’s made of black iron coupled with keel and weighs one hundred and twenty catty.<sup>2</sup> Even the current Four Great Generals cannot draw it. Bestowing it upon you is because I want you to be diligent at all times. When you face this bow, remember the hardships of the Great Ancestor Emperor in his great undertaking to establish the Empire.”

Li Jianheng acknowledged his words and called for his men to carry the bow away.

During dinner, Emperor Xiande called Li Jianheng over to sit with him and leaned against him. This was a hint that could not be any more obvious.

All the officials present knew it, but they still had to play dumb because Secretariat Elder Hua, Hua Siqian, was still on an equal footing with Prince Chu.

Once everyone had their fill of wine and food, a bonfire was started.

Emperor Xiande had not retreated this whole day, and so all those present could not leave either. Li Jianheng had already grown tired of sitting, but then, he saw that Emperor Xiande still had no intent to retreat for a rest.

What's going on?

Li Jianheng cast a questioning gaze at Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye pretended not to notice.

By this time, the singing and dancing had already receded, and the flame of the bonfire was raging. Emperor Xiande suddenly gathered his clothes and called out, "My dear minister Hai."

Hai Liangyi tidied his robe and respectfully kneeled before the Emperor to answer, "This old subject is here!"

Emperor Xiande asked, "What were you going to do today?"

Hai Liangyi kowtowed and replied, "This old subject would like to recommend the Chief Supervising Secretary of the Six Ministries' Office of Scrutiny for Revenue, Xue Xiuzhuo, to be given the authority to submit a petition before Your Majesty!"

Hua Siqian had already sensed something going on. He stroked his beard and said, "Renshi, why put it in such a way? To begin with, the Chief Supervising Secretary has the authority to remonstrate directly with His Majesty."

"That may be so." Hai Liangyi said, "But Xue Xiuzhuo's memorial<sup>3</sup> has repeatedly failed to reach His Majesty. He might as well seek a direct audience with His Majesty."

"How could there be a memorial that couldn't make its way to His Majesty?" Hua Siqian asked.

Emperor Xiande said, "I'm curious too. My dear minister Hai, call him up to say his piece."

Having received the command, Pan Rugui exchanged looks with Hua Siqian and strode two steps out to call out, "Summon the Chief Supervising Secretary of the Office of Scrutiny for Revenue, Xue Xiuzhuo, for an audience with His Majesty!"

Xue Xiuzhuo was not wearing his official robe. He looked travel-worn as though he had just dismounted from his horse. He did not look at anyone when he made his way up. Instead, he kneeled first to kowtow and pay his obeisances to Emperor Xiande.

“What do you have to report?” Emperor Xiande asked amid the wind.

Xue Xiuzhuo said, “This subject is the Supervising Secretary of the Office of Scrutiny. My key task is to audit the financial affairs of the Ministry of Revenue in minute details. In the third month of the fifth year of Xiande,<sup>4</sup> this subject audited the expenditure ledger for the fourth year of Xiande and discovered a subsidy of 2,000,000 taels recorded. For the sake of prudence, especially in the light of the Ministry of Revenue’s statement that it was a “subsidy to the Thirteen Cities of Juexi“, this subject personally made a trip to Juexi. The Provincial Administration Commissioner of Juexi, Jiang Qingshan, conducted a reconciliation of the accounts with this subject and discovered that out of the subsidy allocated in the fourth year of Xiande, only 1,530,000 taels had been given to Juexi for real. The remaining 470,000 taels had vanished without a trace. Following this, in the eighth month of the same year, the Ministry of War disbursed the salaries and provisions to the troops at the frontiers. The Ministry of Revenue allocated 2,800,000 taels for this purpose. Of that amount, 1,800,000 taels were for Qidong Five Commanderies Garrison Troops, and 1,000,000 taels were for Libei Great Commandery. But by the time this subject chased the money to Luoxia Pass after it was handed down, there were only 830,000 taels left! And this goes on, incident after incident. The deficit of the State Treasury is such a huge sum. Where has all the money gone? Who took them? Elder Secretariat Hua may be unsure, but this subject has the records to submit for His Majesty’s perusal!”

“You are spouting nonsense!” Hua Siqian denounced him in a cold tone. “The Ministry of Revenue has to reconcile the accounts at the beginning of the year right in the palace itself! How is it that you just had to be the one to know when the Minister of Revenue, Grand Secretariat, and the Brush-holding Director of the Imperial Palace’s Directorate of Ceremonial all had no idea that there was a deficit?!”

Hai Liangyi raised his head and said in a steady voice, “This old subject knows! Starting from the second year of Xiande, the account books submitted by the Ministry of Revenue have been split into real and fake

copies. When it comes to deciding what is handed over every year, it's not the Minister of Revenue's words that counts, but yours, Hua Siqian!"

The "crackle" of the bonfire exploded like a sudden burst of thunder that struck everyone present into silence. None of them had expected Emperor Xiande to raise tough questions in such a manner so suddenly.

"Fine." Hua Siqian laughed and slapped the table to get up. "So you are making up wild charges now? What Hua Faction?! All the lands in the world belong to the Emperor. I, Hua Siqian, have been open and aboveboard in everything I have done. All along, I've placed His Majesty first! If there are any dubious accounts, take them out now. Zheng Guoshi, tally it with him!"

The Minister of Revenue, Zheng Guoshi, knelt down in a fluster and said, "Your Majesty, this subject would like to ask Chief Supervising Secretary Xue a question. Since it's the accounts for the Fourth Year of Xiande that has a problem, why did he wait until today to bring it up? If there is truly a problem with it, then wouldn't he have held up a major issue!"

Xue Xiuzhuo quickly said, "Nowadays, the local officials who have entered the capital do not meet their superiors nor pay obeisance to Your Majesty. Instead, they first send a visitation card<sup>5</sup> and head over to the Hua Residence and Pan-gonggong's secondary residence to pay their respects. The Hua Faction is so powerful and influential. It may well be asked who still wouldn't dare to follow the lead of Secretariat Elder Hua?!"

"Every year, I have to tell the delegated Investigating Censors to just voice it out if there is a problem! What do I have to fear?! The account ledgers of my Hua Clan have all been presented before His Majesty; it's all clear and aboveboard!" Hua Siqian stared at Xue Xiuzhuo. "Xue Yanqing, do you still remember who gave you a recommendation when you had to enter Qudu to be an official during the years of Yongyi? I could be partially considered your teacher, and yet you framed me like this!"

Xue Xiuzhuo raised his head and met Hua Siqian's eyes for a moment. He said, "On the imperial court, there is only the ruler and his ministers; there is no teacher and his student."

Hua Siqian turned to Emperor Xiande and asked, "Does Your Majesty believe it?"

Emperor Xiande lowered his eyelids and said, "I believe the accounts."

Hua Siqian raised his head and burst out laughing. He joined his palms together and said, "Fine! Your Majesty, it was a turbulent period in Qudu back then, and the former Emperor chose you on his deathbed. Do you still remember who was the one who supported you, who protected and escorted you all the way?! But tonight, you believed it because of a few disloyal and unfilial scums?!"

Emperor Xiande raised his hand to drink the tea. He finally looked at Hua Siqian. With his eyes brimming with loathing, he said, "Shouldn't you be clear whether that was protecting and escorting or coercing and commanding a prince?"

Hua Siqian suddenly shoved aside the table and said, "Ji Lei!"

The Imperial Bodyguards at the feast drew their blades with a swoosh.

Hai Liangyi said, "The audacity of you to rebel!"

"I wouldn't dare." Hua Siqian said. "But you are already forcing the blades right at me now. Surely you don't expect me to sit and wait to be killed, do you?"

"What do you want?" Emperor Xiande said coldly, "Xi Gu'an!"

The Eight Great Training Divisions suddenly strode a step forward to stand before the Emperor.

"Take down Hua Siqian!" Emperor Xiande commanded.

"Don't you dare!" Hua Siqian bellowed. "Xi Gu'an, your wife and child are now having tea with the Empress Dowager. If you dare to take another step forward, the lineage of the Xi Clan will be severed! The Empress Dowager has treated you well over the years, but you have been repeatedly instigated by others. It is still not too late for you to turn back."

Xi Gu'an had originally been forced and left without a choice. Now, he took a slight step back, afraid.

Emperor Xiande said in a sinister voice, "Not too late? Xi Gu'an, was it not too late for the former Crown Prince? Was it not too late for Shen Wei? Which of them weren't more loyal than you were?! They retreated, but did the Empress Dowager let them off? I have already asked them to draft an imperial edict. As long as Prince Chu ascended to the throne in the future, the daughter of the Xi Clan will be the Empress of the Empire!"

"It has already become a usual practice for His Majesty to issue and rescind his orders. And you still dare to harbor such wishful thinking?!" Hua Siqian flicked his sleeves. "His Majesty has gone muddle-headed from

his illness! Imperial Concubine Wei is already half-a-month pregnant, so how can Prince Chu ascend to the throne?!"

Xi Gu'an gripped his blade. His forehead was drenched in sweat.

Layers and layers of dark clouds had already shrouded the night sky. The wind before the eve of a rainstorm ceased too. Banners of flags at the hunting grounds flapped. No one moved.

Gritting his teeth, Xi Gu'an drew out his blade and turned to Emperor Xiande. With some difficulty, he said, "The illness of His Majesty is... beyond cure."

"I gave you a chance." Emperor Xiande looked at Xi Gu'an and gradually began to laugh. The more he laughed, the louder he became. And the louder he was, the more he coughed. He braced himself against the table and said frostily, "If I did not have total confidence when I came to this Autumn Hunt, then how could I hunt down and kill treacherous ministers and traitors like you?! Qi Zhuyin is already leading the troops over to come to my aid. She should be here within four hours! So who are you killing? Hm? Who dares to?!"

Ji Lei suddenly piped up. "Commander-in-Chief Qi is far away in the Cangjun Commandery in Qidong. The Imperial Bodyguards are responsible for all incoming and outgoing correspondences. Your Majesty, it's time for you to wake up from your dreams!"

Emperor Xiande glared furiously at him and said, "Qi..."

Pan Rugui suddenly covered Emperor Xiande's mouth and forced him to sit down. He looked around the crowd and smiled. "His Majesty is having a relapse of his illness."

All the civil servants' legs were trembling. Hua Siqian looked at Li Jianheng and grinned nastily as he said, "Prince Chu harbored the intent to stage a revolt at the hunting grounds. He even brought a bow and arrows along. The evidence against him is conclusive! What are you waiting for? Kill him!"

Except for the guards beside him, the cold gleams of blades suddenly erupted all around.

Li Jianheng dropped his chopsticks in shock. As he retreated, he tumbled onto the ground along with his seat. He said, "Secretariat, Secretariat Elder! I have no intent to proclaim myself the Emperor!"

"Your Highness." Hua Siqian said, "Do you know how the four words, 'in spite of oneself' is written?"



Thunder exploded in the sky.

Hearing the swarm of footsteps towards him, Li Jianheng hid among his guards. He could not even stand up as he said in a teary voice, “I’m an idle prince by nature! So why go to such an extent?”

The gleam of a blade flashed past before him, and Li Jianheng held his head and yelled. But then, he heard a tremendous crash, and the table before him overturned with a “bang”. Someone gripped his back collar and lifted him up.

“His Majesty bestowed the Conqueror Bow upon you, and so you are the Crown Prince of Dazhou!” Xiao Chiye let out a sinister smile. “As the Viceroy of the Imperial Army in Qudu, I, Xiao Ce’an, want to see who will meet their fates under this blade of mine! Chen Yang, help the Crown Prince up the horse!”

“Xiao the Second.” Ji Lei slowly drew out his blade. “On account of the friendship between us, do you have to do this tonight?”

“I’ve been fooling around for so long.” Xiao Chiye released Li Jianheng. “I’m itching for a fight.”<sup>6</sup>

“Capture him.” Ji Lei said, “As long as there is no danger to the Second Young Master’s life, it’s fine to break his arms and legs.”

Xiao Chiye took off his cumbersome outer robe, only to reveal a body-fitting *jinzhuang*<sup>7</sup> underneath. He cast a glance around and said, “Whoever is able to break my arms and legs, I will not only award him a hundred taels of gold, but also call him Master.”

Langli Blade, which had almost never once left its sheath in Qudu, steadily slid out. Inch by inch, light the color of snow glinted, along with a frosty, murderous aura that intimidated.

“But if he can’t break them, then his life is forfeited.”



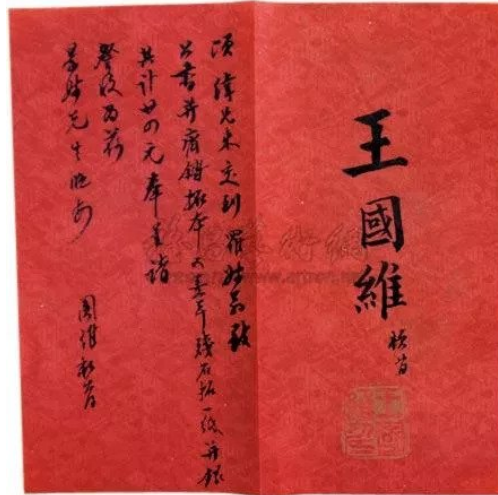
Credits: Many thanks to saed (@[saedee\\_](#)) for helping with maths because the only maths I can do is  $\text{Cang Ji} + \text{Me} = \text{Babies}$

#### Footnotes

1. 太祖(皇帝) Great Ancestor (Emperor), a posthumous title for the founder of a dynasty.
2. 斤 catty, or *jin*. A unit of weight. 1 catty equal to 0.5kg.



- 3.
4. 折子 *zhezi*, also 奏折 *zouzhe*, is a memorial presented to the Emperor in folded, accordion form
5. This is the name of an era during which a specific Emperor (Emperor Xiande, in this case) reigned.



- 6.
7. 名帖 (also 拜帖), a name card (or visitation card) written on paper or wood used by officials, nobles or distinguished people to notify the other party of their visit. It would usually indicate his name, position, and so on. It's like a name card in the modern world.
8. 皮痒 actually a colloquial term that refers to someone who is asking for a spanking/beating.



9.

10. 劲装 *Jin Zhuang* is a more body-fitting outfit (compared to the usual loose, flowing robes) with the sleeves secured to make movements easier and less restrictive. It's usually worn by martial arts practitioners to facilitate combat.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 23 : DOWNPOUR



A gale assailed across the grass of the hunting grounds. The instant the flame leaped, the sudden sound of blades colliding against one another erupted.

The feast was thrown into chaos. Hai Liangyi climbed up from the ground. With a burst of unexpected energy, he slammed headlong into Pan Rugui and bellowed, “Castrated traitor! Don’t hurt my Lord!”

Li Jianheng was on the horse, trembling all over as he watched the glinting and flashing display of cold steels. Clinging on to the horse’s neck, he closed his eyes and cried out, “Ce’an! Ce’an, save me!”

All of a sudden, Xiao Chiye kicked Ji Lei back into a retreat. Without even looking back, he backhandedly stabbed the Imperial Bodyguard who was attempting to launch a sneak attack behind him and snuffed the life out of the latter. Warm blood spattered over half of his body. He pulled out Langli Blade, took two steps forward, and struck the Eight Great Training Divisions soldier charging at him to the ground.

Chen Yang had already flipped atop the horse. He hauled Li Jianheng up, whistled at the top of his voice, and shouted to Prince Chu’s guards, “Follow me to protect His Highness. We’ll break through the siege towards the east!”

Before the horses could move, Ji Lei said in a cold voice, “Stop him—”

Ji Lei had yet to finish his word when he saw a blade slashing down on him. He held up his blade horizontally to block it. The next moment, both his arms sank down heavily as Xiao Chiye’s blow pained and numbed them. A sound escaped from Ji Lei’s throat as the impact sent him staggering. Astonished, he looked before him.

Xiao the Second!

“You played dumb to exploit the situation for your own ends.” Ji Lei crouched abruptly with legs astride and forcibly lifted his blade. He bellowed in fury, “I’ve misjudged you!”

A gust of wind assaulted from the side, and Xiao Chiye turned his head to dodge the attack. He swept the edge of his blade in a diagonal arc on his right, and a stream of glistening blood followed in its trajectory. Following right after, his blade collided with Ji Lei’s once again.

Lang Tao Xue Jin charged in, knocked over the table, and dragged the tablecloth along with it as it galloped through the bonfire. In that moment, the fire surged, setting tents and withered grass on fire. The very instant Lang Tao Xue Jin brushed past him, Xiao Chiye flipped atop its back. With the back of his blade, he swatted the buttocks of the horse Prince Chu was on and said a deep voice, “Go!”

“Protect His Majesty!” Xue Xiuzhuo strode over to pull Hai Liangyi away. “Elder Hai! Let us go to protect His Majesty!”

Emperor Xiande gasped for breath. His lips and face were pale. Xue Xiuzhuo squatted down to hoist Emperor Xiande over his shoulder and fled from the fire along with the other civil officials.

Xi Gu’an wanted to give chase, but Hua Siqian pointed directly at Prince Chu and said, “His Majesty’s fate is sealed, so there’s no need for us to kill or not kill him. But Prince Chu must die tonight! If he escapes, then you and I will be labeled as the traitorous party! Ji Lei, gather the Imperial Bodyguards and join forces with the two thousand Garrison Troops in the City of Tuancheng to surround the hunting grounds. You must kill Prince Chu! Xi Gu’an, hurry back to the capital at top speed! The Eight Great Training Divisions will take charge of protecting Qudu!”

By the time he spoke to this point, he had calmed down.

“We have the imperial heir in our hands, and the Empress Dowager in command. As long as Qudu doesn’t fall into chaos, even Qi Zhuyin herself will not be able to act rashly if Prince Chu dies! As for the Xiao Clan, there will be plenty of opportunities to deal with them in the future!”

The stench of blood on Xiao Chiye was thick and heavy. His lips were tightly pursed as he killed everyone in his path the entire journey. Whoever dared to block his way, Langli Blade would decapitate that person, regardless of whose camp they were in!

Li Jianheng’s stomach lurched. But he covered his lips and did not dare to puke.

The remaining forty men at the sides were all Xiao Chiye’s personal guards. The steed under his legs galloped away without a moment’s pause. Behind them, the Imperial Bodyguards followed hot on their tails.

Just as their group galloped to the front of the forest, Xiao Chiye suddenly commanded, “Scatter!”

The remaining forty men tore off their guard attires in unison to reveal riding outfits that were exactly the same as Li Jianheng’s. Then, the

procession dispersed with a loud clamor and charged into the forest from various spots.

With dark clouds shrouding the moon, there was no way anyone could tell the direction in which Prince Chu had fled under the darkness, especially from a distance away.

Ji Lei reined in his horse outside the forest and turned his head aside to spit. He said, "Surround the hunting grounds! Dig deep and search! If you encounter Xiao the Second, don't engage him in a one-on-one fight. Form a team of at least four men and attack him from all sides!"

Branches kept whipping across his face, hurting Li Jianheng so much that he kept using his arm to shield his face. The surrounding guards had already dispersed, leaving only Xiao Chiye and Chen Yang beside him.

"Dismount." Xiao Chiye lifted Li Jianheng and threw him to the ground to let Chen Yang take over.

Li Jianheng tumbled until even his head was soiled with dirt and earth. He said in a plaintive voice, "Ce'an, Ce'an, what are you going to do?"

"Your Highness, please follow me." Chen Yang pulled Li Jianheng up. "It's too conspicuous to travel on a horse through the forest! The Imperial Bodyguards are experts at encirclement and assassination. Riding a horse is like being a live target. We can't take this risk!"

"I'm not leaving!" Li Jianheng fearfully yanked his arm back and pleaded, "Ce'an, you are the only one who can protect me!"

Xiao Chiye said, "Knock him out and carry him away!"

With that, he turned the horse around without waiting for Li Jianheng to reply and galloped away deeper into the forest.



Lightning flashed in the sky, illuminating the sinister forest with layers upon layers of spooky shadows. The sounds of horses' hooves, of blades being drawn, and of men dashing rang out in succession. The only thing missing was the sound of people speaking.

A whiff of the impending rainstorm wafted through the dark night. Xiao Chiye did not know how long he had been fleeing for. Lang Tao Xue Jin gradually came to a halt.

Dead silence suddenly descended all around.

Raindrops came pelting down from the sky, and a drop shot down before Xiao Chiye's eyes. The darkness, amid that soundless drip, looked as if a monstrous creature was creeping slowly out of it. Countless Imperial

Bodyguards stalked towards Xiao Chiye like a tightly woven net of oppressive darkness spreading towards him.

No one gave orders.

Rain pattered down, and the sharp end of a Xiuchun Blade<sup>1</sup> sliced through the water droplets. In the twinkling of an eye, it reached the side of Xiao Chiye's neck.

At the same time Xiao Chiye bent his head, Langli Blade left its sheath. With a "clang", the back of the blade halted the retracting momentum of the Xiuchun Blade. He pressed Langli Blade back into its sheath again. There was an ear-piercing sound of scraping as the damaged sharp edge of the Xiuchun Blade cracked. Along with its master, it was kicked back. Both tumbled and fell into the rainwater.

Numerous figures abruptly leaped up from all four sides of his horse.

Xiao Chiye clapped his palm on the back of the horse. His entire body leaped out of the saddle, and once again, Langli Blade left its sheath. This time, the glint of the blade swept across, splitting open skin and flesh in a ring around him. Blood spattered onto his face and trickled down to his chin along with the sound of human bodies dropping.

Xiao Chiye landed back onto the back of the horse but did not sit on it. Instead, he maintained a crouching posture with the edge of his blade partially sheathed.

The sound of breathing. The pattering of rain.

In this pitch-dark night where one was as good as blindfolded, Xiao Chiye had already used his ears and hearing to its maximum capacity. Not one of the Imperial Bodyguards who had been wounded earlier made a sound. Those closely woven footsteps circled around him a short distance away, forming an indestructible encirclement with him in its center.

He who was impatient right this moment would expose his weakness.

Xiao Chiye waited in silence, and it was in this moment that Qiao Tianya, who was hiding in the darkness, truly realized what being a lone wolf meant.

Xiao Chiye was so unhurried and calm that it was as if the more precarious and dangerous the situation he found himself in, the more cool-headed and unpredictable he could be. And that blade of his was the fangs he bared this very night.

Qiao Tianya felt a rare sense of restlessness. The source of this fretfulness came from his order not to kill Xiao Chiye. It was far harder to

trap and thwart this kind of dangerous predator than to kill him. Because more often than not, there was only one chance they had to get close to him. If they could not take him down, then they would end up slaughtered by this man.

Qiao Tianya closed his eyes. When he opened them again, ruthlessness brimmed in them.

He pulled out his own Xiuchun Blade and took a step out. The next moment, there was a flash of his figure as he burst into action and hacked down on Xiao Chiye's back with a lightning move of his hand.

Xiao Chiye reversed his blade to parry the blow and turned around to kick Qiao Tianya on his abdomen. The men from the remaining three sides slashed their blades down on him in unison. He stopped the blades with one arm, but someone saw an opening on his left and sliced the sharp end of his blade towards his face. Xiao Chiye struck his elbow at the side of the blade. The blade swung sideways along with Xiao Chiye's elbow as he slammed the other man in the face with it and sent the latter flipping over to the ground.

Once again, Qiao Tianya followed closely on his heels.

The rain fell in torrents. There was no shouting, only the sound of blades. Rainwater had scrubbed away at Xiao Chiye's facial features until they looked all the more ferocious. In this never-ending encirclement, he maintained the acuity that was specific to him and him alone. Time and time again, he warded off the onslaught of assault led by Qiao Tianya, moving in the darkness as though he was treading on thin ice.

Qiao Tianya pressed on with his offensive. They were indeed experts at drawn-out encirclement. Was a lone wolf terrifying? They just had to surround him and wear down his patience and calmness into nothingness. He would surely reveal a weak point once they tire him out with their never-ending attacks!

Pressure from the intense flurry of blades gradually made Xiao Chiye breathless. The downpour masked some of the finer details in the surroundings, like the crossbow being pulled out under the cover of darkness.

The more Xiao Chiye fought, the more fierce he was. The blood under his blade flowed endlessly. But all of a sudden, Qiao Tianya waved his hand and led the group of black shadows into a withdrawal, plunging Xiao Chiye



once again into a silence without human voices to rattle his soaring fighting spirit.

The rainwater glided across the back of his hands. Xiao Chiye could no longer hear the footsteps. Heavy rain drenched him thoroughly. Under him, Lang Tao Xue Jin anxiously treaded its hooves.

“Twang.”

The sound from the crossbow trigger was very soft, yet Xiao Chiye seemed as though he had heard a deafening sound. He suddenly slapped his horse. Lang Tao Xue Jin leaped away, but he rolled off the horse instead. In a flash, there was a succession of “thud, thud, thud” as a row of short arrows stabbed into the muddied water behind him.

Xiao Chiye wiped away the rain on his face, only to hear the sounds of “twang” from all directions. He leaped up at once and darted away.

The irritating footsteps followed him relentlessly!

An arrow suddenly grazed Xiao Chiye’s arm. At the same time a gash of blood materialized, he felt a twinge of numbing itch.

Anesthetic!

They were really treating him like a violent beast to subdue and capture!

There was a dip in the terrain ahead. Xiao Chiye sprang up with all his might and leaped across the ditch. He had only just landed on his feet when a sudden gust of chilly wind came assaulting him from the side.

Xiao Chiye seized the momentum to roll forward as a blade hacked down on the spot he was just at. Before the killer could extract his blade, there was a tightness in his throat as Xiao Chiye shoved him down into the muddied water and broke his neck.

A jumble of arrows stabbed into the tree trunk beside him. Before Xiao Chiye could get up, he was suddenly kicked in the back. Caught by surprise by the man behind him, he tumbled into the undergrowth. But in this brief period of oversight, he braced himself against the ground to steady himself.

When Xiao Chiye got a clear look at the man before him, he licked away the traces of blood between his teeth and called out to him as though they were lovers, “Oh, Lanzhou.”

Shen Zechuan was also bracing himself on the ground with a hand. A thin blade was sandwiched between his fingers. He stared at Xiao Chiye in the rain and pounced.

Xiao Chiye's palm was next to the hilt of his blade. But unexpectedly, Shen Zechuan was already right before him. The latter slapped back Langli Blade with one hand and grabbed the front of Xiao Chiye's clothes with the other hand to fling him over to the ground.

Mud splashed all over. Xiao Chiye hooked his arm around the back of Shen Zechuan's neck and turned the freed Langli Blade over and sent it slashing towards Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan immediately pressed his body down and came face-to-face with an upside-down Xiao Chiye. The instant their eyes met, he struck the side of Langli Blade aside with a lightning move of his hand. Blood droplets on the edge of the blade hit his face and slid along his chin to mingle with the rain before dripping onto the center of Xiao Chiye's eyebrows.

The Imperial Bodyguards behind closed in on them. Shen Zechuan wanted to lift his body, but Xiao Chiye slid his palm up to press him down until they could almost hear each other's breathing.

Panting slightly, Xiao Chiye said, "You want to court death with me that much?"

But Shen Zechuan bowed his head and said, "Even a wolf will not be able to run anymore once struck by an arrow. Your movements have slowed down by so much. You can't go on anymore, can you?"

Xiao Chiye's fingers teasingly caressed Shen Zechuan's nape. His thumb slipped to Shen Zechuan's Adam's apple and pressed against it forcefully.

"I can still break a neck like this."

The thick growth of grass rustled as a human figure bore his way out of it. Without even looking, Shen Zechuan raised his hand to toss out his blade. The other party instantly collapsed to the ground. The killing intent in Shen Zechuan's eyes did not recede, but he pushed away Xiao Chiye's touchy-feely hand and dragged him along with him as he slid down the slope.

Qiao Tianya was a little late. By the time he arrived, there were only two corpses. He briefly turned them over for a look and plucked the blade from the throat of the dead man. He narrowed his eyes and said, "This doesn't seem to belong to Xiao the Second... And how did these killers get in? Xiao the Second is the dog leash to hold Libei in check. He cannot die. Wasn't that the fucking consensus?"



## Footnotes



- 1.
2. 绣春刀 Xiuchun Blade is the blade of the Imperial Bodyguards during the Ming Dynasty.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 24 : RAINY NIGHT



Lightning flashed and thunder boomed. Rain poured like curtains of waterfalls.

Qiao Tianya stood up and handed the blade to the man behind him to put away. He said, “Xiao the Second has been hit by an arrow. He won’t be able to make his escape.”

At the bottom of the slope, Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan lay prone in the mud with bated breath.

Right this moment, Imperial Bodyguards were everywhere around them, and there were also unknown assassins in hiding. It would prove to be harder than ascending to Heaven for both men to escape. But breaking through the encirclement was even tougher. The most fatal of all was Xiao Chiye. His left arm, which the arrow had grazed, was going numb. In just an hour, the drug would spread throughout his body and paralyze him.

Qiao Tianya brushed aside the tousled grass with his foot and saw the messy tracks of footprints. He silently raised his hand and pointed down the slope.

Behind him, the Imperial Bodyguards filed out, crouching as they slowly surrounded and edged towards that sunken ditch.

Xiao Chiye’s body tensed as he listened to the approaching sound of men stepping on mud. The hilt of his blade was pressed against his palm. As long as someone jumped down prematurely, he would immediately leap up like a wolf and end the other party in a single blow.

The Xiuchun Blades<sup>1</sup> had already swung their way to the edge of the slope. Xiao Chiye suddenly—was stopped by Shen Zechuan who had grabbed hold of his soaked clothes. He shifted his gaze over and saw Shen Zechuan’s calm eyes.

Right at this moment, several figures suddenly sprang down in the forest to engage the Imperial Bodyguards in a battle. Qiao Tianya drew his sword at them and saw a flash of flying blades. Following right after, a few Imperial Bodyguards toppled to the ground. With their morale boosted, the other party instantly pounced.

Once chaos descended above them, Shen Zechuan kept away the few remaining blades he had left. Without needing him to say more, Xiao Chiye

had already leaped to his feet. He climbed along the muddy slope and rolled into the thick growth of grass on the other side.

“Catch them!” Qiao Tianya bellowed.

The Imperial Bodyguards streaked across the air in a retreat. Xiao Chiye extended and hung his arms up on a tree trunk and swiftly flipped atop it. Below him, Shen Zechuan had only just reached when the Imperial Bodyguards behind him arrived too. Like a ferocious tiger springing down the mountain, Xiao Chiye swiftly hacked down on them with Langli Blade like a heated knife cutting through butter, forcing the crowd of Imperial Bodyguards simultaneously back in a retreat.

Qiao Tianya sprang up from behind and brandished his blade to sweep it towards Xiao Chiye, who could not retract his own blade in time. Xiao Chiye abruptly ducked his head. Then there was a “thud” as the edge of Qiao Tianya’s blade collided into a sheath.

Shen Zechuan pressed his sheath against the other blade. With one foot, he stepped onto Xiao Chiye’s back, whose powerful lift of his own body raised Shen Zechuan’s whole body up to close in towards Qiao Tianya. The thin blade between his fingers on his other hand suddenly went assailing towards Qiao Tianya’s eyes.

Qiao Tianya did not dodge. The Imperial Bodyguards at both sides swiftly cleaved down their blades to obstruct the attack.

Having already gotten up, Xiao Chiye lifted his leg to kick Qiao Tianya right in the chest. Both parties retreated in unison. Qiao Tianya flung off the droplets of blood on his blade. The locks of hair before his forehead had already been sliced off by Shen Zechuan earlier.

Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan took two steps back. Without even saying a word, they turned and ran.

Qiao Tianya stared at their backs and said, “Give chase!”

Xiao Chiye reached out an arm to pull over Shen Zechuan and said, “East!”

Shen Zechuan brushed aside the stray branches and said, “There’s one man in every five steps and a squad in every ten. Not to forget there’s still the Tuancheng Garrison Troops in the east!”

Xiao Chiye slowly retracted his arm. He said resolutely and decisively, “The east is the way out.”

“The gate of death is right before us.” Shen Zechuan backhandedly tossed out his blade, and the soldier hiding in an ambush in the tree

promptly fell headfirst to the ground. When Shen Zechuan passed by him, he conveniently extracted the other party's Xiuchun Blade.

Xiao Chiye backhandedly grasped the hilt of his blade. The next moment, he sliced through the pitch-black night to hold up two blades in the rain. He had already lost all sensations in his left arm. Even the fingers on his right hand were now slightly stiff.

It would be a tough battle tonight!

Shen Zechuan brandished his blade to slay the man, then kicked over the body.

As Xiao Chiye strode forward, he staggered. He suddenly pressed his chest against Shen Zechuan's back and brought him tumbling into the billowing waves of grass and rolling into the stream.

The rain was still falling, and penetratingly cold water scoured their bodies. Xiao Chiye's heavy breathing weighed down beside Shen Zechuan's neck, forming a bizarre duality of scalding heat and icy cold.

"Killing me won't do you any good." Propping himself on Langli Blade, Xiao Chiye raised his body a little. "So I'm counting on you for the rest of the journey."

Shen Zechuan wiped his face with the stream water and said, "There's no point in saving you either."

"You are here to look for Prince Chu." When Xiao Chiye heard him, he pinned him down again. "What's to be done? The Imperial Bodyguards can't ferret him out either. Only I know where he is. You have already missed your opportunity. No doubt the Empress Dowager will fail tonight! Dote on me. I'm your way out."

Shen Zechuan looked back, and the tips of both men's noses came face to face with each other. He said coolly, "I'll hack you to death. We can all just die together."

"You expended so much effort to get out of imprisonment." Xiao Chiye said, "Just to die with me in the name of love?"

"You might as well use that mouth to have a chat with Qiao Tianya." Shen Zechuan grasped hold of Xiao Chiye's hands with his icy fingertips. The next instant, Langli Blade swept back and beat the pursuing troops back for a moment.

Having received an opening, Shen Zechuan lifted his leg to shove Xiao Chiye aside. He grabbed Xiuchun Blade with one hand, carried Langli Blade in the other, and calmed his panting caused by the sprint earlier.

“Put that life of yours on account.” Shen Zechuan looked as Qiao Tianya dashed closer to them and tightened his grip on the blade. “After tonight, I’m your master.”

Snow-white light glinted in the ink-like night. Without giving Qiao Tianya the chance to speak, Shen Zechuan slashed down on him head-on.

Sprays of water splashed along with his footsteps. Every single one of Shen Zechuan’s blow was deadly. As blades collided, the edge of his Xiuchun Blade was damaged. Qiao Tianya flung it aside with his own blade and sent it flying.

The two men instantly separated. Shen Zechuan’s empty left hand soaked in the stream water, which washed away the blood that had trickled down.

“A beauty should sit high behind a curtain in a pavilion.”<sup>2</sup> Qiao Tianya looked as though he had caught a whiff of some scent. “Carrying a blade will hurt the hands. What if you break them?”

Shen Zechuan weighed Langli Blade with his right hand. “Isn’t breaking my hands and legs just the thing to make me compliant?”

“There is a kind of people in this world who cannot be provoked.” Qiao Tianya said. “Men like you who can even be ruthless to your own self.”

Shen Zechuan strode forward to attack.

Langli Blade was heavy, so he could not wield it smoothly and effortlessly enough. But being heavy had its own advantage. Just like how Qiao Tianya was now too occupied to counteract his blows as he relied on the forcefulness of the Ji Clan Blade Technique to hack away at the former.

As Qiao Tianya retreated, the pressure almost made him fold over backwards. However, the moment he drew near to the stream, he had an ill sense of foreboding. Sure enough, he saw Shen Zechuan’s injured left hand suddenly splashed up from the water. The dirty mud spattered into Qiao Tianya’s eyes, causing him to momentarily expose a weak point. Then, his chest received yet another heavy blow as Shen Zechuan kicked him down and sent him crashing into the stream.

When reinforcements arrived, Shen Zechuan retreated a few steps. He would definitely not persist in engaging in combat, so he started dragging Xiao Chiye in an attempt to leave. How could he have expected Xiao Chiye to be so tall with such long legs that he could barely hoist him away?



The search intensified, and time passed particularly slowly.

Everyone they found in the entire forest was all smokescreens. What's more, they were well-trained men who would give their lives for the cause. Once they fell into the Imperial Bodyguards' hands, they would take their own lives by biting off their tongues to deny Ji Lei of the chance to interrogate them.

Exactly where was Prince Chu?

Only Xiao Chiye knew!

"Little bastard!" Somewhat frustrated, Ji Lei rose to his feet to survey the place. "Get Tuancheng Garrison Troop search along the hunting grounds!"



Shen Zechuan climbed out of the water and dragged Xiao Chiye out. But this slope was too steep. He bit down on Xiao Chiye's back collar and hauled, finally dragging him up.

The wound on Shen Zechuan's left hand bled incessantly. He tore his clothes, rinsed it in the water, and wrapped it around the wound.

Xiao Chiye leaned against the moss-covered rock and said, "There's a handkerchief in my bosom."

Shen Zechuan reached into the clothes on his chest and fished out a handkerchief that was a pile of mud. He squeezed out all the muddy water onto Xiao Chiye's chest.

Xiao Chiye asked, "When will the effects of this drug pass?"

"Two hours. Soon."

"Crouching in a tree is better than taking cover in the water." Xiao Chiye looked at him and saw that he was soaked to the skin. His back collar was slightly open, and there were still specks of mud on his neck. The contrast between them was very...

"The Imperial Bodyguards have offices for domesticating beasts. Animals can smell the scent of blood." As Shen Zechuan spoke, he lowered his head and took a light sniff of the fingertip that had bled earlier.

Very seductive.

Xiao Chiye watched him.

What sorcery was this? This man was still wielding a blade to kill earlier, and he wasn't acting like a woman, so why had he thought of such a term?

He must have really been possessed by Li Jianheng! Harp, harp, harp. The latter had kept harping on and on about this every day that even he



himself had come to think and see it this way, just like those old men in Qudu with their special fetishes.

“Your swordsmanship is pretty good.” Xiao Chiye’s gaze looked as though they could peel off Shen Zechuan’s back collar. “You must have trained hard in the temple. And yet one can’t tell from your body’s physical appearance alone. Did you use medicine on yourself?”

Shen Zechuan looked askance at him. Following his gaze, he raised his hand to touch the back of his neck. He asked in response, “How many times a day do you have to look at it? Are you that obsessed with it?”

Xiao Chiye licked the residual taste of blood with the tip of his tongue and said, “The way you put it is so ambiguous. You make it sound like I’m a lecherous ghost.”

Shen Zechuan reached over and covered Xiao Chiye’s face with the dirty handkerchief and said, “I thought you only fool around with women and courtesans. I never expect you to have a taste for both men and women.”

Xiao Chiye said, “What’s this flirting? This Second Young Master just wants you to wipe the mud off your neck.”

“Do you want me to wipe it?” With the handkerchief serving as a partition, Shen Zechuan’s fingertip stopped between Xiao Chiye’s eyebrows. “Or do you want to wipe it for me?”

Icy cold rainwater trickled down along his fingers and dripped between Xiao Chiye’s eyebrows. As if they had fully absorbed that alluring temptation, the droplets that dripped all blossomed into ripples of water that flowed tide after tide into his collar, stirring up in him a wet, ticklish restlessness.

Xiao Chiye wanted very much to drink some water. At the same time, he wanted Shen Zechuan to stay a little farther away from him.

After a moment of silence, he smiled and said, “You sure are something.”

“You think too much.” Shen Zechuan tightened his collar around him, held his blade, and spoke no further.

The rain gradually abated.

The barking of hounds in the woods rang out from afar. Neither man moved. This rock was propped against the side of the stream, and it was covered with shrubs above. It was an exceptionally small and narrow hiding-place, large enough for just one man.

Xiao Chiye waited for quite a while, listening as the man leading the hound closed in on them. Shen Zechuan wedged Langli Blade in midair and crouched over to climb his way in from below.

Xiao Chiye felt a weight on his body as that man edged along his legs to his chest. Both men squeezed, body to body, into this narrow space. Xiao Chiye could feel the heat of their thighs rubbing against each other when the other man straddled him. He could also feel the latter's breathing as he leaned in close beside his temple.

Xiao Chiye covered his eyes. In the darkness, he could freely visualize Shen Zechuan's posture. He could not shake off the image of that white-as-lotus-root neck either.

"I beg of you." Xiao Chiye sighed. "Sit on my stomach. Don't sit farther down."

Shen Zechuan did not move, because the rustling sound above came closer.

Xiao Chiye adjusted his breathing. But if he raised his head up in this posture, he could touch Shen Zechuan's chin. Move down a little, and the tip of his nose could nuzzle along the contour of that neck.

Shen Zechuan was originally listening attentively to the movements when he suddenly lifted Xiao Chiye's handkerchief to look at him without saying a word.

Xiao Chiye was also looking at Shen Zechuan. He did not know if the scent of blood tonight had gone to his head, or whatever it was that was going on. In any case, that gradually hardening part of his was pressing up against the man above. It made both men uncomfortable. Fabrics that had been soaked through by rainwater clung so closely to their skins that it was akin to physical contact between bare skins. It was as if he shifted just a little more, he would be intentionally creating friction to ignite a fire.

The hound above was still sniffing around.



P/s: for those who haven't seen it yet, there's a [Revised Character Clan Chart](#) for those still confused about the characters in the novel and their clans as well as departments/divisions in the imperial court. Use the chart with the [Character Guide](#) for more details about a character. Note that this is only for characters who have appeared up to chapter 23. (This is to avoid spoilers and also to avoid confusing readers further). The clan chart and

character guide will likely be updated at various stages in the future as more characters appear and alliances change.

#### Footnotes



- 1.
2. 绣春刀 Xiuchun Blade is the blade of the Imperial Bodyguards during the Ming Dynasty.
3. The impression here is one of a noblewoman or enchanting beauty who sits high and pretty behind a hanging screen in a pavilion, far removed from things like battles. Kind of like sitting pretty like a doll on a shelf. (I'm keeping to the original quote to preserve the imagery of it).

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 25 : DAYBREAK



Human feet trampled over the shrubbery. As though it had smelled something, the hound nudged aside the branches and leaves with its snout and pawed at the ground.

Shen Zechuan was doused with dirt all over his neck. Moving up or down were both out of the question, so he could only remain frozen in position.

Xiao Chiye felt even more uncomfortable. This posture made it hard for him to loosen up. Every single moment, he was in constant contact with firm, delicate skin. The man riding on his body was not a person at all, but a mass of clouds enveloping him like wet mist—ubiquitous, and all-pervasive.

This atmosphere whipped him up. The place he had not relieved for a long time remained in high spirits. It was so hard he just wanted to take a cold shower right at once.

Raindrops splashed his hair wet.

In this endless stalemate, Xiao Chiye finally regained some of his strength. His fingers twitched as the sense of numbness slowly receded.

The man above their heads finally moved away, but Shen Zechuan's tensed body did not relax. Pressing up against each other in a corner of this danger zone turned it into another precarious situation concerning their safety in another way.

Keeping his cool, Xiao Chiye did not shift his eyes away.

He could not look away. He only had to show just a fraction of evasiveness and it would look like he really had a thing for Shen Zechuan.

"You are pressing me too tightly." Xiao Chiye said nonchalantly.

Shen Zechuan did not reply.

For the first time, Xiao Chiye knew how to read the words "he who rides a tiger finds it difficult to dismount".<sup>1</sup> He wanted to raise his head and gasp for air, but he did not do so, because doing so would look like he was a rascal who was too impatient to even wait.

He swore that he did not have that intention.

It was just that they were too close to each other. He was instinctively bewitched by this minute touch and distinctive scent, and his body

consequently submitted to the impulses of his bestial desires.

Xiao Chiye felt Shen Zechuan sliding down along his chest. The very instant Shen Zechuan separated from him, he breathed out a light sigh of relief as if he had been relieved of a huge burden.

But before he was done heaving his sigh of relief, his collar tightened around him. His person rose, scraping against the moss before he was hurled into the stream without warning.

Before Xiao Chiye landed in the water, he backhandedly grasped hold of Shen Zechuan's wrists. Then he lifted his leg to hook and trip Shen Zechuan. Just as Shen Zechuan fell into the stream too, Xiao Chiye rolled over, lifted Shen Zechuan's wrists, and heavily pinned him under his body.

"We have already done the amorous stuff." An uncompromising Xiao Chiye refused to let Shen Zechuan move. "Isn't it too unrighteous to raise your hand at me now?"

The ten fingers on both of Shen Zechuan's clasped hands were slightly parted, and his hair scattered in the water. He could only gasp for breath with his chin slightly raised. Pulling at the corners of his lips slightly, he said, "It's not a good choice to force yourself upon others."

"I don't have that intention." Xiao Chiye itched so much to crush every word into pieces with his teeth.

Shen Zechuan pressed his knee against him and looked at him with a meaningful gaze.

With a hint of forbearance in Xiao Chiye's expression, he hung his head down and shook his dripping wet hair. The water droplets spattered over Shen Zechuan's face. Without waiting for Shen Zechuan to react, he had already reached out his hand to rub the back of Shen Zechuan's neck ruthlessly and stubbornly until that bit of mud that was always on his mind was all but rubbed away. Then, he fastened Shen Zechuan's collar tightly and securely around him..

"Rainy nights are wet and cold." Xiao Chiye loosened his grip on Shen Zechuan and stepped down from his body. "Take care of your body!"

With that, he dunked his head into the water without giving Shen Zechuan a chance to reply. Water droplets slid down and dripped when he raised his head up again, and he had already more or less calmed down.

Splashing a handful of water, Xiao Chiye grasped his blade up with penetrating eyes and said, "It's almost dawn. Let's go."



Ji Lei noticed that the day was about to break, yet they still had yet to find the man. He could not help but increasingly fret.

Qiao Tianya peeled away the collar of the dead soldier, but he did not find any traces.

“This batch of men are Xiao the Second’s men.” Qiao Tianya squatted down and pondered it. “Every move of his in Qudu cannot escape our eyes. When did he come to raise these kinds of formidable soldiers who have no fear of death?”

“Finding him now is the top priority!” Ji Lei looked toward the northwest of Qudu. “The Eight Great Training Divisions should have already taken control of all the main city gates of Qudu. We mustn’t lose our heads.”

Looking at Ji Lei’s hand that had never once left his blade, Qiao Tianya felt that his restlessness was definitely not just because Xiao the Second and Prince Chu had yet to be found. It seemed as though there was another reason.

“Xiao the Second is the life-saving token.”<sup>2</sup> Qiao Tianya maintained his composure and watched Ji Lei. “Yet there are other assassins thrown into the mix tonight. Does Your Excellency have any idea?”

“The number of people the Xiao Clan has offended isn’t small. Someone wants to fish in troubled waters.” Ji Lei suddenly stared at Qiao Tianya. “How would I know who it is?”

Qiao Tianya spontaneously spread his hands out and said, “We can’t find Xiao the Second at present. Your Excellency, he must have come prepared, that’s why he has slipped from our fingers the entire night. It’s almost dawn now, and he has played us into running around in circles. It seems more like we have fallen into his trap.”

“Fallen into his trap?” Ji Lei furrowed his brows.

“I’m afraid the reason he put himself in danger is to delay time.” Qiao Tianya stood up and looked out into the grassland in the distance. “My guess is that he has reinforcements.”

“The troops on all four sides have not moved. So where is his reinforcement from?”

Qiao Tianya did not answer, because he did not know either.



Xi Gu’an rode his horse back to the capital and found it silent all around when he entered the city gates. With his doubts roused, he drew his

blade while on horseback and asked his deputy general, “Are there any anomalies in Qudu tonight?”

The deputy general came over to lead the horse. Seeing his nervous expression, he replied, “No, it’s all as usual.”

Xi Gu’an said, “Gather the men. Except for those on strict guard duty at the various city gates, all the rest will follow me to encircle and defend the palace!”

With that, he spurred his horse on towards the palace. His wife and son were still in the palace. As long as the night was not over, the Empress Dowager would definitely not let him see his wife and son. So even if he had to risk his own life, he had to ensure the Empress Dowager’s safety.

The deputy general went to deploy his men, but as he led the patrol squad, he came across a group of drunken men from the Imperial Army.

The Eight Great Training Divisions had always looked down upon the Imperial Army. Without getting off his horse, he brandished the whip and cursed, “Scram!”

The vice commander of the Imperial Army was a man with a blade scar on his face. After getting lashed, he unexpectedly grinned and rolled at the hooves of the horse. He shouted, “We are both a part of the garrison guard system.<sup>3</sup> My rank is a little higher than yours. Why did you hit me? How dare you hit me!”

The deputy general sneered, “Lowlife pests of the government coffers.<sup>4</sup> Scram! Don’t hold up the Eight Great Training Divisions from important business!”

The man swiftly turned and rose to his feet in a single move and smiled malevolently at the deputy general. He said, “Important business? The Imperial Army is the important business you will get a taste of tonight!”

He had only just said that when the Imperial Army, whom had been in various stages of drunkenness, drew their swords in unison. The deputy general reined in his horse in shock. The rows of men behind him already had their throats slit.

The deputy general snapped, “Is this a rebellion?! The Eight Great Training...”

The glint from a blade flashed before him, and he instantly fell off the back of his horse. His blood spilled over the ground.

The man kicked the deputy general’s head aside and wiped his blade clean on the deputy general’s chest. He said in a steady voice, “Keep

daydreaming. The political situation has changed. It's time for my Imperial Army to piss on your heads from the top!"

Faint white lines appeared on the horizon. Sunrise was fast approaching.



Qiao Tianya hurriedly drank some water and tossed the water bag<sup>5</sup> in passing to the man behind him. He wiped his mouth and said, "Keep searching."

But then, after he took a few steps, something clicked in his mind. He suddenly turned his head and carefully sized up the subordinates behind him.

Where was Prince Chu hiding?

There was no way he could have escaped out of here, so why had they been unable to find him? Because they had been pursuing "Prince Chu" all night, but it was possible that Prince Chu had already become an Imperial Bodyguard!

Qiao Tianya instantly gave his order. "Inspect the authority tokens!<sup>6</sup> Everyone on the duty record tonight must be verified face to face. Check now!"

The Imperial Bodyguards removed their authority tokens and presented them without exception to the Judge to authenticate against their faces. The Judge<sup>7</sup> checked each token and swept a glance across each man it belonged to. He conducted his check with his photographic memory until the very end of the line.

"Waist token." The Judge raised his eyes and stared at the other party like an eagle. "Hand your authority token over."

The other party pushed his authority token onto the tray, and the Imperial Bodyguard leaning closely next to him suddenly began to tremble. The latter hung his head down, not daring to raise it.

The Judge did not seem to notice. Using his brush, he drew a tick in the book and said, "Which bureau?"

Chen Yang replied, "Office of Ceremonial Swords."<sup>8</sup>

"I haven't seen you during a mission." The Judge said, "First time?"

Li Jianheng trembled so much that Chen Yang knew they could not escape this. He remained unruffled and said, "Strangers at the first meeting, friends at the second. You will find me familiar enough after seeing me a few more times."



The Judge pointed at Li Jianheng with the brush and said, “Waist token .”

Li Jianheng did not manage to pull it off even after a few attempts. The Judge smiled and reached a hand out as if to remove the token for him.

The moment the Judge extended his hand, Chen Yang’s body tensed. Who would have expected Li Jianheng to have already lost heart? As the Judge moved, Li Jianheng flinched back holding his head and cried out involuntarily, “Don’t hurt me!”

—Oh, shit!

Right at this critical moment, they suddenly heard a shrill whistle. Following right after, a horse with a white chest and black back unexpectedly galloped out of the forest. As the day broke, the gyrfalcon finally led the way back, circling in the air towards them.

Hua Siqian heard the movements and saw a troop of military forces galloping across the grassland towards them in an attack. He asked in a stern tone, “The Eight Great Training Divisions?”

But these men had no insignia on their armors. They did not even carry banners.

Knowing that the time had come, Chen Yang immediately supported Prince Chu and said in a loud voice, “Under the protection of the Imperial Army, all those who bear swords before His Royal Highness the Crown Prince will be slain. Move back now!”

Hua Siqian took two steps forward in disbelief. He looked back and shouted, “Prince Chu is being held hostage by traitors. What are you all waiting for?!”

Li Jianheng had no way to retreat. Seeing the Judge pounce on him, he could not help but yell. A long blade that was suddenly tossed out from the forest stabbed into the ground right before Li Jianheng.

Xiao Chiye leaped down, took off his authority token, and threw it into the tray. He said a deep voice, “With the main forces bringing up the rear, who still dares to move?”

Ji Lei had just arrived riding his horse. On seeing this, he bellowed too, “What a load of bullshit! Just a mere Imperial Army—”

The gyrfalcon landed on Xiao Chiye’s shoulder. Xiao Chiye stroked the gyrfalcon as though he was rewarding it. He said, “If Old Ji has the balls to, then try.”

Ji Lei looked towards the grassland again. The vanguards of the Imperial Army had already arrived. Yet there seemed to be no end to the long stretch of military forces behind. The Qidong Cangjun Commandery banner suddenly unfurled, and he saw that the one at the head of the galloping horses was precisely Qi Zhuyin.

Hua Siqian retreated several steps. Holding on to Pan Rugui, and said in a hoarse voice, “The letter to Qidong has been intercepted. How could they so soundlessly...”

“If all the letters in the Qudu have to go through the hands of the Imperial Bodyguards,” Xiao Chiye kept away his blade. “Then how troublesome would that be?”

Seeing that the situation was beyond salvation, Hua Siqian sat on the ground and murmured, “The Empress Dowager is still around...”

“The Empress Dowager is advanced in years. In order to take care of her health, she has already handed all matters pertaining to the patrol and defense of Qudu to the Imperial Army to take charge.” Xiao Chiye had run for the entire night, and now, he pulled up Li Jianheng and said, “Your Highness has been on the move all night. It has been hard on you!”

Qi Zhuyin’s horse had already arrived. She turned to dismount and kneeled to Li Jianheng to pay her obeisances. She said loudly, “Your Highness, do not worry. The 200,000 military forces under Qidong’s command are on full alert. This subject, Qi Zhuyin, will go all out to ensure the safety of Your Highness!”

As if he was in a dream, Li Jianheng looked blankly at Qi Zhuyin, then looked to his left and right. Qiao Tianya was the most discerning and astute. Seeing that the outcome was a foregone conclusion, he immediately kneeled. As soon as he did so, the Imperial Bodyguards discarded their blades and kneeled down one after another in succession.

“... I...”

Li Jianheng clenched his empty palms as though he was clutching on to some life-saving straw. He practically wept with joy. The tears in his eyes trickled down even while he was still muttering.

“Now that I’m the Crown Prince...<sup>9</sup> I’ll surely heavily reward everyone’s great kindness in the future!”



### **Lianyin's Note #1:**

While the author mostly based the novel on the governmental system of the Ming Dynasty with a combination of elements from the Qing Dynasty, please remember that it is a work of fiction after all and is not a 100% precise and factual representation of history itself. Also, some of the offices' names are literally translated if I can't find the corresponding English term for it in my sources. (Which you probably can tell because LiAnYiN sUcKs at nAmiNg ThiNgS).

### **Lianyin's Note #2:**

Chapter 25 onwards are all VIP chapters on JJWXC! If you have enjoyed the novel so far, please support the author Tang Jiuqing by buying the chapters and the novel on JJWXC!

- [Qiang Jin Jiu Novel](#) on JJWXC
- [Guide to buy on JJWXC](#) by 書庫

### Footnotes

1. 骑虎难下, lit. he who rides a tiger finds it difficult to dismount, i.e., to have no way to back down (or find it hard to stop what one is doing).
2. 令牌 Military token of authority
3. 卫所(编制) or 卫所(兵制), *Weisuo*, or the (Military) Garrison (Guards) System was a military establishment during the Ming Dynasty. It was a system where the troops of each garrison were fed by agro-colonies belonging to the garrison and worked by soldiers, while their salary came from the central government.
4. 皇粮 i.e. imperial funding for troops



5.

6. 水囊 water bag, a portable water bag typically made out of animals' hide.



- 7.
8. 腰牌 literally waist tablet or token, it's a small tablet hung at the waist to prove one's identity, especially for people in governmental posts or acting in an official capacity.
9. 镇抚 Judge of the Imperial Prison, which specialized in using torture to suppress corrupt officials. During the Ming Dynasty, there was a Southern and Northern Prison (镇抚司) subordinated to the Imperial Bodyguards. The Southern Prison was in charge of interpreting military laws and managing military craftsmen while the Northern Prison was responsible for cases entrusted by the Emperor.
10. 班剑司 Ceremonial (or motif) Swords was a subordinate organization under the latter Imperial Procession Guards during the Qing Dynasty in charge of ceremonial banners/flags, ceremonial weaponry, and stuff.
11. He actually literally said "I'm the Eastern Palace." 东宫, or Eastern/East Palace is where the Crown Prince traditionally resides. It's also used by extension to refer to the Crown Prince himself.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 26 : FROST



Imperial Concubine Wei was on tenterhooks as she walked. Seeing the unfamiliar palace walls around her, she could not help but ask in fear, “Gonggong, why aren’t we there yet? Where is the Empress Dowager?”

The eunuch walking ahead ignored her.

Imperial Concubine Wei’s hair stood on end in this quiet and secluded place. She stopped in her tracks, then feigned a stomachache and stirred up a ruckus about wanting to head back.

She had never seen this eunuch leading the way before. He looked unfamiliar and young. The eunuch turned his head back to look at her and said in a gentle voice, “We will be there soon. Support Imperial Concubine Wei as she walks. We mustn’t let Niangniang fall.”

The eunuchs on both sides immediately held on to Imperial Concubine Wei to support her. Imperial Concubine Wei started to struggle. She raised her voice to yell, but was gagged. The eunuchs nimbly hoisted her up and speedily walked on ahead.

There was a well in the deserted courtyard, with some water remaining at the bottom of the well.

The eunuch craned his head to look and said, “Right here. Send Niangniang in.”

Imperial Concubine Wei struggled with all her might, and her well-maintained fingernails scratched the arm of the leading eunuch. Her bun was disheveled as she shook her head and sobbed while clinging to the edge of the well.

The eunuch stroked her pretty hand and told the men in a pitying voice to lift the stone.

Then, a “plop” startled away the birds on the branch over the vermilion wall.



Emperor Xiande lay inside the horse carriage, while Li Jianheng kneeled by his side holding a medicine bowl in his hands.

Emperor Xiande’s breathing was so weak that he could not even cough. He beckoned to Li Jianheng. The latter quickly put aside the medicine bowl and moved over on his knees. He said, “Imperial Elder Brother, are you feeling better?”

Emperor Xiande placed his hand on the back of Li Jianheng's hand and said laboriously, "Jianheng."

"Your younger brother<sup>1</sup> is here." Li Jianheng started crying again. He said, "Your younger brother is right here."

"The former emperor, in his later years, was impeded by others. At that time, the Crown Prince of the Eastern Palace was my eldest brother, while I..." Emperor Xiande looked at him, "I was like you, an idle Prince. The ways of the world are unpredictable. In the end, this empire fell into my hands. But ever since I ascended to the throne, I have been under control. Every move I make is just like a puppet before a screen. If Imperial Mother wants me to laugh, then I have to laugh. If she wants me to die, then, I must now die."

Li Jianheng choked with tears.

Emperor Xiande said, "In the future, you will become that lonely man."<sup>2</sup>

All at once, Li Jianheng burst into tears. He held Emperor Xiande's hand and pleaded, "Imperial Elder Brother! How could I be him? I'm just a worm in this Li Clan's empire. How am I up to sitting at the peak? Imperial Elder Brother, I'm scared, I'm so scared."

"Don't be." With a sudden burst of energy, Emperor Xiande held Li Jianheng's hand tightly and opened his eyes wide. "You are different from me... the Empress Dowager's kin<sup>3</sup> have lost! There's only death left for Hua Siqian. Likewise for Pan Rugui. If you kill them, then the Empress Dowager will have no one left to aid her! From then on, power will fall back to you, and you will be... the ruler of all lands under Heaven! What I couldn't do... You can... I..."

Emperor Xiande started coughing so violently that he trembled all over. Unwilling to release Li Jianheng, he continued with blood in his mouth.

"Eliminate the Empress Dowager's kin and supervise the court officials. The Hua Clan has lost. And... and something else... you must bear in mind. Allow no one to sleep too soundly in the bed of imperial power!<sup>4</sup> Those... who save you today... can kill you... tomorrow! Military power is like a fierce tiger... Xiao..."

Emperor Xiande vomited fresh blood, throwing Li Jianheng into a panic.

"... Never..." Emperor Xiande gasped for breath and gripped Li Jianheng so hard that the latter hurt. "Never ever... release... A-Ye..."

Never ever release A-Ye back to Libei!

It did not matter if he was a rich young master or an extraordinary talent. As long as he was here, the Xiao Clan was just a dog. Even though the Empress Dowager's kin have been defeated, it did not mean that the frontier would not assemble their own personal army and consolidate their power to challenge the central administration. Without the Hua Clan, who else could hold the Xiao Clan in check?! Since Xiao Chiye had the disposition to be able to endure it in silence for five whole years to transform the Imperial Army from a degenerate bunch into remarkable soldiers, then imagine if they gave him another five more years before letting him return to Libei... Would he not become a menace then?!

Li Jianheng said blankly, "Imperial Elder Brother... How can we do that... Imperial Elder Brother..."

"Strip him of his power<sup>5</sup> and reduce his troops." Emperor Xiande said weakly, "... When necessary... kill... kill..."

Kill him.

Li Jianheng saw him close his eyes and instantly wailed. Even before his death, Emperor Xiande never released his hand. The resentment and gloom in his expression never once dissipated.

He ascended to the throne for nine years, and he had never made a decision even once before the Empress Dowager. It was the Empress Dowager who had the final say over his meals, clothing, expenses, and even the choice of woman to spend the night in his chamber.<sup>6</sup> The craziest move he had ever made in this life was to communicate secretly with Qidong and draw Xi Gu'an over to his side to pave, at the hunting grounds, what seemed like a smooth way to the throne for Li Jianheng.

The long procession on their way back stopped, and tremendous cries of grief and sorrow rang out. Dense mass of ministers kneeled. Hai Liangyi took the lead in shedding tears and choking with sobs. He cried out, "Your Majesty", and this, was the last of Emperor Xiande's honor.

The funeral bell in Qudu tolled for a very long time, and the entire country wept bitter tears.



Empress Dowager Hua sat on the couch and fed Emperor Xiande's parrot.

Listening to the sound of the bell, the parrot shouted, "Jianyun! Jianyun! Jianyun is back!"

The eastern pearls<sup>7</sup> beside Empress Dowager Hua's ears swayed slightly as she nodded and said, "Jianyun is back."

The parrot then shouted, "Imperial Mother! Imperial Mother!"

Empress Dowager Hua remained motionless as she tapped her wooden spoon. The white hair in the slanting shadow could no longer be covered up, and the fine wrinkles at the corners of her eyes looked like the cracks on valuable porcelain.

The parrot shouted a few more times before it suddenly fell headlong into the cage and went permanently still.

Empress Dowager Hua set aside the wooden spoon and sat quietly until the sound of the bell stopped. Only then she said, "Where's Imperial Concubine Wei? Why is she taking so long to come?"



Because of Emperor Xiande, Xiao Chiye was so busy after returning to the capital that he could hardly get a breather. For several days, he knelt together with the other officials. By the time he could really get to lie down, he was already exhausted.

But even though he was dead beat, he still had to bathe. As Xiao Chiye wiped his body, he saw that the scrapes and grazes on his shoulders had already scabbed over. He put on a new robe and came out to ask Chen Yang, "Where is that man?"

This time, Chen Yang knew who he meant. He replied, "The Imperial Bodyguards are being reorganized, so he has to re-enlist these few days. He didn't even go home much."

"I'm asking..." Xiao Chiye said, "Where is Ji Lei? Who are you talking about?"

Chen Yang scratched his head a little abashedly and said, "Oh, Ji Lei. He's been detained. He should be executed by beheading after the new Emperor ascends to the throne. Viceroy, weren't you the one who locked that man up?"

Xiao Chiye put on his outer garment and said in all seriousness, "I forgot."



Shen Zechuan, Ge Qingqing and Xiaowu were eating their noodles at the noodle stall. When they were halfway through the meal, Xiaowu suddenly stared fixedly ahead.



Shen Zechuan turned his head back and saw Xiao Chiye tossing some silver to the proprietor. He then lifted his robe to sit beside him and said, "Two bowls of noodles."

Xiaowu slurped his noodles down. Holding the bowl, he shuffled on his butt away to another table like a timid quail. Under Xiao Chiye's gaze, Ge Qingqing took his bowl and moved away too.

Shen Zechuan picked at his noodles and said, "I'm full."

"Finish it." Xiao Chiye pulled out a pair of chopsticks and clamped them at Shen Zechuan, "Afraid to see me? Look at how anxious you are to flee."

"Of course." Shen Zechuan slowly took the last bite. "Anyone who gets... pinned down once should be afraid."

"You made your escape pretty fast that other day we were protecting the Emperor." Xiao Chiye's noodles came, and he poured vinegar into it. "It was such a good opportunity for you to get a promotion. Why did you run?"

"I did nothing of the sort." Shen Zechuan blew at the soup and drank it. "So why join in the fun?"

Xiao Chiye started eating his noodles. When he was almost finished, he suddenly piped up, "Come to think of it, you squatted behind me that night for a long time, didn't you? Who to choose? Why not play it by ear? If Xi Gu'an took down Qudu, you will give me a stab. If Xi Gu'an didn't, you will give me a hand. Keeping an eye on the perfect opportunity was just to wait for me to fall that one time before you would make your move."

"Then you're lucky." Shen Zechuan inclined his head and smiled, "You're still alive."

Xiao Chiye said, "You couldn't be the one who shot that arrow at me, could you? If I weren't in a perilous situation, then how could your favor have appeared all the more significant?"

"I didn't even ask for anything in return for the great favor I did." Shen Zechuan said. "Why are you still thinking that I'm plotting against you?"

"It's not asking for anything in return that's the problem." Xiao Chiye did not seem to have eaten his fill. He set aside his chopsticks and said, "That day you dare not appear before Prince Chu, was it because you were afraid of Ji Lei, or because you were afraid Hua Siqian would blurt out something?"

Shen Zechuan stacked his copper coins neatly, then leaned close to Xiao Chiye to whisper, "Wrong. I was afraid of you."

Xiao Chiye parroted, "Afraid of me?"

"That hardness, man."

The human voices around him seemed far away. All that remained in Xiao Chiye's ears was this warm puff of "hard". Because of this word, he realized that Shen Zechuan was wearing a fastened collar today which half-surrounded that neck, denying him of the chance to eye it wantonly again.

His expression underwent a few changes, then he looked at Shen Zechuan and squeezed out two words through clenched teeth, "Don't worry."

"The Second Young Master has come of age now too." Shen Zechuan sat back upright. "Time to get a wife."

"Your Second Young Master has more tricks to play than you." Seeing that he was about to leave, Xiao Chiye grasped his wrist to forbid him from standing up. He said, "You are always wanting to leave before I'm done talking. That's against the rules."

"And you're always laying your hand on me at every turn." Shen Zechuan said, "Tell me again about the rules."

Xiao Chiye released his hand and said, "I'll repay you for the friendly sentiment."

"Call me Master and I'll consider it repaid." Shen Zechuan said.

"But you have to return me the thing." Xiao Chiye said. "Surely you don't want me to keep chasing after you for the thumb ring, right?"

Shen Zechuan tossed the bone thumb ring to him without demur.

Xiao Chiye caught it and said suspiciously, "What kind of conspiracy is this? To think you would return it the moment I said it."

"The way honest people handle matters," Shen Zechuan said, "is just that straightforward."

At this point, there was nothing more to say.

Xiao Chiye watched Shen Zechuan rise to his feet as he turned the thumb ring around with his fingertips. Somehow, he found it too easy.

"Going home?" He asked behind him.

"It's my turn to be on duty tomorrow."

"The Imperial Bodyguards have been reshuffled. So what duty are you talking about?" Xiao Chiye said, "Winter is a difficult time. Take care."

“Small fry like me drift with the current and go with the flow.” Shen Zechuan turned around. “The one who should take care isn’t me.”

Xiao Chiye touched his knuckles and said, “And while you are at it, send my regards to Ji Gang-shifu.”

Shen Zechuan’s leg that had already taken a step forward paused in mid-action as he swiftly stared towards him.

Xiao Chiye wore his thumb ring properly and jested, “Lanzhou, want to go and play together?”



### **Lianyin’s Note #1:**

The [Places Glossary](#) has been updated with maps from the [audio drama](#) team used in the history lesson by Li Jianyun aka Emperor Xiande.

### **Lianyin’s Note #2:**

As mentioned, chapter 25 onwards are all VIP chapters on JJWXC! If you have enjoyed the novel so far, please support the author Tang Jiuqing by buying the chapters and the novel on JJWXC!

- [Qiang Jin Jiu Novel](#) on JJWXC
- [Guide to buy on JJWXC](#) by 書庫

### **Footnotes**

1. 臣弟 *chen-di* is an address the Emperor’s younger brother used to refer to himself when talking to the Emperor.
2. 孤家寡人 – 孤 and 寡人 being used by feudal kings and princes to refer to themselves. So lonely man here refers to an Emperor who is on his own.
3. 外戚 relatives of the Emperor on the side of his mother or wife
4. 帝王权榻，绝不允许他人酣睡 literally allow no one to sleep too soundly in the bed of imperial power. i.e. never allow anyone to revel in the sweet taste of imperial power, or give them too much power and authority. I’m keeping the original bed quote for the imagery \_(:3 ∟ ∟)
5. 削藩 a historical policy by the Emperor or central government to strip powers (especially military powers) from vassal states or conferred princes, dukes, and lords by withdrawing their conferred lands in order to re-consolidate their own power and authority and/or to weaken the other party’s power and authority, e.g. to prevent an uprising.

6. 侍寝 basically to summon his concubines, palace maids, etc, for sexual purposes and to make babies.
7. 东珠 literally eastern pearl, a rare treasure also known as the northern pearl (北珠) or *tana* in Mongolian. During the Qing Dynasty, pearls produced in northeast China were called the eastern pearl to distinguish them from the southern pearl produced in the south. The rulers of the Qing Dynasty regarded the eastern pearls as treasures and used them to inlay their crown and clothing with it to represent authority and honor.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 27 : AUTUMN CHILL



Shen Zechuan immediately smiled and said, “This is no big secret anyway... Goodbye.”

“Why don’t hear me out first?” Xiao Chiye was in a good mood after recovering his lost thumb ring. “Since Ji Gang is your master, then we are fellow disciples. I’m older than you, so it wouldn’t put you at a disadvantage to call me shixiong.”

“The Ji Clan has nothing to do with Libei.” Shen Zechuan’s mind quickly recalled his fight with Xiao Chiye in the snow five years ago. Back then, he had felt a sense of familiarity that kept bugging him.

“Not necessarily so.” Xiao Chiye said, “It’s hard to say for sure when it comes to stuff like affinity.”

Shen Zechuan gestured to Ge Qingqing and Xiaowu and sat back down beside Xiao Chiye. He said, “You checked Ge Qingqing out.”

“I can’t forget it.” Xiao Chiye looked at him, “Five years ago, he fled so fast. Five years later, he’s close to you. How could I not get suspicious of something so glaring? So I took the opportunity to check him out and managed to dig out all about him.”

“What do you want to do?” Shen Zechuan asked with a smile.

“Nothing.” Xiao Chiye raised a finger to point and tap at Shen Zechuan’s eyes. “There’s no need for you to force a smile. We could be considered sworn friends in life and death. So there’s no point in putting on an act of bravado. Your mind is already troubled. Afraid now, huh.”

Shen Zechuan said, “Not quite there yet.”

Xiao Chiye reversed his chopsticks and tapped the table intermittently. He said, “Since Ji Gang is your shifu, then it makes sense for the Imperial Bodyguards led by Ge Qingqing to spare your life back then.”

“You are oversuspicious.” Shen Zechuan looked at the brown oil stain accumulated on the tabletop. “Just because that kick didn’t kill me, your suspicions were roused, and you kept probing into it. You are really dogged.”

“That’s all the virtues I have.” Xiao Chiye said, “And I use them all on you.”

“Since we are from the same school of martial arts,” Shen Zechuan said, “It wouldn’t do for you not to report your shifu’s name, right?”

Bored stiff, Xiao Chiye tossed the chopsticks back into the bamboo holder and said, “Let’s hear you call me shixiong first.”

Shen Zechuan said nothing.

Xiao Chiye said, “Ji Gang could be considered a real man. I sent someone to Duanzhou to make enquiries. Everyone thought he was burned to death—Was he the one who killed Xiaofuzi?”

“Nope.” Shen Zechuan righted the chopstick holder. “My shifu is already advanced in age. How could he have killed him?”

A slight wind rose right then. Neither man moved.

Xiao Chiye said, “You looked like you have done nothing. Yet I feel as if you have done everything.”

“Whether I did it or not, all of you will not let me go.” Propping himself on his stool, Shen Zechuan turned to Xiao Chiye and smiled slowly. He said softly, “Then why don’t I do all the bad things so that you are justified in hating me?”

The next day.

It was only when Xiao Chiye entered the palace that he learned Imperial Concubine Wei was dead.

Li Jianheng had already changed his attire. These days, he had cried until he looked wan and sallow. Seated in a high position, he said, “They said she slipped and fell into the well. They didn’t find her body until last night.”

This slip was really too coincidental.

Seeing no one around, Li Jianheng asked in a whisper, “Ce’an, don’t tell me it’s you...”

Xiao Chiye shook his head.

Li Jianheng seemed relieved. He fidgeted in his seat and said, “Now that I live in the palace, I can see the eunuchs the moment I open my eyes at night. It’s rather scary. They used to call Pan Rugui *Lao Zuzong*,<sup>1</sup> and now this *Lao Zuzong* is still locked up in prison! Ce’an, do you think they will hate me...”

He let loose a stream of grumbles, and they were all about how afraid he was. In the end, he got Xiao Chiye to transfer the Imperial Army over first to take over the key duty of the palace patrol.

Xiao Chiye naturally would not refuse. He stayed for a moment and listened as Li Jianheng said, "Libei has sent a message saying that the Prince of Libei and your eldest brother are on the way here. Ce'an, you'll be able to see them in a few more days."

Li Jianheng was somewhat playing up to him. To think he had to be even more timid than he was in the past, right before he was about to become the master of the lands under heaven. That insufferable arrogance of his seemed to have been worn away during the Autumn Hunt. He had already understood who was in power.

Xiao Chiye did not intend to accept the reward bestowed upon him. His wish was something Li Jianheng could not be any more clearer about. But to date, Li Jianheng had said nothing about letting him back to Libei.

Xiao Chiye's expression remained impassive, but his heart sank.

Five days later, the Prince of Libei entered Qudu.

That day, the autumn rain continued uninterrupted. Xiao Chiye rode his horse out of the city early in the morning and stood in the pavilion where he had seen them off back then. After waiting for four hours, he finally saw several flying eagles materializing out of the sky.

The "Meng" on his shoulder instantly grew excited and charged into the rain to hover and catch up with its brothers and sisters.

The Armored Cavalry galloped over in the rain, looking much like a stroke of thick ink in the water sweeping towards Xiao Chiye. Without waiting for the Armored Cavalry to come nearer, he flipped out of the pavilion and dashed up in the rain to greet them.

"Father!"

Sitting on his horse, Xiao Jiming laughed aloud and said to his father before him, "He looks so tall and strong now. But the moment he sees Father, he shows his real self."

Xiao Fangxu took off his bamboo hat and leaned over to rap on Xiao Chiye's head. He scrutinized him for a moment and said, "You've grown taller."

Xiao Chiye grinned and said, "That's right, dage is almost going to be half a head shorter than me!"

"What a smug lad." Xiao Jiming said, "Ever since he outgrew me, he has to mention it every year we meet."

Xiao Fangxu let Zhao Hui lead his horse away as he dismounted and raised his arms to give his youngest son a sudden hug. Patting him heavily

on the back, he said, "Silly lad!"

The pats made Xiao Chiye smile. He said, "I have been waiting for a long time. Did something happen on the way?"

Zhao Hui said, "The little Young Master caught a chill at home. So the Prince made a detour to Dengzhou to invite the Venerable<sup>2</sup> Yigui back home for a look."

Xiao Chiye said, "Ah Xun is sick? When did it happen? Why didn't dage mention it in the letter?!"

Xiao Jiming said, "It's just something minor. There's Yizhi at home to look after him. Don't worry about it."

Xiao Chiye felt a little disappointed.

Five years ago when he left Libei, his eldest sister-in-law had been pregnant. Now, little Ah Xun was four years old, and he had not even seen him yet. He could only learn of some interesting tidbits of his little nephew from his father's and brother's letters.

He wanted to go home.

Xiao Chiye's disappointment was fleeting. He smiled and said, "I have already prepared a birthday present. When dage returns home this time, please bring it back on my behalf."

Xiao Fangxu dusted off the brim of his bamboo hat and said, "Before we set off, Xun-er specially painted a picture for you. I'll get Zhao Hui to bring it to you later. This is not the place to chat. I'll head for the palace first. It's not too late for us father and son to talk when I return to the residence at night."

The party of men mounted their horses and rode their way into Qudu.



It had already been many years since the Prince of Libei had shown himself in public. Now that the name of the Four Generals had spread far and wide, very few people would still remember the Prince of Libei, Xiao Fangxu.

As Autumn came, Grand Mentor Qi ate so well that he put on weight. At present, he was washing his feet in the rain, wiggling and rubbing his toes against each other. He said, "Speaking of the Four Generals of the world, they actually existed twenty years ago. Back then, Xiao Fangxu of Libei, Qi Shiyu of Qidong, Liu Pingyan of Bianjun Commandery, and Feng Yisheng of the Suotian Pass, were the Commanders-in-chief of the military forces on all sides. Feng Yisheng later died in battle, and the Feng Clan's



bloodline was severed. No one probably remembers this name today. But back then, they were all valiant warriors who stepped onto the frontier pass with their horses and wiped out the Biansha troops.”

“Feng Yisheng?” Ji Gang responded in a loud voice as he did the cooking inside. “What do you mean no one remembers? Chuan-er! Both of General Feng’s sons died on the battlefield. He later adopted a son, who is your shifu’s eldest brother.”

Shen Zechuan scooped rice into the bowls and repeated, “Shifu’s eldest brother?”

Ji Gang smacked his own head and said, “I forgot to tell you!”

Grand Mentor Qi yelled, “Is the food ready? Aye, isn’t his eldest brother Zuo Qianqiu?! What’s there to tell? Anyone could guess!”

Shen Zechuan served the dishes, laid out chopsticks for Grand Mentor Qi, and said respectfully, “Teacher, please have your meal.”

Grand Mentor Qi gulped down a mouthful of wine and said, “Having someone wait on you is still the most comfortable feeling ever.”

Ji Gang wiped away his sweat and sat on the other side of the table and said, “You said earlier that Xiao the Second told you he’s from the same school of martial arts with us. Then, I’m afraid his shifu is Zuo Qianqiu!”

Shen Zechuan took two mouthfuls of rice.

Ji Gang lamented, “I haven’t seen him in years. Did you exchange blows with Xiao the Second this time? How was it? Were the strokes of his blade strong and forceful?”

Grand Mentor Qi said, “Let Lanzhou eat first. We’ll talk again when we have eaten our fill. It’s dangerous this time, and there’s no hurry. We can rest for a few days.”

“I should have thought of it.” Ji Gang said, “Xiao the Second wore a bone thumb ring. The one in this world who knows best how to wield a powerful bow is Zuo Qianqiu.”

“Perhaps you will be able to meet your eldest brother now that Xiao Fangxu has entered Qudu.” Grand Mentor Qi picked out the dishes. “Zuo Qianqiu fought to the death at Tianfei Watchtower. Although he warded off the Biansha cavalry, his wife died. It was because of that battle that he obtained the name of ‘Thunder Sinking the Jade Stage’, but it was also because of it that he never recovered from the setback. Rumor has it that he has left home to become a monk, but it’s also possible that he has been

living incognito to teach Xiao Fangxu's son after receiving refuge from the latter."

Ji Gang said with sorrow, "A general's success is built upon the sacrifices of tens of thousands of people. So what if he's renowned for his impressive military exploits? In the end, he'll still turn into a handful of loess. Those who died on the battlefield are loyal to the end, while those who survived aren't having a wonderful time either. Zuo Qianqiu lives incognito, Xiao Fangxu is ill, and Lu Pingyan is old. Twenty more years later, where would the current Four Generals be at? It's all but the slapping of waves on sand, with one generation after generation superseding the former."

Grand Mentor Qi was slightly tipsy as he watched Shen Zechuan eat his meal. After a long while, he said, "It's too much of a loss to suffer through an entire lifetime for nothing. All of us will eventually die. So why not reach for the sky and fulfill your aspirations before you die?! Lanzhou, here! Have another bowl!"

By the time they had eaten and drank to their heart's content, the sky was already dark.

Grand Mentor Qi lay across the mat while Shen Zechuan sat under the eaves to wipe his teacher's feet. Ji Gang took out two outer garments and draped it over both of them. Then he squatted in the corner to smoke his pipe.

Resting his head on a papaya, Grand Mentor Qi said, "Lanzhou, tell me the situation at the hunting ground again."

Shen Zechuan gave a detailed account of it again.

Grand Mentor Qi listened with his eyes closed. When Shen Zechuan was done speaking, he remained silent.

The vines in the courtyard soaked in rain, with each drop pitter-pattering on the leaves. After the rain drummed on the leaves for an unspecified amount of time, Grand Mentor Qi said, "Xiao the Second seemed to be in the limelight this battle, but he is trapped in the same situation as his father and elder brother. The new Emperor has called him his brother for as long as five years, but he has lain low and concealed himself so deeply, so how could the former not be afraid? Today, the new Emperor can let it slide on account of him saving his life, but how long can this friendship withstand until it's all worn away into nothing? I thought he could still tolerate it for a little longer given his endurance. There are

countless ways he could have let Qi Zhuyin take the limelight, but he just had to do it on his own.”

Ji Gang knocked off the ash under the dim light and said, “The wolf cub wants to go home too. All he dreams of are the grassland of Libei. How old is he? Having this bit of spirit is what being young is about.”

“A little lack of forbearance upsets great plans.” Grand Mentor Qi said. “If he had endured it this one time, then wouldn’t he have been able to return home as a dandy young master?”

Right at this time, Xiao Chiye was standing outside the palace gates looking up at the shadowy palace. The overhanging eaves of these vermilion walls seemed to be a trial Heaven had given him. Under this frivolous appearance of his, a ferocious beast howled in silence.

Shen Zechuan sat upright. It was at this moment that he oddly understood the meaning behind this move of Xiao Chiye.

He wanted to go home.

He wanted to go home, openly and above-board, as his own person.



#### Footnotes

1. 老祖宗 literally old ancestor or forefather; sometimes the top eunuch in the Ming Dynasty is privately addressed as such
2. 大师 *Dashi* or Great Master or Venerable, an honorific term for a monk.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 28 : DRUNK IN THE ALLEY



The Autumn rain in Qudu never stopped falling after the new Emperor ascended to the throne. White lanterns hung high beneath old, black tiles. If one were to stand atop the city wall overlooking the place, they would see a bleak chill shrouding every single spot.

Because of the Autumn Hunt incident, all the Imperial Bodyguards had their authority tokens<sup>1</sup> revoked. Imperial Bodyguards of fifth grade<sup>2</sup> and above, such as Ji Lei and Qiao Tianya, were all imprisoned. Together with Hua Siqian and Pan Rugui, they were handed over to be tried in a joint trial by the Three Judicial Offices.<sup>3</sup>

Xue Xiuzhuo was transferred from the Office of Scrutiny for Revenue and promoted to the position of Assistant Minister in the Court of Judicial Review. This position did not seem to have as much authority and power as the Chief Supervising Secretary of the Office of Scrutiny for Revenue, but in truth, it gave him an in to the central administration of Three Judicial Offices. In other words, he not only had the authority to examine any case reviews, but also had the power to participate in the deliberations and rebuttals of proposals from the Ministry of Justice and the Chief Surveillance Bureau.

“Xue Xiuzhuo.”

Empress Dowager Hua reclined against the *xumi* couch<sup>4</sup> and idly tapped the jet-black jade chess piece<sup>5</sup> against the board.

“I have never heard of this child before the Nanlin Hunting Grounds incident. Who is he to the Xue Clan?”

Matron Liuxiang gently fanned the incense censer and said, “To reply Your Majesty, he is the third son of common birth of the Xue Clan. This slave has never heard of this person before, and so this slave specifically went to make some inquiries about him.”

“The Xue Clan has no lack of successors.” Empress Dowager Hua said. “All these years, Yao Wenyu is the one in the limelight. I thought that old fox, Hai Liangyi, would sooner or later recommend Yao Wenyu into the Grand Secretariat after having imparted all his knowledge to him. Who would have expected him to remain silent on it and use the unremarkable Xue Xiuzhuo instead?”

Aunt Lixiang said, "Xue Xiuzhuo first joined forces with the Provincial Administration Commissioner of Juexi, Jiang Qingshan, to gather evidence on the sly, then joined up with Secretariat Elder Hai to act as a go-between. He had access to the Six Ministries when he held office as the Chief Supervising Secretary of the Office of Scrutiny for Revenue. Now he has been promoted to Assistant Minister of the Court of Judicial Review, he will be hearing the case of our Secretariat Elder. I fear that he has made up his mind to get to the bottom of the matter and will not let it go at that."

"I can't go out now." Empress Dowager Hua looked contemplative. "If Xue Xiuzhuo wants to investigate, then let him investigate. The Hua Clan is already at such a critical juncture. Go and tell Eldest Brother that he needs to have the determination to act decisively and cut his loss. Only then will we be able to stage a comeback."

Matron Liuxiang uttered an acknowledgement and quietly withdrew.



Shen Zechuan shook the rainwater off his umbrella and sat in the run-down veranda of the deserted courtyard. Less than an hour later, Xi Hongxuan's mountain-like figure strode through the moon gate<sup>6</sup> and walked over to him while holding up an umbrella.

"This is the time when spies abound all around. I almost couldn't get away." Xi Hongxuan gathered up his clothes and frowned as he asked. "Is there some urgent matter for you to call me here at this time?"

"Xi Gu'an is in prison." Shen Zechuan said. "Your long-time wish is right before you. Yet you aren't pressing home the attack now following the victory. Are you waiting for him to take desperate action instead?"

"His guilt of committing a capital offense is already but certain." Xi Hongxuan said. "Making any more moves now would be like drawing legs on a snake—redundant."

"Nothing in this world is 'certain'." There was no trace of a smile on Shen Zechuan's fair face. He said, "The more critical the situation is, the more you cannot afford to be negligent. As long as he remains alive in this dangerous situation, there's a chance he will survive through it."

Xi Hongxuan looked at his side profile and said, "The Hua faction case has already been handed over to the Three Judicial Offices. With so many pairs of eyes staring, how are you planning to make your move?"

"I'm not making any moves." Shen Zechuan turned his eyes. "As the Hua Clan's lackey, his crimes during his term of office are too numerous to

record. As long as one or two document proofs is handed over to the Three Judicial Offices, then his death will be all but certain.”

“Bearing a weapon before the Emperor and trapping the Crown Prince in to hunt him down. These two matters aren’t enough to put him to death?”

“As the Commander-in-chief of the Eight Great Training Divisions, he has the prerogative to bear a blade before the Emperor. The hunt of the Crown Prince has nothing to do with him. He could simply assert that he headed back to the capital to seek and deploy reinforcements on seeing the situation go wrong. The new Emperor now fears the Imperial Army. Although he has taken down the Hua Clan, it is at the time where he needs the help and cooperation of the Eight Great Clans. It takes time for the Three Judicial Offices to review the case. The longer this drags on, the harder it will be for Xi Gu’an to die.” Shen Zechuan sneered a little. “As long as Xi Gu’an doesn’t die, you will remain Xi the Second, never to step into the limelight.”

After a lengthy silence, Xi Hongxuan said, “What are you planning to do?”

“Xi Gu’an has been assigned special duty in the Eight Great Training Divisions since the fourth year of Xiande.<sup>7</sup> In the four years so far, the Eight Great Training Divisions have received a total of 9 million taels of military funds and provisions. Only 7 million of the disbursement were accounted for. Where did the remaining 2 million taels go? They all disappeared after they passed through Xi Gu’an’s hands.” Shen Zechuan said, “The audits of the account books are originally handled by Xue Xiuzhuo. In all likelihood, he will still be able to dig out more void expenses once he checks. Pan Rugui and Hua Siqian can take such a large sum, because if they do, they are just greedy and corrupt. But Xi Gu’an can’t. He cannot afford to be greedy or corrupt. Control of the Eight Great Training Divisions, whose key task is to patrol and defend Qudu, lies in his hands. If he can’t explain the whereabouts of all that money, then one could only suspect if he has been embezzling money to bribe the soldiers and to raise his own private army under the name of the Eight Great Training Divisions.”

A chill suddenly ran down Xi Hongxuan’s back. He said, “... Raise his own private army.”

“He stands beside the Son of Heaven’s<sup>8</sup> couch. What other reason can there be for him to raise his own private army?” Shen Zechuan said.

“... No way!” Xi Hongxuan vetoed it. He raised his hand to wipe away his sweat and said, “You think I’m out of my mind? If it’s just associating with the Hua Clan, then he’s the only one who dies. But if it’s harboring the intent to rebel, then my whole family will die! It’s a crime punishable by extermination of the entire clan!”

Shen Zechuan laughed aloud and lowered his voice. “A change of sovereign brings a change of ministers.<sup>9</sup> It’s a wonderful opportunity for you to distinguish yourself now that a new Emperor has ascended to the throne. This is just Xi Gu’an giving you his life as a congratulatory gift for your promotion.”

“You want me to...” Xi Hongxuan stared at Shen Zechuan for a while and suddenly burst out laughing. He said, “You are really vicious. At the very least, the Empress Dowager has saved you twice. You really show no regard for the kindness shown to you.”

“Kindness, huh?” Shen Zechuan picked up the umbrella. “It’s not too late to repay it after killing them. What’s more, the power struggle today is all a game of chess between Xiao and Hua. What does it have to do with me?”

With that, he opened his umbrella, nodded slightly at Xi Hongxuan, then stepped into the night rain. Xi Hongxuan sat alone in the veranda. After Shen Zechuan disappeared, he touched his own back, finding it all drenched in cold sweat.



A few days later, the Court of Judicial Review re-processed the Autumn Hunt case.

Jiang Xie, the Chief Minister of the Court of Judicial Review, served as the presiding judge, while Hai Liangyi served as the supervisor, and Xue Xiuzhuo, the jury. This was a major case examined and prosecuted by the Chief Surveillance Bureau, with the criminal charges of “unconstitutional formation of an insurgent faction”, “embezzlement of taxes to corrupt governance”, and “endangerment of the state” submitted to the Court of Judicial Review.

Of these, “unconstitutional formation of an insurgent faction” made the Six Ministries jittery. Those who have been to the Hua Residence, or have received recommendations from Hua Siqian and Pan Rugui in the past all found themselves in a precarious position. Countless officials submitted memorials to impeach and report Hua Siqian and Pan Rugui these few days,

with each one making an impassioned statement of loyalty for fear of getting implicated.

Seeing those memorials<sup>10</sup> gave Li Jianheng a headache. He was not a person who could sit still to begin with. Even so, he did not dare to fool around during a time where the entire nation was in national mourning. He had seen the way Hai Liangyi confronted Hua Siqian that night; thus, he was very much afraid of Hai Liangyi.

Hai Liangyi was rigid and inflexible. His appropriately trimmed beard was always hanging before the second clasp on the front of his robe, while his crown was properly worn, and his hair, meticulously combed. He never left his clothes open during the three hottest periods of summer,<sup>11</sup> and he never folded his arms during the severe winter months. He was like the pine tree on the mountain ridge when he stood, and the swift wind in the quiet valley when he walked. When it came to handling matters, he was never sloppy. He could even listen attentively to the details of the case for three days and three nights without showing any traces of weariness.

Li Jianheng was used to fooling around. So he always went weak in the knees on seeing this kind of elder, scholar teacher-like<sup>12</sup> minister.

Because of the Hua faction case, Hai Liangyi was constantly looking for him to report the details. Li Jianheng found the Dragon Throne<sup>13</sup> in Mingli Hall so hard that his butt was always hurting from sitting too long, so he got his men to pad it up with several layers of cotton-padded mattress. But Hai Liangyi saw it and remonstrated with him, advising him to be steadfast in his conduct.

The thrill of having power and authority in his grasp seemed fleeting. What followed right after was an avalanche of heavy responsibilities. The never-ending morning court sessions<sup>14</sup> made it difficult for Li Jianheng to persevere. He sat on the Dragon Throne, sometimes not even understanding what those people at the foot of his throne were arguing about.

No money?

Then, collect taxes! Kill a bunch of corrupt officials, and the money could be recovered, no? What's there to argue about?

Li Jianheng did not dare to reveal his innermost thoughts. He was afraid of Hai Liangyi, and even more afraid of these civil servants and military commanders. He did not know what they were fighting about, or why the Hua faction could not be executed immediately by decapitation, let alone



what the Empress Dowager's intention in sending him snacks every day was.

He huddled up on the Dragon Throne, as if he were merely having a dream.

"Is His Majesty ill?"

Having been summoned, Xiao Chiye entered the palace and met the Imperial Physician from the Imperial Academy of Medicine outside Mingli Hall.

The Imperial Physician said, "He worried too much, and the Autumn chill has gotten to him. When the Viceroy enters later, please persuade His Majesty. "

Xiao Chiye took off Langli Blade and strode into Mingli Hall.

Li Jianheng had just taken his medicine and was zoning out on the couch at the moment. On hearing that Xiao Chiye had come, he hurriedly wore his shoes like slippers and called Xiao Chiye in.

"Ce'an." Li Jianheng said. "You're just in time. The Imperial Bakery<sup>15</sup> will send the silk-nested tiger's eye candy later. Come and try it too. We had it at the official banquet a few years ago."

Xiao Chiye kowtowed and said, "Thank you Your Majesty for the bestowment."

With his clothes draped around him, Li Jianheng went silent for a moment, then said, "Ce'an, take a seat."

Xiao Chiye sat down, and those serving at the sides withdrew. Li Jianheng suddenly stood up and restlessly turned around in circles where he was. He said, "Ce'an, why aren't they beheading Hua Siqian? What retrial is the Court of Judicial Review talking about? What else is there for them to go over? Argh!"

Xiao Chiye said, "The Court of Judicial Review has to triple check the case. This is the rule to prevent miscarriages of justice. The evidence against Hua Siqian is conclusive. He will definitely be executed by decapitation before the new year."

"A long night is fraught with dreams."<sup>16</sup> Li Jianheng said nervously. "The Empress Dowager doesn't look like she's in a panic... You know, she keeps sending people to deliver snacks to me every day. What is she thinking of doing? Does she want to poison me to death too?"

"The Hua Clan now is the target of public criticism. So the Empress Dowager somehow has to put on a show of affection." Seeing Li Jianheng's

flustered expression with dark circles under his eyes, Xiao Chiye said, “Is Your Majesty not sleeping well at night?”

“How can I sleep?” Li Jianheng said, “They aren’t dead yet... So how would I be able to sleep? Ce’an, go tell Hai Liangyi on my behalf to skip the retrial and carry out the execution on the spot.”

How would that do?

Xiao Chiye was the Viceroy of the Imperial Army. He had nothing to do with the Three Judicial Offices, so how could he interfere in the joint trial by the Three Judicial Offices? Moreover, after what happened at the Autumn Hunt, the next person they would take down would be his own self, Xiao Chiye. The civil officials, with Hai Liangyi at the head, were unwilling to let Xiao Chiye go. Xiao Fangxu himself had gotten wind of it these few days as well.

No one was willing to take a gamble when it came to this matter. It was only with Xiao Chiye in Qudu that Libei would prove to be diligent in all they did. The crisis in the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo was a sore point. Xiao Jiming could save Qudu once or twice, but could he save Qudu countless times without reservation? Even if he could, who would believe it?

Xiao Chiye would definitely not get entangled in any disputes with the civil servants at this point in time.

Li Jianheng himself knew that it would not work, so he became more and more dispirited. When the silk-nested tiger’s eye candy was sent over, he took a few cursory bites of it, but could taste nothing.

As soon as Xiao Chiye left, he lay on the couch, feeling that this Emperor was really boring to be.

Shuanglu, who had always been following him to serve him, kneeled beside the couch and whispered, “Your Majesty...<sup>17</sup> How about this slave accompanies you out for a stroll?”

Li Jianheng replied, “Not going. I’m tired.”

Shuanglu hit upon an idea and continued, “... Then how about inviting Lady Mu Ru to play the pipa<sup>18</sup> for you?”

Li Jianheng turned over and took another glance outside. Seeing no one, he said, “... I don’t think I can. The nation is in mourning. Besides, she’s still at Pan Rugui’s Residence. If I bring her to the palace now, wouldn’t I get a scolding?”

Shuanglu let out an “oh, my” and smiled, then said, “Your Majesty, you are the Emperor. You have the final say within this palace. How would those officials on the outside know what eunuchs in the inner palace does? We’ll do it on the sly...”

Li Jianheng instantly felt his spirits soar. Not even eating the candy anymore, he said, “Secretariat Elder Hai won’t know?”

“No one will know.” Shuanglu shuffled forward on his knees. “You are our master. He isn’t. Us slaves run errands for Your Majesty. If Your Majesty doesn’t want to let anyone know, then no one will know.”

“Great!” Li Jianheng clapped his hands. “Great, I finally found an opportunity. Go quickly, the sooner the better. Bring Mu Ru in. Pan Rugui is going to die. Remaining in that compound will only be inviting bad luck!”

It rained again when Xiao Chiye left the palace. He felt vexed for no reason. The zeal and drive he had before the Autumn Hunt seemed to have dissipated overnight. He did not even want to draw his blade at this moment.

Chen Yang and Zhao Hui came to pick him up, and Xiao Chiye got into the horse carriage. Halfway through their journey back, Xiao Chiye suddenly lifted the curtain and said, “Tell Father and dage that I won’t be going back tonight.”

Without waiting for both men to respond, he jumped off the carriage and headed towards Donglong Street without taking anything with him.

“He’s gone drinking again.” Zhao Hui got off the carriage as well and said to Chen Yang, “You head back and inform the Prince and the Hereditary Prince. I’ll follow the Young Master. It wouldn’t look good for him to get drunk and make a scene during a time when the nation is in mourning.”

Chen Yang said, “In just the time it takes for you to say all these, you would have already lost sight of him. Since the Viceroy doesn’t want anyone to follow, then... let him be.”

Zhao Hui was Xiao Jiming’s deputy general, while Chen Yang was Xiao Chiye’s deputy general. Although both of them were members of the Xiao Clan, the subject of their consideration were ultimately different. Zhao Hui was more like the older brother.

He turned his head in the rain. Sure enough, he could no longer see Xiao Chiye’s figure.

With the authority tokens of the Imperial Bodyguards revoked, its subordinates were all temporarily assigned to the Imperial Army to serve as patrols.

Shen Zechuan just finished his rounds tonight. As he returned home, he passed by the back alley of Xiangyun Villa<sup>19</sup> on Donglong Street.

Because it was just a drizzle, he did not hold up an umbrella.

As he was walking along the road, he suddenly heard a bout of puking sounds before him. Then, a courtesan wearing wooden clogs and no socks trotted out in pursuit of the person who had been puking. The latter gently fended her off.

Xiao Chiye propped himself up against the wall and pointed at the back door to motion to the woman to stay away from him.

The courtesans of Xiangyun Villa were all well-acquainted with him. They knew that he would not let others touch him while he was drunk, so this courtesan folded a handkerchief and lay it at the side and said in a gentle voice, “Second Young Master, please go in again once you feel better. I’ve prepared hot soup for you.”

Xiao Chiye did not respond.

The sound of wooden clogs receded into the distance, and he squatted down. His stomach was churning so badly it was hard to bear.

This was the way a man should live—eat, drink and make merry as if in a drunken stupor. He had only this one way out.

He felt a sudden weight on his back.

Xiao Chiye suddenly looked back with a stare so cold it would make one flustered. On seeing the man, he thought for a moment before saying, “... Why did you kick me?”

Shen Zechuan said without blinking, “I didn’t.”

Xiao Chiye backhandedly touched his own back for a moment. He pulled at his clothes and said stubbornly, “This is evidence of your guilt!”

Shen Zechuan scrutinized him for a moment and said, “Have you drunk yourself foolish, Xiao the Second?”

Xiao Chiye said, “Do I look like a fool?”

Without waiting for Shen Zechuan to reply, he answered himself.

“I’m not a fool.”

Smelling him reeking of wine, Shen Zechuan said, “Don’t block my way. I want to go home.”

Xiao Chiye turned his head back and stared blankly for a moment before saying to the wall, “Don’t block my way. I want to go home too.” Shen Zechuan was about to laugh when he heard him continue. “If I can’t go home, then you can forget about going home as well.”

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#### Footnotes



- 1.
3. 腰牌 literally waist tablet or token, it’s a small tablet or token hung at the waist to prove one’s identity, especially for people in governmental posts or acting in an official capacity. I’ll also be calling this an authority tablet or tablet of authority.
4. 品 Grades; Officials were classified in nine hierarchic grades, with grade one being the highest rank. Their salaries ranged according to their rank.
5. In the Ming Dynasty, the supreme court was known as the “Joint Trial by the Three Judicial Offices” (三(法)司会审), whose verdicts had to be submitted to the Emperor for approval. Three Judicial Offices are namely the Ministry of Justice (刑部), the Court of Judicial Review (大理寺), and the Chief Surveillance Bureau (都察院).
6. *Xumi* couch (须弥榻), also known as the *Mile* couch (弥勒榻) or short couch (短榻), is basically a couch that’s shorter.



- 7.
8. Chess in those days typically refers to Weiqi, or Go in Japanese and Baduk in Korean.



- 9.
10. 洞门 An opening in a wall separating different courtyards within a residence or palace. It's also known as a moon gate (月亮门).
11. This is the name of an era during which a specific Emperor (Emperor Xiande, in this case) reigned.
12. 天子 Son of Heaven, refers to the Emperor.
13. 一朝天子一朝臣 A change of sovereign brings a change of ministers, i.e. when a new Emperor is crowned, he brings to the court his own favorites and expels those of his predecessor.



14.

15. 奏折 *zouzhe*, also 折子 *zhezi*, is a memorial presented to the Emperor

16. 三伏天 three periods forming the hottest periods of summer, from mid-July to mid-August, namely: 初伏 (mid-July), 中伏 (late July to early August), 末伏 (mid-August)

17. 夫子 *fuzi*, an ancient and respectful form of address for a Confucian scholar or for one's teacher (particularly in the classics and/or Confucian teachings.)



18.

19. 龙椅 Dragon throne, the imperial throne of the emperor.

20. 早朝 Court sessions held in the morning for the Emperor to discuss state affairs with his ministers. It was typically held daily, but occasionally varied from emperor to emperor.

21. 甜食房 Imperial Bakery or Confectionery, name of an office manned by eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty. They were in charge of palace desserts and sweets for the Emperor's own consumption or to reward officials, etc. The production method was kept secret, and all the instruments used were made by the eunuchs themselves. It was



especially famous for silk-nested tiger's eye candy (丝窝虎眼糖; literally translated) and etc.

22. 夜长梦多 literally a long night is fraught with dreams. i.e. undue delay may bring unforeseen trouble, and the longer the delay, the more the troubles or the higher the chance of one happening.

23. The 'Your Majesty' here Shuanglu used is specifically 万岁爷 *Wansui-ye*, or literally Master of Long (10,000) Life, instead of the usual 皇上. 万岁爷 is an honorific address for the Emperor mostly used by servants such as eunuchs and palace maids, typically seen in Qing Dynasty dramas. It refers to the Emperor when used in general.



24.

25. 琵琶 Pipa, a four-stringed Chinese musical instrument, belonging to the plucked category of instruments.

26. This *Xiangyunfang* is kind of like an entertainment or pleasure house.



## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 29 : FATE



Shen Zechuan said, “Oh.”

Not getting the answer he wanted, Xiao Chiye looked back at him and asked, “Why aren’t you rebutting?”

Shen Zechuan raised his hands to open up the umbrella and said, “I don’t have a father or a brother back at home. No acquaintances either. So what’s the point of going back?”

Xiao Chiye picked up the handkerchief to wipe away the water on the back of his neck. He stood up and said, “Oh right. The Prince of Jianxing’s Residence in Dunzhou has already been cleared out. With your identity, you will only be cursed by all if you go back.”

“That’s why when it comes to fate,” Shen Zechuan looked at Xiao Chiye quietly for a pause before continuing, “you will only suffer if you don’t get reincarnated into a good life.”

Xiao Chiye did not look at him as he lifted his arm to rub away the raindrops on his forehead. He said, “Then why are you still alive?”

Shen Zechuan smiled and said, “Millions of people want me to die. But how could I feel at ease myself if I were to fulfill the wish of others?”

Xiao Chiye said, “The way for you to survive is to remain in Zhao Zui Temple.”

Shen Zechuan took two steps to bypass the water puddle on the ground and said, “If I remain in Zhao Zui Temple, then you will think that getting executed by decapitation is how I should end up. Xiao Chiye, even if you try your best to hide it, you are already used to looking down from above. You are no different from the people who look down on you today. And all those eyes on you now agonize you.”

He laughed out loud and patted Xiao Chiye on the back with a palm.

“I seek to live. You seek to die. The Xiao Clan once had me trapped, and now the Li Clan does the same to you. Isn’t the ways of this world strange? The bird in the cage longs for its former woods, while the fish in the pond misses the deep.<sup>1</sup> Your lot in life has been laid bare from start to end. If you can’t go back, then you are nothing but a loser with lofty aspirations sans actions. The most regrettable thing in this world is to train a wolf into a dog. How long can your fangs remain sharp in Qudu?”

“You followed me during the Autumn Hunt,” Xiao Chiye turned his head to the side to look at him, “and saved my life just for this moment of gratification?”

“I am but an insignificant nobody.” Shen Zechuan said softly, “Even if I didn’t show up, you will still live.”

“Exactly what,” Xiao Chiye’s inebriation had worn off. He asked, “are you up to?”

“Repaying a debt of gratitude.” The brim of Shen Zechuan’s umbrella sheltered Xiao Chiye—This was how close he was to the latter. “Repaying all of you for your mercy in not killing me.”

Xiao Chiye suddenly grabbed Shen Zechuan by the collar and said, “I thought you had repent and turned over a new leaf to become a better person.”

“What wrong did I do?” The glint in Shen Zechuan’s eyes was even colder than this Autumn rain. He pressed in a step closer, almost sticking to Xiao Chiye, and asked, “What is my crime?”

“Didn’t you take a look at various cities of Duanzhou when you climbed your way out of Chashi Sinkhole?” Xiao Chiye tightened his grip. “Everyone in the eight cities was massacred. When the hooves of horses trod through the city gates, all the blood that splashed up was the people’s blood.”

“Shen Wei’s troops were defeated.” Shen Zechuan finally tore off that mask of his, exposing his burning hatred. “40,000 people from Zhongbo were buried in Chashi Sinkhole! I lost my elder brother and shiniang to death that day! Where does my fault lie in this?”

“Shen Wei deserves to be killed!” Xiao Chiye reached the end of his limit too. He suddenly pressed Shen Zechuan up against the wall and said, “Shen Wei should be put to death! You are a Shen too! So how are you blameless?!”<sup>2</sup>

The oil-paper umbrella tumbled to the ground as Xiao Chiye slammed Shen Zechuan into the wall and lifted him until his toes could barely touch the floor. Shen Zechuan lifted his leg to stomp on Xiao Chiye’s chest. Xiao Chiye retreated a few steps back in pain, but he did not release his grip as he pulled Shen Zechuan by the collar and flung him to the ground.

The pattering rain suddenly intensified and came pouring down in torrents. A burst of crashes rang out from the dark lane, as overturned odds and ends were trampled underfoot.

The courtesans of Xiangyun Villa who had been waiting for Xiao Chiye were startled by the commotion. All of them held on to the doors with their wooden clogs in hands to look.

“Why did they start fighting?!” Xiangyun hurriedly draped on her upper, outer garment and slipped on her wooden clogs to rush over. “My dear masters! Talk it over if you have something to say. This isn’t worth coming to blows over!”

Shen Zechuan rode Xiao Chiye and punched the latter’s head aside. Xiao Chiye grabbed Shen Zechuan’s wrist and tugged him hard towards himself. Licking the blood between his teeth with the tip of his tongue, he said, “Neither you nor I shall dream of having an easy time!”

Xiangyun had already called out the hired help, and they joined forces to drag both men apart. Xiao Chiye jerked his arm, and those tall and strapping hirelings felt the webs between their thumbs and forefingers going numb. However, Xiao Chiye did not pounce again. He raised his fingers to wipe at the wound on his face and said, “Piss off.”

Seeing that the situation did not look good, Xiangyun motioned for the hirelings to hurry over to the prince’s residence to call for help.

Who would have expected Xiao Chiye to say, “I’ll break the legs of whoever dares to alert my father!”

Xiangyun’s voice softened and she took the opportunity to say, “What is this about? Second Young Master has always shown tenderness towards the fairer sex. Why did you frighten the ladies tonight? It is common for gentlemen to swap pointers with one another after a bout of drinking. Let’s forget it and bury the hatchet with a smile, alright?”

Xiao Chiye rose to his feet, stripped off his dirty robe, and threw it to Xiangyun. He said, “Go in.”

Holding his outer robe, Xiangyun attempted to persuade him. “Second Young Master, it’s so cold outside...”

Her voice trailed off as she lost the courage to let out even a squeak. She waved her hand quietly at the courtesans and led them back inside. However, the door was not closed tight this time. All the courtesans clung to the sides of the door and windows to steal a peek.

Shen Zechuan picked up the umbrella. He was so filthy all over he was barely recognizable. He had been drenched by the rain, and strands of hair stuck to his cheeks. The contrast of black on white made his fair skin look even whiter.

“Next time.” Shen Zechuan said, “Go right to my door if you want to look for me. I won’t necessarily make a trip through this alley even in eight hundred years.”

“If I knew you would be passing by.” Xiao Chiye said, “I would not come here even if I have to puke all over inside.”

Shen Zechuan smiled mockingly and said, “Then it must really be a small world for enemies to meet on such a narrow path.”

Xiao Chiye walked up to him. “I’ll watch you closely from now on.”

“You can hardly look after yourself, and you still want to concern yourself over me?” Shen Zechuan raised his umbrella and pulled apart the distance between them. “Old institutions die hard. Just one Autumn Hunt, and you want to bring the Hua Clan down to their knees. You are really delusional.”

“You’d better find a way to preserve your life.” Xiao Chiye pressed his chest against the umbrella and looked askance at him. “How long can you live without the backing of the Empress Dowager?”

“There is already a new master sitting in the Imperial Court.” Shen Zechuan said, “Isn’t it time for you to change all those assumptions you have been taking for granted too?”

“You can’t kill any of them.” Xiao Chiye said, “The ones who owe you are the Biansha Cavalry and Shen Wei.”

“Whatever you say.” Shen Zechuan draped on that layer of tame outer coat again. He closed his umbrella and said gently to Xiao Chiye, “I’ll listen to you, okay?”

That indescribable rage within Xiao Chiye suddenly bubbled up. He said, “Sure. Then you’ll stay with me tonight.”

“You sleep under the bed canopy of a sweet, tender lady.” Shen Zechuan said, “And you still have the fetish to share your bed with another man? I’m sorry, but I don’t.”

No matter how Xiao Chiye looked at him now he looked as though he was up to no good, so he said, “What are you shying away from? Didn’t you say, whatever I say?!”

“Are you,” Shen Zechuan pointed to his head, “out of your mind?”

“All the idlers of the Imperial Bodyguards have been assigned to the Imperial Army.” Xiao Chiye said, “So who is the one out of his mind?”

Shen Zechuan paused for a moment and said, “What does the Viceroy want me to do?”

There was still a red imprint remaining on Xiao Chiye's cheek. The hostility between his eyebrows dissipated, and he took on the appearance of a lazy slacker. He turned around to sit on the veranda under the eaves and pointed to his own boots.

Shen Zechuan unhurriedly moved the corners of his lips at him and said, "Sure."

Early in the morning the next day, Chen Yang came to pick him up, and was stunned when he saw Shen Zechuan hugging Langli Blade at the entrance of Xiangyun Villa.

Shen Zechuan, who had been leaning against the door, straightened up his body and bowed a greeting to Chen Yang.

Chen Yang had an ill sense of foreboding for an instant and asked, "Shen... Why is the Red Cavalry<sup>3</sup> here?"

"Ji Lei is still in prison and has not yet been sentenced." Shen Zechuan said, "The Imperial Bodyguards are temporarily serving as Imperial Army under the Viceroy's supervision."

Chen Yang looked at his calm face and felt a chill down his spine. He gave a slight nod of his head and hurried up the stairs.

Shen Zechuan watched him go upstairs. At the same time, Xiangyun was coming down the stairs while lifting the hem of her skirt. She said tenderly, "You haven't eaten yet right? You haven't changed out of those dirty clothes of yours either. Ling Ting—"

The courtesan upstairs leaned against the railing with a tired expression and said, "Why is Madam<sup>4</sup> still calling out for Ling Ting? You are always forgetting that little lass has been redeemed."<sup>5</sup>

It dawned on Xiangyun then, and she said, "I have gotten used to calling her! Go and bring some food over for this Red Cavalry Excellency."

When Chen Yang entered, he saw Xiao Chiye still sprawled on the couch sleeping. There was no one around attending to him, so Chen Yang went forward and called out to him softly, "Viceroy, Viceroy?"

Xiao Chiye wearily buried his face and slept for a little longer. He suddenly sat up and asked, "Why is it you? Where is Shen Lanzhou?"

"He's keeping watch downstairs. Viceroy... What happened to your face?" Chen Yang asked in astonishment.

"Got punched while I was hunting." Xiao Chiye got off the couch and moved his shoulders and arms. He asked, "Did dage ask you to come for me?"

“It was His Lordship the Prince.” Chen Yang said, “We received information early in the morning. The Shaqiu<sup>6</sup> Mutual Trade Market was looted by the Biansha Cavalry last night. We still need to enter the palace later to discuss this matter in detail. Secretariat Elder Hai has summoned the Ministry of War and the Ministry of Revenue for a convention. Us Libei have to deploy our troops again.”

Xiao Chiye wiped his face with water and immediately stepped out of the door. When he headed downstairs, he saw Shen Zechuan with a courtesan. He strode a few steps down, grabbed the small plate from behind, and tossed a pastry into his mouth.

Shen Zechuan looked at him and said, “Eat slowly. No one can save you in time if you choke to death.”

Xiao Chiye swallowed it clean. He smiled at him and put his arm on his shoulder. Leading him outside, he said, “Lanzhou...”

Shen Zechuan looked at him.

Xiao Chiye said frivolously, “Why do you still hold an overnight grudge? I’ve already forgotten all about it after a sleep. Let’s go. Second Young Master will take you along to look for fun...”

Shen Zechuan swatted his hand away with the sheath of his blade and said, “Second Young Master, don’t take advantage of the chance to touch the back of my neck.”



Many people gathered in Mingli Hall.

Li Jianheng remained seated on the Dragon Throne, not daring to move. He first tried to figure out Hai Liangyi’s expression with his eyes, then shifted them over to the others while trying his best to look dignified and imposing.

“Now that the Brush-holding Director of the Directorate of Ceremonial’s position is vacant, this old subject will present all the various ministries’ accounts to His Majesty once they are sent to the Grand Secretariat before signing off on them.” Hai Liangyi first said to Li Jianheng, “What does Your Majesty think of the accounts last night?”

Li Jianheng had been listening to the pipa<sup>7</sup> with a beautiful woman in his arms last night. So when Hai Liangyi kowtowed to him, he immediately shifted his buttocks with a guilty conscience and said, “Okay, okay!”

Xue Xiuzhuo, who had been kneeling behind Hai Liangyi, initially had on a neutral expression. But he furrowed his brows on hearing these

words.

Hai Liangyi waited for a while. But when he saw that Li Jianheng had no intention of saying further, he said, “Autumn is cold and frosty at present. If Libei is to deploy troops, then they must report to Qudu the military salaries and provisions to be paid in advance. Your Lordship, how much do you need this time?”

Xiao Fangxu smiled and said, “I have been ill and out of commission for a long time. All the military affairs have long been entrusted to Jiming. Jiming, tell Secretariat Elder Hai how much money we lack.”

Xiao Jiming kowtowed and said, “The Twelve Tribes of Biansha looted the market at this time because winter snow is about to fall. The grain supply of the various Biansha Tribes have run out, so they could only loot the mutual trade market. If this were in the past, the military fields of Libei can provide for itself and would not need assistance with army supplies. But the former Emperor passed away this year, so it’s likely that the Twelve Biansha Tribes is thinking of taking the advantage of our vulnerability now. If we are to mobilize troops, then we must not only expel them out of our territory but also station our troops there to guard it. I have already submitted the required sum to the Ministry of Revenue.”

The newly appointed Minister of Revenue took out the memorial.<sup>8</sup> Shuanglu presented it to Li Jianheng.

Li Jianheng looked at it for a moment and said, “1.2 million taels. What’s so hard about it? As long as the soldiers don’t go cold and hungry.”

The Minister of Revenue, Qian Jin, was a little embarrassed and said, “Your Majesty does not know it but... we still have yet to make up for last year’s deficiency. The State Treasury does not have that much money at such a short notice.”

Li Jianheng said, “Then, 1 million taels should be fine, right?”

Qian Jin kowtowed and said, “During the Autumn Hunt, the mobilization of the Eight Great Training Divisions cost us 230,000 taels, and the former Emperor spent... 540,000 taels. The remaining money in the State Treasury still has to be used to pay out salary arrears to all the senior and junior officials. It’s soon to be the end of the year, and the civil officials all need to celebrate the New Year. We definitely do not have 1 million taels. Your Majesty, we can only allocate 600,000 taels to Libei’s Armored Cavalry. “

Li Jianheng truly never expected there to be a day he would be poor as an Emperor. He had wanted to do Libei a favor, and doing so could placate Xiao Chiye too. Who would have thought that he would have no money? This suddenly put him in such an awkward spot that he wanted so much to dig his way under the table. Instead, he merely uttered a few vague sounds of acknowledgements.

Mingli Hall went silent for a moment.

Xue Xiuzhuo suddenly piped up, "Your Majesty, this humble subject has a way."

As though he had seen his savior, Li Jianheng said, "Please speak. Tell me."

Xue Xiuzhuo said, "When the Hua faction was in power, they put a price on some sinecures and welcomed everyone who could pay up. The 'ice respect'<sup>9</sup> they collected every year were all large sums. Then, there's Pan Rugui who took advantage of the loopholes in procurement to amass wealth blatantly. Both men are now in prison. Why not search both the Hua's and Pan's residences and confiscate their possessions to subsidize the military funds? The Second Young Master of the Xi Clan, Xi Hongxuan, has already made amends and submitted a document to the Court of Judicial Review yesterday to report Xi Gu'an of raising his own personal army in private. He even leased out the Xi Clan's residence in Qudu to repay the empty accounts of the Eight Great Training Divisions while Xi Gu'an was in office."

The moment Li Jianheng heard they were going to raid the residences, he instantly showed interest. Eager to give it a try, he said, "Sure! I... I<sup>10</sup> have been thinking of this too!"

Hai Liangyi hesitated for a moment, then said, "That's not appropriate. The Court of Judicial Review's retrial is not concluded yet. How can we bypass the law and carry out the sentence straight?"

Xue Xiuzhuo said, "It's an emergency. We do not have a choice. Qudu can wait for the retrial, but the Biansha Cavalry will not. We cannot let Libei's Armored Cavalry fight a war on empty stomachs."

Hai Liangyi was still hesitating, but Li Jianheng had already slapped the table to give his approval.

When they came out, Xiao Jiming said to Qi Zhuyin, who had been silent the whole time earlier, "How is the Bianjun Commandery holding up?"



Qi Zhuyin raised her head to look up at the rain beyond the eaves and said, “Lu Guangbai is still at Bianjun, so the Twelve Tribes of Biansha will naturally not make a move. But Libei is lacking a chief commander; that makes it inevitably tricky for you.”

Xiao Jiming stood for a moment and sighed, “It’s hard to come by men with military talents. They aren’t easy to find.”

Qi Zhuyin said, “No matter how the situation changes in Qudu, it’s the duty of the commanders and generals to protect his home and defend his country. Jiming, military talents are hard to come by, and it isn’t easy to nurture and train them. Libei is a heavily fortified land at Dazhou’s frontier. It will only prove to be detrimental to Libei if you still don’t choose a successor.”

It was the original aspiration of each and every one of them to be a valiant general of one side and to become an impregnable fortress of Dazhou. However, a man would eventually age.

Entrusting and tethering the lives of an entire army to one person could be overlooked if it was just for a few years, but let it continue for more than a decade, or even a few decades, and the Libei’s Armored Cavalry would turn into one that could not do without Xiao Jiming.

If one day, the Libei’s Armored Cavalry were to lose Xiao Jiming, then what would become of the army that had reigned supreme on the battlefield for decades without any blemish to its reputation?

“I know you have high hopes for A-Ye.” Qi Zhuyin descended the stairs and turned her head back unhurriedly. “But he is destined to never fly out of Qudu. You put your eyes on him. Do you think he never noticed it all these years even though you never spoke of it? The more expectation you have for him, the more agony he’ll be in. Libei is not his wings, but his cage. Jiming, you and I have been buddies for many years. Let me give you a word of advice. Choose someone else.”

The palace eaves in the far distance were all shrouded in fog. A lone crow cawed a few times, and silence descended once more.



#### Footnotes

1. 羈鸟恋旧林,池鱼思故渊.

2. The bird in the cage longs for its former woods, while the fish in the pond misses the deep (pool/sea).
3. From “Return to Nature (or the Fields) Part 1“ 《归园田居·其一》 by Tao Yuanming (陶渊明), also known as Tao Qian, a Chinese poet who was also known as the Poet of the Fields.
4. There is a Chinese proverb, 父債子還, which means the son is obliged to pay his father’s debt. Thus Shen Wei’s crimes became Shen Zechuan’s to bear.
5. 緹骑 *tíqí*; a subordinate of the Imperial Bodyguards. They are mounted cavalry of the Imperial Bodyguards that wear red uniforms and are commonly guarded escorts of an official’s retinue or entourage.
6. 妈妈 *Mama* or Madam, address for the procuress who runs a pleasure house or brothel
7. 赎(身) Redeem (a person); paying a price to ‘buy’ the freedom of those who have been sold into certain trades, e.g. slaves and courtesans (i.e. prostitutes).
8. 沙丘 *Shaqui* or sand dunes



- 9.
10. 琵琶 *Pipa*, a four-stringed Chinese musical instrument, belonging to the plucked category of instruments.



- 11.
12. 奏折 *zouzhe*, also 折子 *zhezi*, is a memorial presented to the Emperor
13. 冰敬 Literally, ‘Ice Respect’ (or paying respect with ‘ice’ during summer) is one of the objectionable practices of ‘Three Respects’ during the Qing Dynasty, along with ‘Coal Respect’ and ‘Departure Respect’. ‘Ice Respect’ refers to the bribe money officials outside the Capital used to bribe the officials in the Capital during summertime.
14. Li Jianheng uses “我” for the first “I”, the swapped to “朕” for the second “I” in this sentence. It’s not apparent in the English sentence, but “朕”, or *zhen*, is an exclusive imperial term for “I” that the Emperor uses to refer to himself. I’ll just be using “I”, “me”, “my”, etc, in the text for easier reading, but Emperors typically use “*zhen*” when referring to himself. Li Jianheng’s automatic use of “我” first shows that he is still not used to being, or yet to get into his role as, an Emperor.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 30 : KING OF WOLVES



Xiao Chiye seems to have forgotten having lost his cool last night. He spurred his horse on through the street, causing cries of discontent to rise all around from the stall vendors on both sides of the street. He hurried over to the palace gate just in time to see the horse carriage from the Xiao Clan's Prince Residence.

Zhao Hui lifted the curtain for Xiao Fangxu and said, "Second Young Master is here."

With his hand on his knee, Xiao Fangxu looked out of the carriage. His gaze passed past his youngest son and landed upon the man inept in riding behind him—Shen Zechuan. He paused for a moment, but said nothing. When Xiao Chiye arrived before him, he saw the injury on Xiao Chiye's face and asked, "What did you do last night?"

"I went drinking." Xiao Chiye reined in his horse and laughed as he held his horsewhip. "I forgot the time. By the time I woke up, it was already late. Father, are you done with the discussion?"

Xiao Fangxu nodded and asked, "Is that Shen Wei's son?"

The Autumn wind suddenly came assaulting Shen Zechuan in the face. It grazed past his temples. He met Xiao Fangxu's eyes and felt a shudder for no reason. His grip on the reins tightened in uneasiness.

But Xiao Fangxu did nothing.

The sideburns of Libei's old King of the Wolves were white. Even though he was sitting all hunched over in the horse carriage, one could still make out his extraordinary height and build. That commanding presence was not something anyone could develop overnight. It was a majestic dignity honed out of a mountain of corpses and a sea of blood. It was a formidable strength so tempered with bones and blood that even his "sickness" could not overshadow it.

Xiao Chiye's naturally endowed, sturdy physique was completely inherited from his father. His shocking arm strength, exceptional height, wide shoulders and back, and explosively swift long legs, were all gifts from his father.

Compared with the gentler and more elegant Xiao Jiming, Xiao Chiye was the true wolf pup. If one were to glance over while the two brothers

stood together, there would be no doubt that Xiao Chiye was the one who gave off a more aggressive vibe.

And now, the real King of Wolves was watching Shen Zechuan attentively. Despite already learning how to restrain himself, Shen Zechuan still had the strong urge to flee.

This was utterly different from being pinned down by Xiao Chiye. This was a gaze that would make one shiver subconsciously.

At this very moment, Shen Zechuan recalled Grand Mentor Qi's words.

"It's Xiao Jiming's time to shine now that Xiao Fangxu is off-commission from illness. Everyone fears Xiao Jiming. But, Lanzhou, twenty years ago, the one who truly secured the frontier with his steed was Xiao Fangxu. From today's point of view, Qi Shiyu clearly has more authority of office as the Commander-in-chief of the Five Commanderies, but he has not been conferred the title of a prince.<sup>1</sup> That is because Qidong is a 'bestowed fief belonging to the Emperor'. The five commanderies are all founding lands of Dazhou that belong to the Son of Heaven. But it's different for Libei. The vast territory of Libei stretches from Luoxia Pass to the end of Hongyan Mountain Ranges in the northeast, and these are all hard-won lands Xiao Fangxu led the Armored Cavalry of Libei to conquer inch by inch during the years of Yongyi!

"Xiao Jiming is now the Commander-in-chief of Libei's Armored Cavalry. 'River of Ice Armored Cavalry'—How awe-inspiring. But it was Xiao Fangxu who established this powerful regiment of cavalry. The Libei's Armored Cavalry doesn't have a long history like the Bianjun Commandery Garrison Troops. They are heavy cavalry that Xiao Fangxu specially set up to deal a heavy blow to our external foes during the years of Yongyi when the Biansha Cavalry repeatedly invaded Luoxia Pass. Libei's battle steeds, Libei's soldiers, and Libei's steel blades with hanging chains... Every symbol of the Libei's Armored Cavalry you can see today all came from Xiao Fangxu."

"The Eight Great Clans have forcibly entrenched themselves in Qudu for a long time. They are the sores and ulcers of Dazhou. The Xiao Clan can stand up to the Hua Clan as equals because Xiao Fangxu's status is secure in Libei. As long as Xiao Fangxu is alive, the Xiao Clan will be the towering tree firmly rooted in Libei! The title of the King of Wolves is, by no means, undeserved."

Xiao Chiye looked back and said, "... He's Shen Wei's son."

Shen Zechuan dismounted and paid his obeisances to Xiao Fangxu.

Xiao Fangxu looked at him for a moment and said, "Shen Wei is already dead, and his child is innocent. Since the former Emperor has let you out, that means he has absolved you of guilt. But why are you following this lad?"

Shen Zechuan knelt on one knee and hung his head down to say, "This humble servant was assigned to the Imperial Bodyguards. Now that it's now temporarily under the Imperial Army, I'm at the Viceroy's disposal."

"So I see." Xiao Fangxu looked towards Xiao Chiye. "And why are you making things difficult for him?"

Xiao Chiye licked the wound in his mouth and said, "How would I make things difficult for him? He and I are now sworn friends. Isn't that right, Lanzhou?"

Without looking at Shen Zechuan again, Xiao Fangxu started to chat with Xiao Chiye.

Shen Zechuan propped himself up with a knee and looked at Xiao Chiye's unrestrained smile and the way Xiao Fangxu gazed at his son through the puddle of water on the ground.

Splashes of raindrops messed up the scene in the puddle.

Shen Zechuan retracted his gaze.

By the time Xiao Jiming emerged, Xiao Fangxu had already left. Qi Zhuyin walked a few steps with him and suddenly asked, "Who is that?"

Xiao Jiming looked beside Zhao Hui and replied without a change in expression, "That's Shen Zechuan."

Qi Zhuyin halted in her tracks and said with some surprise, "Shen Wei's son? Why is he following A-ye?"

Xiao Jiming said, "A-ye is playful. Most likely, he's making things hard for him."

Qi Zhuyin looked for a long time before saying, "That appearance of his is too outstanding. I heard that his mother was a dancer from Duanzhou. Fortunately, she was a dancer from Duanzhou and not the Cangjun Commandery."

Commander-in-chief Qi Shiyu was the most fond of beauties. He was a man who would not move his feet whenever he saw a pretty woman.

Although Qi Zhuyin had very few brothers, she had countless *yiniang*<sup>2</sup> back at home.

“Speaking of which.” Qi Zhuyin turned sideways. “A-ye is already twenty-three years of age, right? Isn’t he going to marry a wife?”

“Yizhi is also getting anxious on his behalf.” Xiao Jiming said. “Libei doesn’t need him to marry a noble lady from a powerful and honorable clan. Just a girl from an ordinary family with a clean background will do. Yizhi keeps sending portraits of all the Libei women she picked out on his behalf to Qudu every year, but not one of them has ever caught his fancy.”

Qi Zhuyin laughed. “A noble lady tends to be haughty; she can’t play with him. While a common girl is too timid; she will get frightened the moment she’s near him. Besides, how many maidens can handle that temper of his? Finding someone who he is mutually in love with and vice versa is harder than ascending to Heaven. What’s more, he loves to make his way to the alleys of pleasure houses. You’d better keep an eye on him, or he’ll really bring a courtesan back to marry one day.”

Xiao Jiming knew that her stepmothers were all famous courtesans in Qidong. They would kick up such a row in the backyard all day long that she would always get a headache the moment she got home. That was why she had detested courtesans ever since she was young.

“Who can stop him if he really meets someone he fancies?” Xiao Jiming felt like letting out a long sigh. He said with a headache. “Even ten bulls won’t be able to haul him home.”

“You’d better prepare for rainy days.” Qi Zhuyin thought for a moment. “Never mind about all the others, but her personality must not be too intense. Your Yizhi is gentle by nature. If he brings home someone with a temper, then Yizhi would have to suffer indignities every day, wouldn’t she?”

“Nothing has even begun to take shape yet.”<sup>3</sup> Xiao Jiming suddenly laughed out loud. “It’s still too early.”

“Marriages are the most unpredictable.” Qi Zhuyin laughed too. “Perhaps someday he will see the light?”

Xiao Chiye felt as though there was a chill on his back. He looked back warily and saw Shen Zechuan standing beside Zhao Hui, looking contemplative.

“I’ll go to the Imperial Army Office in a while to collect the authority token.” Xiao Chiye blocked the light in front of Shen Zechuan. “Before the

final deployment order of the Imperial Bodyguards is given, you will have to follow me day and night.”

“Day and night.” Shen Zechuan repeated the words and looked up at him. “Do I still have to lift the chamber pot for the Second Young Master at night?”

“If you want to, then sure.” Xiao Chiye took a step closer. “I’m busy these few days. I have to stay at the residence behind the Imperial Army office.”

Shen Zechuan did not answer.

Xiao Chiye had already turned around to receive Xiao Jiming.



The review of the Court of Judicial Review had yet to conclude when both the Hua and Pan residences were searched and seized. Li Jianheng took the opportunity to close off access to the Empress Dowager’s Enci Palace on the grounds that the Empress Dowager was “troubled by worries to the point of anxiety.”

With some difficulty, enough money was finally gathered to make up for the shortfall in Libei’s military fund for salaries and provisions. Xiao Fangxu and Xiao Jiming could not stay for long, and so they left a few days after.

Xiao Chiye unexpectedly did not look reluctant to part with them. It was as if he had abandoned the ambitions he had during the Autumn Hunt after that night of inebriation. From time to time, Li Jianheng would bestow him with rewards, and each time, he would accept it with delight.

Not only that, he also started to loaf on the job. Originally, the Imperial Army had the important task of conducting patrols. But he worked in fits and starts like the fisherman who fished for three days and dried the net for two days.<sup>4</sup> There was often no sight of him where he should be. The Ministry of War gradually began to voice their doubts about him as they grew more inclined to have him replaced.

But Li Jianheng refused to agree and even used the tactics of making a scene and throwing his tantrum. He even went to the extent of almost falling out with the Vice Minister of the Ministry of War who presented the petition.

He flung away the memorial<sup>5</sup> from the Vice Minister of the Ministry of War and said, “Xiao Ce’an has made great contributions in coming to my



rescue. Why isn't he up to being the Viceroy of the Imperial Army? It's not like he has bungled matters or held things up. I won't replace him!"

Both men reverted to the way they were before the Autumn Hunt, and Li Jianheng felt a little more relaxed. The Xiao Chiye of that night was more like a figment of his imagination, while this man without an iota of decorum was his buddy.

Li Jianheng also felt glad that Xiao Chiye did not mention a word about returning to Libei. He was of the view that this was his buddy's consideration of his situation. There was really nothing he could do! And it was still possible to play while remaining in Qudu, wasn't it? Now that he had even become the Emperor, Xiao Chiye could throw his weight around as he liked given their relationship, no?!

So why return to Libei? How could that bitter cold land be as comfortable and carefree as in Qudu?!

When Xiao Chiye wanted to head out of the city to race his horse, Li Jianheng approved it. When Xiao Chiye wanted to expand the Imperial Army Office, Li Jianheng approved it too. And when Xiao Chiye wanted to be on duty for half a day and idle at home for the other half, Li Jianheng not only approved it, he even approved it with great delight.

When both men had nothing to do, they would ride horses and play ball. Li Jianheng could not head for Donglong Street to fool around, but he could ask Xiao Chiye over to listen to the pipa<sup>6</sup> together with him. That Mu Ru now lived in Mingli Hall. Li Jianheng originally thought that Xiao Chiye would say a few words of admonishments. Instead, Xiao Chiye said nothing and merely joined in the fun with him.

It feels so fucking good to be an Emperor!

During the last rain in Qudu, Xi Gu'an was sentenced to execution by decapitation by the Court of Judicial Review. Because Xi Hongxuan distributed his wealth and sought forgiveness, he got into Li Jianheng's good graces and was transferred to the Ministry of Revenue where he took up a modest position. Xi Hongxuan was originally adept at having fun, and this was just perfect for Li Jianheng, so Xi Hongxuan would go looking for Li Jianheng every day to offer him suggestions on what and how to play.

Xi Gu'an had only just been sentenced when Hua Siqian committed suicide by biting off his tongue in the prison. In the testimony he gave, he shouldered all the crimes without so much a word implicating the Empress Dowager. At present, it was just Ji Lei and Pan Rugui who had yet to be

sentenced. Hai Liangyi wanted to pry a confession out of these two men's mouths, but he never succeeded.

It was not until the house was damp that Shen Zechuan returned. As soon as he opened the door, he saw an eastern pearl<sup>7</sup> on the table. Shen Zechuan closed the door. He had only just picked up the pearl in his hand when he heard Chen Yang knocking on the door.

He opened the door, and Chen Yang said, "The Viceroy is calling for you."

Shen Zechuan grasped the eastern pearl in his hand. The strip of cloth it came with was soaked. He said naturally, "I'll go once I change my clothes."

Chen Yang said, "Don't bother. Just go like this. The Viceroy doesn't have the patience to wait for others."

With that, he took a step aside, wanting to leave together with Shen Zechuan. Shen Zechuan could only let his hands drop and stride out of the door to leave with Chen Yang.

Xiao Chiye was wearing a cloak. When he saw him coming, he said, "Take the blade and come with me."

Shen Zechuan went out of the door. It was only when Xiao Chiye led the horse over that Shen Zechuan realized Chen Yang had not followed them.

Xiao Chiye got up the horse, and the gyrfalcon shook the water droplets off its neck before landing on Xiao Chiye's shoulder. Shen Zechuan could only follow after him. The horse left the city and braved the rain to head for the military drill grounds at Mount Feng.

When they arrived at the drill grounds, it was empty and void of people. Xiao Chiye removed the reins for Lang Tao Xue Jin and gave it a pat to let it run around to play by itself. Meng flew under the veranda, unwilling to soak in the rain any longer.

"Take off your clothes." Xiao Chiye turned around and said to Shen Zechuan as he untied his cloak.

Shen Zechuan held the blade in his arms and raised his chin. The water trickled down the front of his clothes, exposing that fair, delicate neck of his.

Xiao Chiye felt just like a person seeing a cat every time he looked at Shen Zechuan's neck; he always could not help wanting to give it a few rubs.

What the heck is wrong with him?

He had already taken off his outer garment while he was thinking. When he saw Shen Zechuan still not moving, he urged again, “What are you standing there blankly for? Strip quickly!”

Shen Zechuan raised his fingers and placed them on his own waist belt. He glanced at him and said slowly, “If I strip, there will be nothing left.”



#### Footnotes

1. 王 Princes, or lords, during the Ming Dynasty were titled and salaried members of the imperial bureaucracy with nominal lordship over various fiefs throughout China. Conferred princes are those who were bestowed the title by the Emperor. I have used a different naming system for both kinds of princes to make it easier to distinguish between real princes (Prince Chu) and conferred princes (Prince of Libei).
2. 姨娘 *yiniang*, or maternal aunt. *Yiniang* is also a term of address for the concubines of one's father.
3. Just some extra nugget, skip if you want! This line is from 八字没一撇 literally the first stroke of the character 八 (eight) has yet to appear. 八字 also refers to a person's eight characters, one's birth data for astrological or fortune-telling purposes, combined from year, month, day, hour, heavenly trunk, and earthly branch. Parents in those days would usually check their children's' eight characters against each other before matchmaking them. Their eight characters typically had to match before a marriage could take place as couples whose eight characters clashed would be deemed to be at odds with one another, which in turn was believed to lead to an unharmonious and unhappy marriage. So 八字没一撇 here in this context could also be taken to mean their eight characters have not even been written out for matching purposes since they don't know who the other person is. i.e. it's still too early to say since Xiao Chiye doesn't even have a (confirmed) love interest (yet)
4. 三天打鱼，两天晒网 literally fish for three days and dry the net for two days; i.e., to lack perseverance and work in fits and start.



5.

6. 奏折 *zouzhe*, also 折子 *zhezi*, is a memorial presented to the Emperor



7.

8. 琵琶 *Pipa*, a four-stringed Chinese musical instrument, belonging to the plucked category of instruments.

9. 东珠 literally eastern pearl, a rare treasure also known as the northern pearl (北珠) or *tana* in Mongolian. During the Qing Dynasty, pearls produced in northeast China were called the eastern pearl to distinguish them from the southern pearl produced in the south. The rulers of the Qing Dynasty regarded the eastern pearls as treasures and used them to inlay their crown and clothing with it to represent authority and honor.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 31 : NAPE



“Then all the more for you to strip.” Xiao Chiye took off his arm guards and set them on the wooden ledge under the eaves together with his cloak and outer garment. The soldiers in the inner hall of the military drill grounds wanted to come over to pay their obeisances, but he raised a hand to stop them. He turned around to look calmly at Shen Zechuan and said, “That’d be just perfect for me to see and experience for myself the difference between a body trained by the Ji Clan’s mental cultivation techniques and mine.”

“Since we are from the same school of martial arts.” Shen Zechuan set Langli Blade at the side. “Then the stances and moves are naturally the same.”

“Not necessarily so.” Xiao Chiye said, “My shifu incorporated an external boxing style<sup>1</sup> into it, so it was already quite different from the Ji Clan Boxing Style by the time it was imparted to me. If they were identical, you wouldn’t have been totally oblivious of the fact that night.”

“If you want to exchange pointers, then just say so.” Shen Zechuan slid a leg out in an arc. “Why speak of stripping? You sound just like a beast.”

In that very instant, Xiao Chiye felt as though Shen Zechuan had suddenly turned into another person. Rainwater and mountain fog overlapped, washing out Shen Zechuan’s facial features. In contrast, his slender body became all the more striking.

“My wish is to be a beast in human clothing.” Xiao Chiye strode down the stairs and stepped into the curtain of rain. “I gave you a kick five years ago. Do you hate me for it?”

Shen Zechuan said, “If I say yes, wouldn’t that mean I have been tossing and turning having sleepless nights thinking of you? So nope. I don’t hate you at all.”

Xiao Chiye struck up a starting stance and said, “What a pity. If you hate me, then you can get your revenge today.”

Amid the biting cold wind, Xiao Chiye slowly added on, “—That is, if you can.”

Raindrops came pitter-pattering down, bouncing for a few steps before spreading their wings on the veranda. At this moment, Xiao Chiye sprang up in the rain to make his move first.

He threw out a punch, only to strike at empty air. But the vigor and strength of his blow sent the water droplets flying and splashing onto Shen Zechuan's cheeks.

Having missed his target with that strike, Xiao Chiye swept his arm to the left. Shen Zechuan blocked his blow with a lightning move of his hand. When both men's arms collided, Shen Zechuan frowned from the pain and retreated a few steps back.

Ji Clan's Boxing Style!

Shen Zechuan pursed his lips into a tight line, but laughed out loud instead.

Shifu's boxing style was steady and robust. Xiao'Er<sup>2</sup> obviously lacked the steadiness but was far more ferocious. His strength was too astonishing. Just a collision like this, and the impact had already numbed Shen Zechuan's arm.

The Ji Clan's Boxing Style was meant to be imparted to this kind of man, because his internal and external constitution all made it particularly suitable for him to train in it. Xiao Chiye's physique granted him the qualification to hold the various heroes in contempt. But was receiving an unfair advantage from Heaven the crux to determining victory?

What Shen Zechuan did not believe the most was the fate Heaven decided for them!

Shen Zechuan raised a leg up, and raindrops suddenly went splashing towards Xiao Chiye. His leg sweep<sup>3</sup> was quick and brutal. Any other ordinary person would home in on the advantageous and avoid the dangerous; thus, they would first evade an incoming attack.

But Xiao Chiye just had to meet difficulties head-on. He lifted his arm to block and fend off Shen Zechuan's leg with a "thud", then strode a steady step forward.

It was too late for Shen Zechuan to retract his leg. Facing off Xiao Chiye was just like facing off a tiger or a leopard poised for action. A wavering heart, an evasive gaze, an avoidant stance—As long as he showed any signs of these, Xiao Chiye would instantly storm in. He would never miss any opportunity to attack his opponent.

Letting Xiao Chiye go on the defensive was much easier to deal with than letting Xiao Chiye go on the offensive!

Shen Zechuan exerted force with his leg, and the pressure slightly slowed down Xiao Chiye's movement. In a twinkling of an eye, Shen

Zechuan was lifted into the air by Xiao Chiye. He leaned his entire body back, supported his weight with both arms on the ground, and straightened back up like a soft willow in the wind. The moment he sprang back to his feet, he swept his leg out again.

Once again, Xiao Chiye bent his arm to block it. This time, his eyes were calm as he said, "An ant trying to shake a tree.<sup>4</sup> Should I diss you for overrating your abilities, or should I commend you for your courage?"

Xiao Chiye had only just said this when he backhandedly grabbed Shen Zechuan's calf. His shoulder sank as he attempted to flip Shen Zechuan over to the ground.

Having already been swung up, Shen Zechuan made use of the momentum and stepped on Xiao Chiye's shoulder. That amazing waist strength of his came into play again as his legs twisted around Xiao Chiye's neck and spun him over to the ground together with him.

Xiao Chiye's palm slid straight up along this straightness and hooked around the spot that had bent into an arch earlier. The suppleness in his palm was so smooth it was incredible.

He simply wanted to touch Shen Zechuan.

Because he could not fathom it. Whether it was the Ji Clan's Boxing Style or the Ji Clan's Broadsword Style, as long as a person trained all the year-round, his body muscles would definitely, and visibly, develop. But Shen Zechuan not only concealed it to the extent it looked as though he had never trained in martial arts, but also to the extent that both Chen Yang and Qiao Tianya were taken in, thinking him to be morbidly weak and sick due to a deficiency of vital energy and blood.<sup>5</sup>

Shen Zechuan lifted his body off the ground and slammed his elbow towards Xiao Chiye's head. Xiao Chiye tilted his head to dodge the blow. He held on tight to Shen Zechuan's waist and pinned him against his own chest, then felt his way up from the latter's waist to his chest.

The eastern pearl<sup>6</sup> was still hidden in his bosom!

The moment Shen Zechuan's back bumped into Xiao Chiye, he clasped hold of Xiao Chiye's arm and flung him over his shoulder into the rain.

The spray of water instantly wetted his hair.

Shen Zechuan wanted to retreat, but Xiao Chiye unexpectedly hooked him with his long leg and sent him tripping towards himself. Shen Zechuan's body was already tilting towards Xiao Chiye, but in that very

instant, he trod on the water and gradually stabilized himself just like the reverberations of the strings on a qin.<sup>7</sup>

Xiao Chiye straightened up and threw himself forward again. His hook struck at empty air, but he touched a lock of Shen Zechuan's long hair that had fluttered up in the rain as the latter spun around in a retreat to evade his blow.

The rain-soaked lock of hair longingly slipped past Xiao Chiye's fingertips as if wanting for more, causing him to feel a wet itch.

"Not fighting anymore." Xiao Chiye suddenly clenched his fist and looked at Shen Zechuan. "The rain has gotten heavier."

Shen Zechuan looked back and asked, "Have you touched enough?"

Without batting an eyelid, Xiao Chiye said, "Not soft, but not hard either."

Shen Zechuan said a little mockingly, "I thought you were going to tear off all my clothes."

"If I really wanted to." Xiao Chiye said, "We would be baring all of ourselves to each other right now."<sup>8</sup>

With that, he raised his other hand and waved the thin blade Shen Zechuan always carried with him.

"The Ji Clan's mental cultivation techniques need to be paired with the broadsword. Even if you use these things every day, you will not be able to defeat me in this lifetime. If you can't beat me, then how are you going to take revenge?"

Shen Zechuan's thin blades were originally hidden on the outside of his thighs. He glanced down, then looked at Xiao Chiye again. He said, "Fighting and killing will hurt relationships. Isn't it more pleasant to play the fool together?"

Xiao Chiye said, "I only fear that you are hiding a blade behind your smile<sup>9</sup> to stab me when I'm the least unaware."

"Only the word lust has a blade above it."<sup>10</sup> Shen Zechuan spread out his hands. "Second Young Master is a gentleman. What's there to fear?"

Xiao Chiye placed the thin blade in Shen Zechuan's palm and said unhurriedly, "I've just said that I'm a beast in human clothing. Why do you always see me as a gentleman?"

Shen Zechuan wanted to retract his hand.

But Xiao Chiye grabbed him by the wrist and said, "Seeing as you are so obedient today, this Second Young Master will take you someplace



that'll make you feel good."

"Viceroy." Shen Zechuan suddenly said with a severe countenance, "Please, I'm not into men. Let us just part on good terms without hard feelings. Why pester me to such an extent?"

Xiao Chiye was momentarily dumbfounded, then he turned his head to the side and saw a whole bunch of Imperial Army soldiers clinging all over the doors and windows of the military drill grounds inner hall to watch the show.

The Vice Commander of the Imperial Army was the scar-faced man who led his men to kill the Eight Great Training Divisions that night. He clutched the window and took the lead to jeer.

"Fighting like a hoodlum taking liberties. Viceroy, what the hell?! You never smiled at us when you lecture us every day!"

"That was pestering he said!" They winked meaningfully at each other and started heckling, "How could that be the same?! The Viceroy is twenty-three now, and he has no wife at home to dote on. So all the energy in him has to be expended on someone else. It's not the same!"

Xiao Chiye sensed that Shen Zechuan was going to run and so he pulled the latter hard towards himself. He said with a superficial smile, "That's right. I'm into pestering others. Lanzhou, why are you running? I'm not done pestering you! The reason you aren't into men is that you have yet to get a sweet taste of them. Second Young Master will teach you."

When it came to being shameless and stupid, he, Xiao Chiye, would only concede defeat to Li Jianheng. Who wouldn't know the trick of forcing yourself on someone else? Shen Zechuan was really belittling him by trying to use this kind of cheap trick to embarrass him.

Without giving Shen Zechuan the chance to reply, Xiao Chiye dragged him away.

Behind them, Tantai Hu touched his scar and asked the soldier beside him, "Who's that man? I've never seen him in our Imperial Army before!"

"His surname is Shen." The man beside him winked. "The one from Zhongbo."

The smile on Tantai Hu's face cooled. He propped himself up with his arms to stick his head out, then looked back and said, "He's that fucking Shen who brought disaster upon Zhongbo? What's the Viceroy doing with him! Shen Wei caused the death of so many people. Even eight heads of his aren't enough for us to behead! The Prince of Jianxing's Manor has already

been wrecked by others. Yet he's still eating and living well in Qudu. The orphans who have lost their parents on the Chashi River frontline are still gnawing on mud! Fuck this! Why didn't you tell me earlier?!"



Xiao Chiye led Shen Zechuan up Mount Feng.

There was a narrow flight of stone steps in the mountain. The stream soaked through the soles of their shoes, chilling them to their bones. But Xiao Chiye did not even look back as he parted the maple leaves dripping with water and made his way onto a path. Their shoes sank into the mud they trod upon as they walked farther in with uneven steps.

Less than an hour later, Xiao Chiye stopped in his tracks.

The thatched cottage in the misty rain was small and exquisite, but it did not look like a place to live in.

He turned sideways and said to Shen Zechuan, "You saved me once in the Nanlin Hunting Grounds. As a reward, I'll share half of this place with you."

"The reward I want is cold, hard cash." Shen Zechuan said, "... not soaking in a bath together."

"Money and fame are merely worldly possessions." Xiao Chiye stretched out both arms to lift the fabric curtain and enter. He stood at the entrance to strip off his attire and shouted, "This place is one that even the Emperor's old man himself had never enjoyed before."

Shen Zechuan lifted the curtain and saw Xiao Chiye's bare upper body. The contours of the muscles on the back of his shoulders were clean and neat, like a physique sculpted with a chisel.

Other than a small clothes rack with curvy raised ends<sup>11</sup> in the house, there was only a hot spring that led out. Xiao Chiye hung up his clothes on one side of the clothes rack. The other end was obviously reserved for him.

Xiao Chiye took off his boots, looked back at Shen Zechuan, and said, "Do you want to turn your back to me and strip, or do you want to strip while watching me?"

Pulling at his waist belt, Shen Zechuan turned his back. The eastern pearl landed in his palm, and he conveniently put it away into his sleeve. The gaze on his back never shifted away. Shen Zechuan's hand paused for a moment before he pulled off his own outer garment.

Xiao Chiye watched that garment slip to the ground. The fairness of Shen Zechuan's neck finally extended downward, very much like pear

blossom rice paper immersed in moonlight. His back looked so thin and smooth.

Xiao Chiye thought.

That's right. It was as if he had been staring at Shen Zechuan's nape all for this very moment.

How could a man's nape produce such breathtaking beauty? This was beyond everything Xiao Chiye had seen and heard in the past. It not only surprised him, but also baffled him.

The fangs of the little wolf from Libei were sharp, but he had never bitten such a neck before, nor had he ever bitten such a man. His gaze slid down from Shen Zechuan's nape with a strength that felt like a caress, moving along that slightly heaving contour as it made its way farther down and down.

Smooth.

Xiao Chiye's mouth felt parched. He suddenly returned to his senses with a jolt and hurriedly averted his gaze.

I must be mad!

He thought.

There were so many courtesans on Donglong Street! Which one of them wasn't a genuine beauty? Why was he looking at a man's back as though he was burning with hunger?

Xiao Chiye used to turn his nose up at people who were seduced by beautiful women, because the elders and seniors he admired were all men of resolute will. Every one of them could be said to be a true gentleman with the air of a man untempted by lust even with a beautiful woman in their laps.<sup>12</sup>

Just like his father, his brother, his shifu.

The famous generals of the world changed generation after generation. But he had never admired Qi Shiyu before precisely because Qi Shiyu was a lecher. After the battle in Zhongbo, the one he loathed the most was Shen Wei, and it was because Shen Wei was not only guilty of monstrous crimes, but was also lecherous!

But at this moment, he felt a little dizzy as that bestial instinct, captivated by beauty and stirred by desires, once again showed signs of rearing its head.

Xiao Chiye strained himself to rein in his gaze and vividly felt the contradiction between his mind and his desire. He did not love this man, but

because of this man's loveliness, the desire to embrace him, ravage him, and tear at him with his teeth sprang up within him for the second time.

"Aren't you going in?" Shen Zechuan was completely oblivious as he turned back and approached him, unperturbed.

Xiao Chiye responded in an angry voice. "...Duh!"



Author's Words:

The back of the neck does indeed imply lust. 233<sup>13</sup>

### Support the Author!

#### Footnotes

1. 外家拳/功夫 'external' martial arts, originates from Shaolin, where one uses one's physical strength in combat to go on the offensive. The opposite 内家拳/功夫 'internal' martial arts originates from Zhang Sanfeng, where one mobilizes one's internal energy instead. The latter is more concerned about the spiritual and mental aspects rather than the physical aspects. An example of internal martial arts is Taiji/Tai Chi.
2. Xiao the Second, also known as Xiao'Er and Second Young Master Xiao, will be used interchangeably depending on the occasion and person saying it. I'll use Xiao'Er (萧二) to distinguish from the -er (儿) suffix that's normally used as a term of endearment. e.g. Chuan-er (川儿)
3. 扫堂腿 a martial art move where one typically sweeps out a leg in a circle.
4. 蚍蜉撼树 literally an ant trying to shake a tree; i.e. overrate oneself.
5. 气血两虚 deficiency of vital energy (qi) and blood. In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), qi (or vital energy) and blood are both required to maintain and nourish one's body to sustain life. When one's qi is deficient, pain, suffering, and illness may occur, while blood deficiency is a condition that underlies many illnesses mainly related to the liver, kidney, heart, and spleen. The latter may seem similar to anemia, but anemia is caused by a lack of iron in the blood, whereas blood deficiency is seen as being a lack of blood itself.

6. 东珠 literally eastern pearl, a rare treasure also known as the northern pearl (北珠) or *tana* in Mongolian. During the Qing Dynasty, pearls produced in northeast China were called the eastern pearl to distinguish them from the southern pearl produced in the south. The rulers of the Qing Dynasty regarded the eastern pearls as treasures and used them to inlay their crown and clothing with it to represent authority and honor.



7.

8. (古)琴 (Gu)qin is a plucked seven-string Chinese musical instrument of the zither family. One of the weapons used by Lan Wangji (MY BAE) of MDZS is the guqin.

9. 坦诚相见 treating each other with sincerity, i.e. baring one's soul/heart to one another. ☺(°▽°)☺

10. 笑里藏刀 literally a blade hidden behind a smile; i.e. a murderous heart or intents under a smiling exterior.

11. 色字头上带(一)把刀, literally, only the word lust (色) has a knife or blade above it. (referring to the radicals that make up the words 色, i.e. 𠂔(a component form of 刀 which means blade) above 巴 to form the character 色. i.e., lust can lead to bitter consequences.



12.

13. 翘头衣架

14. 坐怀不乱 In the Spring and Autumn Period, Liuxia Hui of Lu stayed at the city gate overnight where he met a homeless woman. Fearing the woman would be frozen from the cold, he sat her on his lap (or embraced her in his bosom) and blanketed her with his clothes. The night passed without him making a single indecent move. This later came to describe an upright man who is unaffected by temptations even with a beautiful woman close by.

15. 233, net lingo similar to LOL

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 32 : MOUNTAIN NIGHT STAY



Thick, steaming mist, coupled with the drumming sound of the rain.

Shen Zechuan was about to enter and soak in the water. As he bent down, Xiao Chiye, who was behind him, got a clear look at the curvy contours of his waist and buttocks, which became more and more conspicuous with each of his movements.

Has muscles. Very toned.

But he did not look like a martial arts practitioner the slightest. Because the way Xiao Chiye saw it, he did not have that threatening vibe.

Shen Zechuan submerged himself into the water. His legs, which had soaked in the rain until it was cold, gradually warmed up. Xiao Chiye entered the water and leaned far away from him at the other end.

Shen Zechuan asked in astonishment, “Why are you hiding so far away?”

“It pleases me to.” Xiao Chiye roughly folded the wet handkerchief to cover his eyes, then put up his arms without looking at Shen Zechuan again.

But after a moment, Xiao Chiye found it inappropriate, so he raised his hand to pull off the handkerchief and stared fixedly at Shen Zechuan. Shen Zechuan felt that Xiao’Er was very much like his gyrfalcon right this moment; it was as if he would start going on the offensive with just a little jab.

“What do you want to see?” Shen Zechuan’s expression was as warm as the spring breeze as he used the tone of one cajoling a child eating candied hawthorns<sup>1</sup> on the street. “Tell me. I’ll let you see.”

Xiao Chiye bent up a leg and pulled off the only remaining cover around his waist without batting an eyelid. He said, “I’ve already touched them all earlier.”

Shen Zechuan sank a little lower into the water, exposing only a pair of eyes to look at him.

Xiao Chye felt even more irritable being sized up by that gaze of his. He said, “What?”

Shen Zechuan revealed his lower jaw and replied, “You were in a good mood earlier. Why the sudden change?”

“My mood right now is also pretty good.” Xiao Chiye said, “Soaking in the bath means one can shut up; There is no need to talk... Can you stop looking up at me like that?”

Shen Zechuan slowly lifted his body, and the water trickled down along his chest. His scattered hair spread out like ink saturating the water. It was as if he was a magnolia flower climbing out among this water mist.

Xiao Chiye could not stand it anymore.

Why had he thought of “flower”?

He watched with wide-open eyes as Shen Zechuan came closer to him. He could even smell Shen Zechuan’s scent when the latter sat beside him.

Not fragrant. Mild scent. Feel like catching a few more whiffs.

Xiao Chiye retracted the arms he had put up at the edges and suddenly pulled over a garment from the clothes rack. He stuffed all of it into the water to cover up his waist. After doing this, he looked calmly at Shen Zechuan and said, “What? Surprised? I’m afraid you might get funny ideas at the sensual sight of Second Young Master; hence, the cover.”

“Then I thank you...” Shen Zechuan said with a displeased expression.

Xiao Chiye lowered his head, only to realize that the clothing he had pulled off belonged to Shen Zechuan.

“...For washing my clothes on my behalf.” Shen Zechuan said, “Now I’ll have to soak in here until tomorrow.”

The awkward silence permeated through the air rapidly as both men looked at each other. Outside, the wind rustled amid the cold and dismal autumn rain.

After a long while, Xiao Chiye said, “This clothing won’t dry even if we leave it be. Meng can go and call Chen Yang over.”

With that, he raised his head and whistled.

There was a moment’s silence in the hot spring. Neither Lang Tao Xue Jin nor Meng came.

Xiao Chiye whistled again.

Outside, Meng shrank its head under its wing and ignored him. Such a heavy rain—it had absolutely no wish to fly out and get itself wet.

The silence seemed endless.

Eventually, Shen Zechuan said, “... I’ll wring it dry.”

Xiao Chiye pressed the clothes back down, and said while gnashing his teeth at him, “Wait a moment!”





Both men were stranded in the hot springs for a night. By the time their clothes dried, it was already the hour of *mao*.<sup>2</sup> Shen Zechuan finally put on his clothes at long last. As he secured his waist belt, he could still sense that ravenous gaze of a tiger eyeing its prey. But he said nothing and feigned unawareness.

Xiao Chiye lifted the hanging screen. It was still dark outside. The air was thick with mountain fog and the scent of dampness after a rain. It was inconvenient to head down the mountain, as the stone stairs were all covered in thin ice.

Both men moved in a single file, with one in front and one at the back.

“The military drill grounds occupy the southwestern side of Mount Feng.” Shen Zechuan surveyed the place from above. “Although it’s very close to Qudu, its view is completely blocked by Mount Feng. The Eight Great Training Division won’t conduct their patrols here. Your location choice is really excellent.”

“I wouldn’t have chosen this land if not for Mount Feng.” Xiao Chiye pushed aside the maple branches and turned back to indicate to Shen Zechuan to make his way over under his arm.

Shen Zechuan passed under it. The scenery before him suddenly opened up as all the obstructions turned to mist. He could see the Imperial Army’s military drill grounds clearly. There were already squads running around the grounds.

“The Imperial Army did not make a move during the Autumn Hunt.” Shen Zechuan sized it up for a moment and said, “But I can see that they are all fully equipped. Hua Siqian is dead now, the moment the seizure of his assets following the Autumn Hunt is concluded, the Chief Surveillance Bureau will be coming for you.”

Xiao Chiye obviously could not afford to raise 20,000 Imperial Army soldiers based on his salary alone, and he could not misappropriate the military salary and provisions of the Libei Armored Cavalry either. But going by the annual budget the Ministry of Revenue allocated to him before the Autumn Hunt, the Imperial Army obviously would not have the money to establish themselves on such a scale. Xi Gu’an died because he “could not explain” himself. And now, it was time for them to be demanding answers from Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye said, “Let them come.”

As for where the money had come from, he did not speak further on the issue, and Shen Zechuan did not ask again.

After a while, Xiao Chiye said, "Many errands from the Ministry of Works requiring manual labor were all handed to the Imperial Army to be carried out. Since five years ago, every sum of money paid out to the Imperial Army for the assignments were all recorded down in black and white in the account books. Even if the Chief Surveillance Bureau investigates it, they won't be able to find anything nefarious."

It was for this reason that Xiao Chiye became the infamous debt collector in the Ministry of Revenue. All of them thought he was asking for money to spend on women and wine. They did not know that he was actually saving money over the years, and that the only account he had that could be said to be an extravagant expense was money for wine. Li Jianheng might be muddle-headed, but he was generous when it came to his buddies. Every time he invited Xiao Chiye to Donglong Street, he was the one who paid out of his own pocket for the girls and for the feasts to treat his bunch of disreputable friends .

Li Jianheng lived off government coffers, and he had no principal wife to keep him in line. If he had no money, he would ask the palace for it. Emperor Xiande had never been stingy with him when it came to him spending money. Even if he had to take the funds from his own coffers, he would also give him the money. So, Li Jianheng never lacked money.

Xiao Chiye did not manage to return to Libei, but he had never resented Li Jianheng for it. Because he knew it better than anyone else that Li Jianheng regarded these disreputable friends of his as his real brothers.

Thinking to this point, Xiao Chiye said, "The reason the Empress Dowager saved you is naturally because she wants to use you. If all is calm, you can perhaps enjoy a steady rise to the top in the Imperial Bodyguards. But the former Emperor suddenly started resisting. The Empress Dowager... The Empress Dowager has gone looking for you, hasn't she?"

Shen Zechuan met Xiao Chiye's eyes.

He must not evade it. Not even for a moment. Xiao Chiye had an extremely keen sense of smell. He only had to show a trace of guilt and Xiao Chiye could definitely tell.

Shen Zechuan replied with certainty, "Never."

The chilly wind brushed past them and swept up the hems of their clothes.

Xiao Chiye slowly exhaled cold air and smiled unconcernedly. "Then your luck is pretty good."

It was already daybreak by the time they returned to Qudu. Xiao Chiye said from atop his horse, "I have to rush over for the morning court session.<sup>3</sup> You head back first."

Shen Zechuan nodded and watched as Xiao Chiye spurred his horse on to leave. When he returned to the abode, he did not see Chen Yang. Presumably, the latter had already left to wait for Xiao Chiye at the palace gate.

Shen Zechuan took out the eastern pearl from his sleeve and held it between his fingertips to scrutinize it under the faint light. But before he could remove the strip of cloth, he paused.

When he undressed, he had placed the eastern pearl into his right sleeve. But now, it was from the left sleeve he took the eastern pearl out of.

Shen Zechuan clicked his tongue lightly and frowned.



Xiao Chiye arrived at the palace gate, dismounted, and made his way into his family's horse carriage where he quickly changed into his official robe. Chen Yang had also prepared breakfast, and the porridge was still hot. Xiao Chiye drank a bowl.

"I went to the military drill grounds last night to look for you, but you weren't there." Chen Yang kneeled beside the curtain and whispered, "It isn't stable in Qudu these days. Someone ought to go along with you when you venture outdoors."

Xiao Chiye set aside the bowl and said, "Get someone to keep a close watch on Shen Lanzhou at all times."

Chen Yang acknowledged his order and said, "It's all our own men outside the abode. As long as he ventures outdoors, he definitely will not escape your eyes. It's just that the Hua Clan has been defeated. Viceroy, what advantage is there for us to watch him closely now?"

Xiao Chiye did not answer. He did not look too good as he lowered his eyes for a long time. It was not until Chen Yang mentioned the morning court session that he wiped his hands with a clean handkerchief and said, "I find that man unpredictable. If you look at him now, can you tell that he knows a little martial arts?"

Chen Yang replied, "He looks clearly weaker than he was when he joined the Imperial Bodyguards. If Viceroy had not spoken of his help

during the Autumn Hunt, I'd definitely not be able to tell. But if Viceroy gets Zhao Hui to take a look, perhaps he might be able to catch something."

"Zhao Hui met him face-to-face the last time he entered the capital, and he did not see anything off about him." Xiao Chiye said, "That body of his..."

His voice stopped abruptly. After a while, he continued, "Send a letter to Libei immediately and request shifu's presence here."

Stunned, Chen Yang said, "You want to ask..."

"No matter what method he used to cover it up, it will definitely not escape shifu's eyes." Xiao Chiye twirled his thumb ring around and said apathetically, "Besides, there's... something I need to speak with shifu."



Li Jianheng shelved the morning court session today. He had yet to sleep his fill when he heard Shuanglu reporting to him that Hai Liangyi was kneeling just outside. Li Jianheng was immediately wide awake, but Mu Ru, who was in his arms, was still asleep. For a moment, he could not free himself, so he could only raise his neck and instruct Shuanglu in a whisper, "Go! Send him away."

Shuanglu had only gone out for a while before he returned to kneel. He said, "Secretariat Elder said he must see Your Majesty. This slave said Your Majesty is still asleep, so Secretariat Elder said he will kneel and wait for Your Majesty."

Li Jianheng panicked. Mu Ru had only just woken up in his embrace when he hurriedly coaxed her, "My dear, get dressed quickly and go to Chenming Palace at the back for your meal! I have to receive and meet the Secretariat Elder!"

Mu Ru was dainty and delicate, with black hair like a waterfall. At this moment, she did not pester him or make a commotion and simply dressed herself obediently. Once she was done, she glanced seductively at Li Jianheng with her adoring, affectionate eyes and helped him up as if the honor he had bestowed on her was too much for her to take.

Li Jianheng loved this look of hers to bits. He tugged at her hand, reluctant to part, wanting so much to hold her on his knees while holding court.

"Next time," Li Jianheng kissed her several times in a row. "Next time, I'll not ask you to retreat."

He embraced her and spoke for quite a while. It was only when Shuanglu entered again to hurry him up that Li Jianheng reluctantly let Mu Ru go.

Hai Liangyi entered with a solemn expression and kowtowed.

Li Jianheng sat on the dragon throne and said, "Please rise, Secretariat Elder. Please rise quickly."

Hai Liangyi remained in place and kowtowed again.

Not getting a response, Li Jianheng looked left and right, feeling his face burning. He coughed twice and said, "I've caught a cold these two days, so I wanted to sleep in a little longer in the morning..."

Hai Liangyi said, "This old subject has heard that Your Majesty has been diligently holding night courts. It's just that there has been no responses to all the memorials that have been submitted. After giving the matter careful thought, this old subject has come to admonish Your Majesty in the face. Your Majesty is now in the prime of life and at the height of power. If Your Majesty exercises diligence in governing the state, then a bright, thriving future will be close at hand once the depressing atmosphere from before has been swept away."

Li Jianheng let out a few dry laughs and said, "I guess so..."

"But Your Majesty resides deep in the inner palace surrounded by castrated traitors serving him. If I indulge Your Majesty and let Your Majesty be, then Your Majesty will over time turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to advice and stray far from current politics!" Hai Liangyi said resolutely and firmly. "This subject has heard that Shuanglu, the eunuch personally serving Your Majesty, has been bribed into staffing plenty of dubious and low-down people around Your Majesty. According to the palace rules, anyone who isn't acting on imperial orders yet has the audacity to lead outsiders into the palace should be flogged to death!"

Shuanglu fell to his knees with a "thud" and looked at Li Jianheng in terror. He said, "Your Majesty, Your Majesty..."

"Mingli Hall is a just and sacred place in this world. How can we tolerate eunuchs making a din here?" Hai Liangyi looked at Li Jianheng, "Your Majesty!"

Li Jianheng's chest was pounding hard. He looked at the stern Hai Liangyi and recalled the extreme danger of that night. His palms were sweating, and he wiped them on his dragon robe like a loser. He did not even dare to say a word in reply.

The guards outside had already entered to drag Shuanglu away. Shuanglu cried out as he slid across the floor, “Your Majesty, Your Majesty!”

“His crime...” Li Jianheng looked at Shuanglu. “His crime is not punishable by death...”

“Your Majesty.” Hai Liangyi said firmly. “Pan Rugui formed an eunuch clique and colluded with Hua Siqian to stir up havoc within and outside Qudu. It’s now the time to nip it in the bud as a warning to others! Not only that, promiscuous members of the imperial harem who seduce and bewitch the Emperor in an attempt to sway him should also be flogged to death!”

Trembling with fear, Li Jianheng said, “I wouldn’t dare, I wouldn’t dare! With such a virtuous subject like Secretariat Elder to supervise and prompt me every day, how would I dare to act arbitrarily and fool around?! Secretariat Elder mustn’t be taken in by those groundless rumors.”

But Hai Liangyi said mercilessly, “There’s no smoke without fire. Your Majesty, we must not allow beautiful women who are the sources of troubles<sup>4</sup> to remain!”

Li Jianheng was really scared now. How could he bear to let Mu Ru die? He rose to his feet in a panic, cutting a sorry figure as he said, “Secretariat Elder, I’ve realized my mistakes. Shuanglu has served me for many years. Just... drop the matter today, and I’ll surely administer affairs of state with due diligence in the future!”

Hai Liangyi kowtowed, deferring to him when all had been said and done to preserve some of his dignity.

Li Jianheng held on to the table and listened to the sound of flogging outside. Blow after blow, one after the other. It was as if the one being hit was himself. He looked at Hai Liangyi with mixed feelings; there was aggrievement and also fear.

Xiao Chiye was just in time to see others splashing water and wiping the floor when he entered. Bloodstains spread under his feet. They were so vividly red that it was terrifying. All the eunuchs in Mingli Hall were quietly kneeling outside; not one of them dared to raise their heads.

Xiao Chiye strode inside, where Li Jianheng was sitting stupefied like a piece of wood on the dragon throne. When Li Jianheng saw Xiao Chiye enter, he stared blankly at him for a moment before he burst out bawling.

Li Jianheng smashed objects around as he cried and shouted, “What kind of Emperor is this? To think someone would point a finger to my nose

and humiliate me like this! Which land under the heavens isn't land of the Emperor?!<sup>5</sup> What's wrong with me bestowing favors on a woman? Where's the wrong in it?!"



#### Footnotes



- 1.
2. 糖葫芦 Tanghulu, aka. candied hawthorn that comes on a stick. It is a traditional Chinese snack.
3. 卯时 hour of *mao*; 5-7 am
4. 早朝 Court sessions held in the morning for the Emperor to discuss state affairs with his ministers. It was typically held daily, but occasionally varied from emperor to emperor.
5. 红颜祸水 kind of a femme fatale; beautiful women who bring troubles upon men.
6. 普天之下，莫非王土 Which land under the heavens isn't land of the Emperor?
7. From 《诗经·小雅·北山之什·北山》 the Book of Songs: Minor Odes of the Kingdom (one of the three main divisions of the Book of Songs) – Northern Mountain

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 33 : UNCLE AND NEPHEW



After Li Jianheng was done flinging stuff around, he covered his face and sobbed.

Xiao Chiye avoided the shattered fragments and kneeled. When Li Jianheng's mood calmed a little after a while, he said. "Get up! There's no need for you to kneel like this. You and I are buddies. Doing this will only make us feel estranged."

Xiao Chiye rose to his feet and said, "The Secretariat Elder is merely upright and frank by nature."

Li Jianheng was in low spirits as he covered his face for a long time. He said, "... They come here every two or three days to settle accounts, all of which I've permitted. Even when money flows out like water, I've never said a word. I've been on tenterhooks all day long these days to the point I've lost appetite. It hasn't been a good time for me. Can't I even ask for a few days to take a breather now that Hua Siqian is dead and Ji Lei is about to be executed? Ce'an, you have no idea how dissatisfied they are with me sitting here. As long as there's another choice in this world, they would never want me."

At this point, he felt sad again.

"But when have I ever thought of being the Emperor? They were the ones who pushed me into becoming one. And now they are also the ones to admonish me! The Censor of the Chief Surveillance Bureau keeps watching me every day. Even when I venture outdoors to appreciate flowers, they still had to submit memorials to reproach me in those erudite ways of theirs! Never mind if he killed a mere eunuch, but why can't he, Hai Renshi, show me due respect and give me some face? At the very least, I'm also the Emperor of Dazhou!"

The more Li Jianheng spoke, the angrier he became. But there was nothing else on the table that he could smash, thus he pounded his own thigh in indignation.

"He made Mu Ru out to be a contemptible person, but it's not like they are noble and virtuous themselves! In the past when we were drinking in Donglong Street, which of them did not look dignified only for them to turn out to be scoundrels when they took off their pants?! Mu Ru was originally



picked out by me from a clan with a clean background. If it weren't for that dog Xiaofuzi who got in the way, would she have fallen into that traitor Pan's hands? My heart aches so much it's going to break!"

Xiao Chiye merely listened and said nothing as Li Jianheng gave vent to all his grievances. By the time Li Jianheng stopped his tirade, his anger had already mostly subsided.

"If they truly treat me as the Emperor and respect me, then I'd be willing to be diligent in my study. My Imperial Elder Brother entrusted this vast empire to me. I want to be a sovereign of a flourishing era too." Li Jianheng said with aggrievement. "... Hai Renshi just doesn't think much of me."

It was only then Xiao Chiye said, "On the contrary. It was precisely because the Secretariat Elder has high hopes for Your Majesty that he dared to admonish Your Majesty so severely. Your Majesty must not bear a grudge against him. Your Majesty has to know that Secretariat Elder Hai is equally stern and exacting with that 'Unpolished Jade Yuanzhuo', Yao Wenyu."

Skeptical, Li Jianheng asked, "Really?"

Xiao Chiye said, "If this wasn't the case, then why would the Secretariat Elder kill Shuanglu today?"

Li Jianheng pondered it over for a moment, then said, "... True that."

If Hai Liangyi did not think much of him, why would he keep asking his opinions on every matter?

Li Jianheng recalled back to the day when he had just ascended to the throne. After Hai Liangyi learned that the Empress Dowager had sent him snacks, he had specifically instructed him in private to change all his spoons and chopsticks into silver.<sup>1</sup>

Hai Liangyi was an inflexible man who conducted himself seriously in both speech and manner. But he was different from Hua Siqian. He has no disciples, only a student—Yao Wenyu. As Hai Liangyi wanted to avoid rousing suspicion, Yao Wenyu had still yet to enter the government to become an official despite being so talented. Hai Liangyi had never joined any clique in the Grand Secretariat, and he was also the only one who staked all he had and charged out to save Emperor Xiande at the Nanlin Hunting Grounds.

He was the lone minister<sup>2</sup> mentioned in the books—difficult like a steep precipice, and upright like a lofty branchless tree.

While Li Jianheng was thinking back on it, Xiao Chiye was thinking about it too.

One thing Li Jianheng said was clear, and that was, as long there was another choice in this world, the one to ascend to the dragon throne today would not be him, Li Jianheng. But even Emperor Xiande could not do anything about it, because Li Jianheng was perhaps the one and only candidate they had in this world.

Since they had given him his support, then they had to teach and guide him. Dazhou was a nation currently beset by difficulties. It might seem as if a wave of troubles had just calmed in Qudu, but in truth, the storm had already begun to stir again.

All the exceedingly loyal ministers with Hai Liangyi at the head were now all looking at Li Jianheng. In their eyes, he was perhaps a hopeless case, but Hai Liangyi had raised both of his hands to support and prop Li Jianheng up with that old back of his, wanting him to hang on, to turn over a new leaf, and to be an Emperor who would be able to leave his good name in history.

Xiao Chiye and the civil officials had never gotten along with one another, because the Central Administration in Qudu feared the military power at the frontiers. These people were not only the reason for the invisible cage in which he was trapped, but they were also men of indomitable will and integrity in Dazhou who could still hobble on forward.

Military commanders were not afraid of death, because they couldn't.

Civil officials were not afraid of death, because they were conscientious.

Li Jianheng was used to being fawned upon. He needed a teacher like Hai Liangyi who could castigate the contemporary failings of the times.

"When all is said and done, Lady Mu<sup>3</sup> doesn't have a status. If Your Majesty's mind is truly set, then why not have a long heart-to-heart talk with the Secretariat Elder. This is the time when Dazhou needs a continuous line of imperial heirs. As long as Your Majesty can speak to him with honesty and sincerity, the Secretariat Elder will definitely not fob Your Majesty off." Finally, Xiao Chiye said, "As for Ji Lei and Pan Rugui, I heard that the Court of Judicial Review has yet to sentence them?"

At the moment, Li Jianheng was occupied with thoughts of all that was good with Hai Liangyi. So he nodded absent-mindedly and replied, "The accounts don't tally. They still need another retrieval..."



The eastern pearl was hollow. When Shen Zechuan hooked the thin fabric strip out of it, the writing on it was already smudged from the soaking. He burned away the fabric strip.

Every one of Xiao Chiye's actions last night was on full display right before his eyes. Perhaps that man had touched the eastern pearl, but it was impossible for him to see what was written inside. Nevertheless, Xiao Chiye's suspicions must have been roused. Shen Zechuan had answered that question on Mount Feng wrong. Xiao Chiye had even told him the source of the Imperial Army accounts, all because he was waiting for him to tell him the truth frankly. Yet, he had denied it with absolute certainty.

Shen Zechuan decocted the medicine and drank it in one gulp. The bitter taste pervaded his mouth. He endured the bitterness, just like the anguish he revisited every day and night. At last, he let out a mocking smile, wiped his mouth, and lay down to sleep.

He dreamed again.

In the dream, the cold wind was still howling at the Chashi sinkhole. He was no longer lying at the bottom, but standing alone at the edge of the pit, overlooking those 40,000 soldiers who were struggling like ants to survive.

The Biansha Cavalry surrounded the sinkhole like the black tide in the pitch-dark night. They blotted out the sky and the earth, engulfing all the Zhongbo Garrisons Troops' chances of survival, and turned this place into a slaughterhouse.

A hand reached out among the churning waves of withered bones. Ji Mu stretched out his arrow-covered upper body like a puppet and sobbed as he called out to Shen Zechuan, "Ge hurts so much..."

It was as if Shen Zechuan was a statue carved in clay or wood; he could not move, nor could he shout. His breathing quickened, and he was drenched in cold sweat as he clenched his teeth tightly.

The leader of the Biansha Cavalry was wearing a helmet. That hair fluttering in the wind had already turned a shade of a deep red in Shen Zechuan's recurring nightmare. He lifted his arm and pointed lightly at the sinkhole, and the arrows behind him all started falling one after another like a swarm of locusts. They stabbed into the men's bodies in dense clusters, piercing through flesh, spattering warm blood all over.

The heavy snow all over the sky turned red too. Shen Zechuan watched Ji Mu fall into the bloody mud before he was swallowed up by a sticky red

wave.

His hands were cold. The blood on it was also cold.

Shen Zechuan woke up.

He sat up with his back to the light by the window as though nothing had happened. He lowered his head and went silent for a moment, then he got out of bed to get dressed.

The guards lurking in the courtyard watched Shen Zechuan step out of his room to eat his meal before heading to the bathhouse.

After an hour, the guard who had never taken his eyes off the bathhouse frowned and asked the man beside him. "Why isn't he out yet?"

Two men exchanged glances and smelled a rat at the same time. When the guards rushed into the bathhouse, all they saw was the neatly stacked clothes. Shen Zechuan was long gone.

Xi Hongxuan had booked Bu'er Tavern to invite others to tea. He sat until he needed to answer the call of nature, so he got up to head to the latrine. He had only just stepped out of the door and had not walked a few steps in the corridor when someone patted him from behind.

Xi Hongxuan looked back and almost took a few steps back. Then he said, "How did you... Why are you always coming and going like a shadow?!"

"A lot has been going on lately." Shen Zechuan poured cold tea in passing. "The reason Ji Lei and Pan Rugui have yet to be sentenced in the third trial by the Court of Judicial Review is because Hai Liangyi and Xue Xiuzhuo have yet to pry out whatever they wanted from those two men's mouths, am I right?"

Xi Hongxuan glanced around, then whispered, "You want to kill Ji Lei, but what can you do with everyone's eyes on this case? The reach of Hua faction case is too widespread, and there are too many people who are afraid of being implicated by those two. It's precisely to prevent them from dying a sudden and inexplicable death that Hai Liangyi told the men to take strict precautions when standing guard. You won't be able to strike."

"I'm not going to." Shen Zechuan smiled derisively at Xi Hongxuan. "But I have a way to get Ji Lei to talk."

Xi Hongxuan looked at him for a long time. Then, he personally lifted the teapot to pour tea for him and asked, "... What way?"

Shen Zechuan sipped his tea and said, "Let me see Ji Lei."



Ji Lei had been tortured for days, and at present, he was in shackles as he lay in the prison with disheveled hair and bare feet. He heard someone walking over to open the prison door, then cover his head before dragging him out.

Ji Lei was shoved up a horse carriage. After a while, he was dragged down and thrown to the ground. It was quiet all around, with only the sound of water dripping off the corners of the walls.

Ji Lei crawled up from the ground and asked with a black fabric bag covering his head, "Who's there?"

A water droplet splashed with a "plop". No one responded.

Ji Lei felt a chill on his back. Bracing himself with his arms, he probed tentatively, "... Secretariat Elder Hai?"

But still, no one answered.

Ji Lei's Adam's apple throbbed. He shuffled forward on his knees and bumped into the bars. He fumbled around, steadied himself, and shouted, "If you aren't Secretariat Elder Hai, then you are Xue Xiuzhuo! How are you planning to torture me today? Bring it on!"

"... Say something. Why aren't you saying something?!"

"Who are you? Who exactly are you? What do you want to do... Do you think I'd be afraid if you don't talk? I'm not afraid... I'm not afraid!"

Ji Lei bent his head down between his arms to scrape the bag off. He moved his eyes and saw Shen Zechuan sitting in a chair right in front of him.

Shen Zechuan was all dressed in bluish-white, with one hand on the chair's armrest as he propped his head up to stare expressionlessly at Ji Lei.

Laughter escaped from Ji Lei's throat. He grabbed the bars and squeezed his face in between the bars, then said in a low and deep voice, "Oh, it's you... the stray dog of Zhongbo. What does the vile beast want from your shishu? Revenge for Ji Gang, or revenge for yourself?"

Shen Zechuan said nothing. The smile vanished from those tender, expressive eyes of his, leaving only a heavy and dark gaze behind.

Ji Lei could not even find hatred in them. He felt as if that was not a man with flesh and blood sitting there, but a famished stray cur that had already started to feed on human flesh.

Ji Lei lowered his eyes and said with hatred, "The Ji Clan has no descendants, and the one who severed Ji Gang's bloodline is you. So what are you looking at me for? Shen Zechuan, it was your Shen Clan who killed

Ji Mu, and it was also your Shen Clan who violated Hua Pingting. How do you face yourself having lived for so long? You are the devil beneath the tens of thousands of ghosts who died unjustly. You are the continuation of Shen Wei's ignoble existence. You deserve to be hacked to pieces..."

Ji Lei began to laugh softly. He looked demented.

"Do you think I'll be afraid of you? The bastard whom nobody wants. You think taking off your pants to follow Xiao the Second will give you better days ahead? Haha!"

Shen Zechuan laughed too.

Ji Lei's laughter gradually came to a stop. He said coldly, "Is that funny? My plight today will also be your predicament in the future."

Shen Zechuan put down his leg and leaned against the chair like he was pondering it over. He said, "Oh, I'm so scared."

His words were breezy with sarcasm the moment he opened his mouth.

"Devil, bastard, stray dog, vile beast." Shen Zechuan rose to his feet and crouched outside the bars. He began to laugh at Ji Lei, and said in an insane yet restrained tone, "You're right, I'm all of them. I'm the devil who climbed my way out of the Chashi sinkhole, the bastard Shen Wei left behind after he burned himself to death, the stray dog without a home to return to, and the vile beast reviled by thousands. Shishu, I'm so delighted you know me so well."

Ji Lei began to tremble uncontrollably.

Shen Zechuan looked askance at him. His gaze was far more sinister and malicious than how it was back then. It was as if a man had already died under this layer of gorgeous skin, and all that survived was an unnamed beast.

"Five years ago," Shen Zechuan drew closer to the bars and scrutinized Ji Lei's fearful expression. He said softly, "The one kneeling here was me. What was that you said to me the day you sent me into Zhao Zui Temple?"

Ji Lei's throat and eyes tensed. He wanted to answer, but he could not voice it out.

"I have been remembering everyone's kindness with gratitude." Shen Zechuan said piously. "Every day. Every night."



Footnotes

1. Using silver to test for poison. As often seen in dramas, people in those days would test for poison by sticking a silver needle into food or drinks; if the needle turned black, then it would mean it was poisoned.
2. 孤臣 a lone/solitary minister, i.e., a minister without support at court or a minister who has fallen out of power and/or favor
3. Mu-niangzi; Niangzi (娘子) is a form of address for one's wife, or a polite form of address for a young woman.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 34 : INTERROGATION



“You... What exactly are you...” Ji Lei pressed himself against the bars, looked at Shen Zechuan’s smile, and swiftly moved back. “What exactly are you up to?!”

“You’re asking me?” Shen Zechuan said cheerfully. “You’re asking me, huh?”

Shen Zechuan’s gaze turned malicious as he beckoned haughtily to Ji Lei. Ji Lei did not move. He leaned back against the wall and refused to budge even a fraction closer to Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan said, “Prisoners are all livestock waiting to be slaughtered. Shishu, how dare you ask me?”

Ji Lei countered, “What else can you do? Kill me?”

“It’s not often us uncle and nephew get the chance to meet. There’s not even enough time for us to play, so how could I kill you so quickly?” Shen Zechuan slid his thumb across the bars and softened his tone. “You aren’t saying a word because you feel that it’s something you can exploit. With those secrets in your hands, no one would bear to lay their hands on you. Your days in prison become more comfortable, and you don’t have to worry about food and clothing, nor fear for your life. There’s Pan Rugui to accompany you, and you have plenty of leisure time. How carefree and happy.”

Ji Lei broke out in cold sweat. He stuck to the wall, no longer looking into Shen Zechuan’s eyes.

“But happy days are all fleeting. As long as the tongue is still there, it’s not a big deal if a leg is missing, an arm is broken, or both eyes are gouged out. A few months ago, shishu treated me to donkey roast. I didn’t get to taste it at that time. But now that the night is long, it’s a good time to dine with wine.” Shen Zechuan slipped the thin blade out between his fingers and tapped it between the bars. He said, “Ji Lei, time to serve you up to go with my wine.”

“You. Are. Insane!” Ji Lei stretched his neck out and enunciated each word, “Shen Zechuan, you’re insane!”

“I’m insane.” Shen Zechuan stared at him and answered in the affirmative.



“How would you dare to lay a hand on me?” Ji Lei said furiously, “Your life is in the Empress Dowager’s hands. How would you dare to even touch a strand of my hair?!”

Shen Zechuan cheered up again and said with a smile, “Shishu, why do you always have to keep saying such hilarious words tonight? Who else do you think sent me here?”

Enraged, Ji Lei said, “Don’t even think of hoodwinking—”

“Shen Wei is dead.” Shen Zechuan quickly cut off Ji Lei’s words. “The day Shen Wei set himself on fire, I heard that the Prince of Jianxing Manor in Dunzhou was ablaze in raging flames. He was burned beyond recognition when the Imperial Bodyguards dragged him out of the ruins and hung him atop Dunzhou city walls to be reviled by all. I didn’t see that scene with my own eyes, but I kept attempting to imagine it over the years. After turning it over in my mind, I finally realized something.”

Ji Lei swallowed his saliva.

“His grand plan to collude with the enemy has succeeded. Isn’t defecting right before the battle much better for him? Duanzhou had already fallen into the enemy’s hands. If he led his troops forth to receive and welcome them, he could join the Biansha Cavalry and hurry to take down Qudu before the Libei Armored Cavalry crossed the River of Ice. However, he was so scared that he recoiled from advancing and only dared to retreat.” Shen Zechuan stood up. “He had already succeeded. It’s only by advancing that he would have a chance to survive. But he kept withdrawing. Even if he was a good-for-nothing, he should have known that retreating would only lead him to his doom.”

Ji Lei’s breathing intensified as he said in loathing, “Because he didn’t dare. Who in the Biansha Twelve Tribes would give him a damn? He was already a dead man the moment he colluded with the enemy!”

Shen Zechuan threw an eastern pearl into the cage, and the tumbling pearl knocked into the edge of the cage and rolled its way to Ji Lei’s feet. Shen Zechuan scrutinized Ji Lei’s face as the color gradually drained from it. He smiled.

Ji Lei’s hands trembled. He stared at that eastern pearl and said with difficulty, “No... Impossible...”

“Emperor Xiande is dead.” Shen Zechuan leaned over and said, “So is Shen Wei.”

Ji Lei suddenly kicked away the eastern pearl and said, "Cunning lad, don't even think of tricking me!"

Shen Zechuan said happily, "Hua Siqian has committed suicide by biting off his tongue. Who will be the next one? You, or Pan Rugui? Shall we draw lots? Shishu, you first."

With that, he spun out two more thin blades between his fingers and presented them before Ji Lei through the gap.

"If it's chipped, we'll kill Pan Rugui. If it isn't, then we'll feed all of your flesh and blood to the dogs. Don't be afraid. Draw one."

Ji Lei looked at the cold glint of the thin blade. His lips opened and closed. He said, "What nonsense are you spouting..."

"The Empress Dowager instructed me to be quick." Shen Zechuan stared at him. "Yet I gave you the opportunity to choose. Shishu, there's a chance for things to turn for the better for each day you live."

Ji Lei was already in a daze having been tortured for days. And now, under this bizarre atmosphere, Shen Zechuan's words confused him until he could not tell the truth from lies. He fixed his eyes on those two thin blades. Finally, and curiously enough, he raised his hand. When his trembling fingers touched the thin blade, he saw Shen Zechuan slowly lifting the corners of his lips.

"Oh." Shen Zechuan smiled regrettably. "I forgot that the blades I've brought along today are all new blades. The chipped ones have already been disposed of."

The shame of being played instantly overwhelmed Ji Lei. Losing control of himself, he threw himself forward and shouted hysterically as he yanked at the bars, "Do it if you want to kill me or cut me to pieces! I'll not say a word of what you want to know! Kill me, kill me!"

"Wrong." Shen Zechuan remained in firm control of the atmosphere. "I'm not the one who wants to kill you."

"You are!" Ji Lei dug his fingers into the bars. "You are!"

"Am I?" Shen Zechuan gently nudged over the eastern pearl that had rolled out and stepped on it. He looked at him coldly and asked again, "Am I?"

Ji Lei held his head and tore at his unkempt hair. He slid down the bars to his knees and repeated over and over again. "You are... You are the one..."

Shen Zechuan suddenly said, "Shen Wei killed the Crown Prince."

Ji Lei raised his head to look at him in terror, as if he had plunged into an ice cave. He said, “You...”

Shen Zechuan said, “You and Shen Wei killed the Crown Prince.”

“It wasn’t me!” Ji Lei clutched at his hair. “It wasn’t me! The one who killed the Crown Prince was Shen Wei!”

“You conspired with him to frame the Crown Prince for plotting a rebellion.” Shen Zechuan said quickly, “You were the one who forged the document. You forced the Crown Prince into Zhao Zui Temple. He wanted to see Emperor Guangcheng, but you drew your blade and killed him.”

“It wasn’t me!” Ji Lei had already gone crazy. He refuted vehemently in the face of Shen Zechuan’s chaotic interrogation. “I wasn’t the one who drew the blade! It was Shen Wei. It was Shen Wei who insisted on killing him!”

“That’s why Shen Wei is dead.” Shen Zechuan circled back and repeated, “Shen Wei set himself on fire and was burned beyond recognition. You are the only one left now.”

This succession of insinuations pushed Ji Lei into such a corner that all he could think of was the word “death”. He thought back clearly to the former Crown Prince’s face when he was killed. At that time, he had stood in the spot where Shen Zechuan was now standing and looked down at the Crown Prince from above as if he was looking at swine. Now, by some act of ingenuity, his position had been reversed. The cage gave him the misconception that he was akin to a beast. He had become the ant<sup>1</sup> under Shen Zechuan’s foot. All he could do was to crane his neck out and wait to be slaughtered.<sup>2</sup>

Ji Lei did not want to die.

His desire to survive had never been so strong. He banged his forehead against the bars and said, “We are all just following orders. We had no choice! You want to avenge Shen Wei? I can help you! Shen Wei killed the Crown Prince and was conferred the title of Prince of Jianxing. He subsequently went to Zhongbo. He fled!”

Ji Lei cut a sorry figure as he started to choke with sobs. He had no idea where this fear came from either. It was as if he had really turned into a livestock at the mercy of others. All he could do was to raise his head and look at Shen Zechuan.

“I didn’t kill the Crown Prince; I wanted to save him! But Father suddenly died.” Ji Lei said helplessly, “Father died, and they want to frame

me for it! If I took the rap for it, Eldest Brother would kill me, and so would Ji Gang! What could I do? I could only beg Pan Rugui for help! If Pan Rugui were to protect me, then I had to forge the documents! I was forced into that situation. I wanted to live too!”

“How did Ji Wufan die?” Shen Zechuan asked out of the blue.

“I don’t know. I don’t know how Father died... Father fell ill, because Ji Gang left. The sons he favored had all left.” At this point, Ji Lei turned malevolent again. He hated them so much. “I was the one who was with him in his last moments and the one who conducted funeral rites for him! Yet he said my core was rotten. He regarded Ji Gang and Zuo Qianqiu as his own sons and passed the mental cultivation techniques to both of them. But my surname is Ji too, and I didn’t even do anything. So how could he treat me in such a way?!”

“Shen Wei couldn’t sleep at night after killing the Crown Prince. He was afraid. When we were drinking, he told me that he had gradually come to sense someone watching him. In his residence, he could even hear someone moving on the roof in the middle of the night. I told him it wasn’t the Imperial Bodyguards. But in this Qudu, is there anything that could hide from the eyes of the Imperial Bodyguards? I presumed there were traitors in the Imperial Bodyguards; Men from the Eight Great Clans were everywhere.”

“The Hua Clan was already in power, so we were careful. But Shen Wei’s insomnia worsened. He wanted to flee. Thus, he bribed Pan Rugui with a lot of money, hoping to leave Qudu. At that time, Libei was a rising force to be reckoned with. The Empress Dowager had no other military forces other than the Eight Great Training Divisions. In order to guard against the Xiao Clan, Shen Wei was conferred the title of the Prince of Jianxing. He went to Zhongbo, a large prefecture where the only routes between Qidong and Libei, and Libei and Qudu, would pass through. The Empress Dowager wanted him to be her watchdog with his eyes on Libei and Qidong.”

Ji Lei spoke more and more urgently.

“Who would have expected Shen Wei to collude with the enemy? He was asking for death! He had the documents with his correspondences with Qudu. Once the documents fell into Libei Armored Cavalry’s hands, Xiao Jiming would not miss the opportunity to deal Qudu a heavy blow! So Shen Wei had to burn himself to death! Do you understand now? Shen Wei

colluded with the enemy. He was no longer willing to be under the control of others. Back then, the Hua Clan had a son of common birth. Going by the Empress Dowager's intent, once this child of common birth grew up, outsiders would no longer be needed to keep an eye on Zhongbo. Shen Wei had committed so many evil deeds in Qudu for the Hua Clan. If Zhongbo no longer needed him, then he would be but a useless chess piece<sup>3</sup> of the Empress Dowager."

"No one anticipated him to take desperate measures after being driven into a corner and let the Biansha Cavalry in to massacre the cities... This was vengeance! This was his revenge on Qudu, on the Empress Dowager, and on Dazhou! "

Ji Lei grasped the bars and pleaded. "I've said all I have to say... The Empress Dowager was the one who forced Shen Wei to his death. She was also the one who forced the Crown Prince to his death. And Emperor Guangcheng, Emperor Xiande, Hua Siqian... they were all the Empress Dowager's sacrificial chess pieces!<sup>4</sup> And now you are carrying out jobs for the Empress Dowager. Look at me. I didn't tell her that you have already thrown in your lot with the Xiao Clan... You saved Xiao Chiye that night, didn't you? But the Xiao Clan will not help you. As long as Xiao Chiye is in Qudu, the Xiao Clan cannot make their move. They can hardly look after themselves, so how would they care about you?!"

He wanted to prove his usefulness, but his fear kept intensifying. His crumbling line of defense left him utterly defeated. The more inferior he felt, the more scared he became.

Shen Zechuan asked him his last question through the bars. "Five years ago, my shiniang died when Duanzhou fell into the enemy's hands. No one knows about this matter, so how are you so clear about it?"

Ji Lei looked at the expression in Shen Zechuan's eyes. In that dead silence, a drop of sweat slowly trickled down.



Xi Hongxuan waited until he fell asleep. It was not until a stack of paper was thrown onto his body that he jolted awake. He took the papers and shook it open for a look in the dark and saw the vividly red fingerprints at the bottom. He let out an obscure laugh and said, "You sure are good."

There was a slight saltish stench on Shen Zechuan's body. He smiled for a moment, then said, "Whether or not this confession can be submitted to the top depends on how Secretariat Elder Hai views it."

“That’s some great favor you did.” Xi Hongxuan said, “Surely you didn’t help for nothing?”

“There’s a man named Qiao Tianya in the Imperial Bodyguards. He’s good with the broadsword. I want him.” Shen Zechuan said calmly.

“... Not a problem.” Xi Hongxuan hesitated for a while. “I’ll talk to Yanqing.”

“Thank you for the trouble.” Shen Zechuan said, “It’s late now. I should go.”

With that, he opened the door and took his leave.

It was raining in the night outside. Xi Hongxuan wanted to call out to Shen Zechuan to get onto the horse carriage so that they could leave together. But then he had a thought and changed his mind. He flipped through the confession to look through it once, feeling that it had all gone too smoothly.

As Xi Hongxuan was thinking that he had to show Xue Xiuzhuo this confession first, he said to the attendant at the side, “Go. Drag Ji Lei out and send him back.”

The attendant acknowledged his order and went to open the door. He had only just strode in when he fell to the ground on his butt with a loud clatter and screamed as though he had seen a ghost.

Xi Hongxuan followed the opened door and saw Ji Lei. His stomach churned, and he covered his face to retreat, desperately knocking aside the table and chairs as he dashed into the rain to throw up violently.



Shen Zechuan washed his hands until they reddened before he wiped them with a handkerchief. There were no bloodstains on his white outfit, but there was the lingering stench of blood. He picked up the front of his clothes and frowned as he sniffed it.

What a stink.

Shen Zechuan squatted under the rain by the edge of the water. Very quickly, the night rain drenched him. He slowly raised his head and gazed at the pitch-black sky until his neck was sore. Then, he rose to his feet and walked back.

When Shen Zechuan reached the alley of the Imperial Army’s residence, he saw a man standing at the entrance.

Xiao Chiye was leaning against the door in the dark with folded arms, staring at him like a cheetah.

At some point, snow had begun to fall with the rain, making one feel damp and cold to the bone.



#### Footnotes

1. 蝼蚁 Also refers to a nobody
2. 引颈受戮 literally, crane one's neck out and wait to be slaughtered; to plead guilty and die without resistance.
3. 废子 a term in Weiqi to mean a useless stone (worthless chess piece).



- 4.
5. Chess in those days typically refers to Weiqi, or Go in Japanese and Baduk in Korean.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 35 : FIRST SNOW



The chill was biting cold as the wind blew at their sleeves.

Right at this time, Shen Zechuan suddenly turned his head and sneezed, dispelling the confrontation that was on the verge of erupting. He was soaking wet as he waved his hand at Xiao Chiye and said in a muffled voice, “Have a handkerchief?”

Xiao Chiye strode a step forward and handed him one.

The tip of Shen Zechuan’s nose had been frozen red; even his fingertips were red. He took the blue handkerchief and covered his mouth and nose.

It was only then Xiao Chiye unhurriedly opened up the umbrella. Without making way for Shen Zechuan, he asked, “Where did you go?”

Shen Zechuan replied, “To play.”

“In any case, you’re my guard. You have to inform the office when you head out to play.” Xiao Chiye said, “It’s really worrying if you run off without so much a word.”

“I left my authority token in the bathhouse. Did the Second Young Master not see it?” Shen Zechuan sniffed the scent on the handkerchief. It smelled rather good—not the usual incense customarily used by the nobles, but more like the surging waves of strong, valiant wind under the scorching sun. It was the scent on Xiao Chiye.

What a nice smell.

Shen Zechuan lowered his eyes, almost fascinated by this scent. This was the sunlight beyond his reach; the spirit he no longer possessed in this life. A part of him did not want to return the handkerchief, thus he raised the corners of his eye to glance at Xiao Chiye out of the corners of his eyes, looking as if he had something to say but was hesitant to.

“Nope, didn’t see it.” Xiao Chiye felt around his chest but did not touch the object he was looking for. He turned his eyes just in time to see Shen Zechuan’s gaze on him. Taken aback, he said, “What conscienceless deed have you done for you to look at me in such a way?”

“Who knows?” Shen Zechuan said a little smugly to him. “I’ve done plenty.”

“Let’s hear a couple.” Xiao Chiye said.



“A heart-to-heart talk in the night should be done inside the house. It’s rather cold to be standing here.” Shen Zechuan coughed and said, “Is the bathhouse still open?”

“Closed.” Xiao Chiye replied. “You can only go to my room if you want to take a bath. Your health is so bad. Should I call for a physician to take a look for you?”

“That’d be great.” Shen Zechuan countered his move. “With the Second Young Master stepping in, I’ll get to save on consultation fees.”

“You have yet to recover from a major illness, and running around all over only makes it even more worrying. I’ll get someone to follow you in the future.” Xiao Chiye chivalrously made way for him. “Let’s go. Second Young Master will hold up the umbrella for you and send you there.”

Shen Zechuan looked at Xiao Chiye’s shoulder, which was even taller than his own self, then looked at him again. He smiled and said, “I can stand on tiptoe to hold up the umbrella too.”

“I’m afraid of veils.”<sup>1</sup> Xiao Chiye’s side profile was tasteful, with a straight nose and a nice silhouette. He said, “You’re too short.”

Shen Zechuan strode through the main entrance with him and said, “You’re really the one who’s too tall.”

“When I was young, I was a few heads shorter than my dage, and with such a name to boot. It made me anxious, so I trained hard in martial arts every day and made it a habit to drink milk before going to bed.” Xiao Chiye strode over the puddle of water with his long legs and continued, “Who would have expected my height to shoot through the roof when I was thirteen or fourteen?”

“Ain’t that great?” Shen Zechuan said, “My dage was very tall too.”

The rain receded, but the snow intensified.

Xiao Chiye raised the brim of the umbrella to gaze at the snow and said, “It’s yet another year.”

Shen Zechuan gazed at the snow too and echoed. “Yet another year.”

“The new Emperor ascended to the throne and granted amnesty to all.” Xiao Chiye paused. “The Empress Dowager’s power and influence have weakened. You can leave Qudu and go anywhere you want.”

“Then conceal my name to live incognito, forget my past, and remain a mediocre person for my entire lifetime.” Shen Zechuan said mildly. “This isn’t something a man who hates me should say.”

“I hate the Biansha Cavalry,” Xiao Chiye said coldly, “I hate Shen Wei too.”

Shen Zechuan said, “You should hate me.”

Xiao Chiye’s eyes stirred.

Shen Zechuan continued, “I’m a man who lives on hatred.”

Snowflakes fell upon the stone slabs and melted in a twinkling of an eye.

Xiao Chiye said, “The current you understand those words from five years ago best.”

“Living is much more painful than dying.” Shen Zechuan suddenly laughed. He exhaled and said to Xiao Chye, “That’s not right. I’m not in pain. Hatred itself is death by dismemberment; it’s like a knife gouging out your flesh. Day after day. Anyone would eventually become numb. There’s nothing else in this world that can make me feel ‘pain’ again. I feel comfortable living like this. You’ve repeatedly advised me to drop the matter, but you yourself understand it best that ‘stopping’ has never been something you and I have the luxury of choosing. If warmth and tenderness can make you feel better, then I don’t mind playing on for longer.”

Shen Zechuan raised his hand as he spoke and drew that icy finger across Xiao Chiye’s sturdy back. He said in what seemed to be a whisper.

“There are some things that are vividly beautiful when seen through the mist; but when you take a closer look, they are just a pile of dead men’s bones.”<sup>2</sup>

Xiao Chiye waited for him to retract his hand before shaking his umbrella impatiently. He said, “Dead men’s bones won’t touch people like this.”

Shen Zechuan smiled and was just about to stride forward when Xiao Chiye grasped him around the shoulder.

“You sure have guts...” Xiao Chiye wrapped his arm tightly around his shoulder, “... to touch your Second Young Master while you are reeking so heavily of blood. Over ten men in the courtyard can’t even keep an eye on you, so what room are you returning to? Just sleep with me.”

Shen Zechuan was caught off-guard. Xiao Chiye said, “The favor you did me by saving my life has always been on my mind, and I’ve repeatedly given you chances. Yet you just have to treat me like some kind of fool to coax. Is it that delightful to keep teasing me? If so, then why aren’t you

smiling? Shen Lanzhou, come on, didn't you say you don't mind playing on for longer?"

As soon as he said that, he tossed away the umbrella, strode a step over, and simply hoisted Shen Zechuan over his shoulder.

A wave of dizziness washed over Shen Zechuan with his head dangling down. He immediately covered his nose and mouth with the handkerchief and fumed, "Xiao'Er—"

Xiao Chiye said, "If you dare to move, then I'll dare to turn Qudu upside down immediately to see who's the one who collaborated with you from the inside and outside to kill someone in the middle of the night."

"Go investigate then!" The moment Shen Zechuan opened his mouth, Xiao Chiye gave him a jerk so hard that he almost threw up.

"Look at how fast you flee when there's a hole in the bathhouse for you to dig your way through." With Shen Zechuan over his shoulder, Xiao Chiye leaped over the railing and passed through the courtyard with withering greenery. He swiftly made his way through the moon gate<sup>3</sup> and headed right for his own room.

The sprawling man shadowing them on the rooftop poked his head out for a look and clicked his tongue in wonder. "He was still smiling and chatting in the snow earlier, looking all courteous and refined. Why the sudden urgency?"

"That guy doesn't want to be with Second Young Master, okay?" The guard who was always watching Shen Zechuan took a gulp of his *shaojiu* wine<sup>4</sup> and continued, "He fled so fast yesterday likely because he was afraid the Second Young Master would force himself on him tonight. I went to the Imperial Army to ask around this afternoon. Everyone all knows about this matter."

"Do we report this to the Hereditary Prince?" The one who had poked out his head to look around fished out a little book, licked his brush, and pondered over it. "Ugh, this isn't going to be easy to write."

"He carried him into the room so brazenly." The one drinking wine took a few glances. Xiao Chiye had already kicked the door close with a "bang". He thought for a moment, then said, "Or let's just not... Being a homo<sup>5</sup> can't be said to be a major issue, but it isn't a minor one either. It'd be tough to explain to both sides if we say it wrong. The Second Young Master will get a beating."

The other one frowned and drew a few strokes, then said, "Well... then I'll just record it but not report it yet. If the Hereditary Prince comes to settle scores later, we'll just say we buckled under the Second Young Master's abuse of power<sup>6</sup> and did not dare to report it without grounds."

"But how on earth did he escape?" The one drinking wine pillowed his head on his arms, still unable to fathom it.



There was a heater in the room. Xiao Chye did not release Shen Zechuan, but looped an arm around his waist as he circled around the room to rummage through his clothing chest.

"There's more than enough hot water. Feel free to pick the fragrances<sup>7</sup> and bath beans<sup>8</sup> as you like." As Xiao Chiye spoke, he turned his head aside to sniff openly at Shen Zechuan's waist. He said, "You are not the kind of person who needs to bathe in milk and flower petals and pearl powder,<sup>9</sup> are you?"

Shen Zechuan said, "Put... I'm going to puke!"

"Then puke the way you are now." Xiao Chiye took out the clothes stowed away at the bottom of the chest and closed the chest. Ignoring the mess of clothes dangling out through the closed gap, he took Shen Zechuan further inside.

He lifted the hanging screen. There were two small sections of space separated by a screen inside. One side led to hot water, while the other side was a clothes rack. Xiao Chiye hung the attire up on the rack and easily shifted the screen away with one arm. Then he placed Shen Zechuan by the edge of the pool and dragged a chair over with his leg.

"Take your bath." Xiao Chiye sat without inhibitions and raised his chin at Shen Zechuan. "Everything you need is all prepared. I'll see how you run."

Shen Zechuan's face turned white as he asked in astonishment. "You watching?"

Xiao Chiye stretched out his long legs and folded his arms. He said, "You shy? Don't run, okay?"

"I'm afraid the one who's shy isn't me." Shen Zechuan retorted sarcastically.

"Then, go ahead and strip." Xiao Chiye was calm and unruffled. "Let's see which of us throw in the towel first."

Without saying another word, Shen Zechuan pulled his waist belt open. Xiao Chiye looked right at him without the slightest intent to avert his eyes. By the time Shen Zechuan stripped to his inner garment,<sup>10</sup> his knuckles had already turned white.

“Whether you are in pain or not, I don’t know.” Xiao Chiye teased him. “But from the looks of it, you’re pretty angry.”

He had not even finished his words when Shen Zechuan’s clothes were tossed onto his face.

Xiao Chiye grabbed the clothes and smiled for a moment. By the time he removed them from his face, Shen Zechuan had already entered the water.

Shen Zechuan leaned over on the other side without turning or looking back. Water droplets condensed on that fair and smooth back of his; it was so silky and moist it looked like jade petals with dew.

Xiao Chiye sat for a moment, then said, “What a short temper. Don’t you always have a way with your words in the past?”

Shen Zechuan said, “Not as *hardcore* as the Second Young Master.”<sup>11</sup>

Never mind if he used such a double entendre for the first time. But after saying it several times, whatever bit of bashfulness Xiao Chiye had was all but snuffed out by him.

So, he remained firmly seated and answered with composure, “Of course.”

After a moment, Xiao Chiye probed, “Aren’t you going to tell me where you went to play tonight?”

“You’re omnipotent.” Shen Zechuan said, “Go check it out yourself.”

“There are a few places where you can get to kill people at this time.” Xiao Chiye took the eastern pearl out of Shen Zechuan’s clothes and pinched it between his fingertips to size it up. He said, “The Empress Dowager is still rich. Things are already at such a stage and she still has to put on such an ostentatious display when sending secret messages. You couldn’t have been dazzled silly by this pearl and set your heart on being her lackey because of it, could you?”

“Who doesn’t love money?” Shen Zechuan said, “Even though His Majesty favors you and trusts you now, you still have to make up for the Imperial Army’s equipment shortfall. You know better than me the benefits of having money.”

“She told you to kill someone.” Xiao Chiye said, “And you simply went to kill?”

Shen Zechuan had already soaked enough and reached a hand out for his clothes. But Xiao Chiye used his leg to hook the clothes rack away. He got up and said, “Answer me.”

Bare-chested, Shen Zechuan said, “Yeah.”

“Liar.” Xiao Chiye stretched out his hand to take down the clean clothes and said to Shen Zechuan, “This pearl had been soaked rotten that night. How could you have been able to see the Empress Dowager’s instructions clearly? The person you killed tonight is someone you wanted to kill, am I right?”

Shen Zechuan said, “... Uh-huh.”

“Don’t uh-huh me.” Xiao Chiye caressed the fabric. “An ambiguous answer is equivalent to no answer.”

“It’s someone I want to kill.” Shen Zechuan reached out a hand. “You got it right.”

“Ji Lei?” Xiao Chiye said, “Or Pan Rugui?”

Shen Zechuan’s fingertips had already reached the clothes. He said, “Why can’t it be you?”

There was a swish as the clothing was lifted high. Refusing to give it to him, Xiao Chiye said, “Just an exchange of a few words and you’ve changed your tone. Second Young Master doesn’t buy sarcasm. Whether you kill Ji Lei or Pan Rugui, the Court of Judicial Review will definitely not let the matter drop tomorrow morning. You saved my life during the Autumn Hunt. The Empress Dowager doesn’t know about this yet, but I can let her know. Once she finds out, you’ll be my man even if you aren’t now. So speak properly and don’t tease your Second Young Master for fun.”

Each time Shen Zechuan attempted to reach for the clothes, Xiao Chiye would raise it high. Shen Zechuan put up with it again and again until he finally rose from the water to grab the clothes. He fumed, “Speak properly, while I’m naked?!”

Xiao Chiye leaned in for a closer look and said, “See, this is what I mean by speaking properly. Why put on an enigmatic dead men’s bones’ act before me? Ghost stories can’t scare me.”

Having said that, he paused for a moment.

“Since you’ve touched me, I’d have to touch back. We aren’t on that good of a term for me to be nonchalant about it. So, where do I touch?”

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## Footnotes

1. 盖头 in ancient times refers to a red veil to cover a bride's head. (also refer to a white head covering for mourning and a general veil to shield a woman's face while outdoors.) He basically means Shen Zechuan is so short that the umbrella will cover right above his head as if he's wearing a veil.
2. 一堆白骨. A pile of white bone. Interestingly, there's a demon named *white bone spirit*, or *baigujing* (白骨精), from the novel *Journey to the West*. She is a shape-shifting demoness, and in her true form she is depicted as a skeleton. 白骨精 also describes a sly, cunning person.



- 3.
4. 洞门 An opening in a wall separating different courtyards within a residence or palace. It's also known as a moon gate (月亮门).
5. 烧酒 *shaojiu*, also known as *baijiu* (白酒), is a spirit that is usually distilled from sorghum or maize.
6. 断袖之癖 lit. cut sleeve (idiom); fig. an euphemism for homosexuality.
7. 淫威 as a word refers to abuse of power, although reading it as 淫+威 can be read as the power of horniness
8. 兰草 or 佩兰 *Eupatorium fortunei* is a plant species used as a herb in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), while the fragrant stems and leaves are used to make fragrant oils. These are placed together in steaming bathwater to scent it.



9.

10. 澡豆 Literally, bath beans, or soap in a ball/bean shape.

11. 珍珠粉 pearl powder is a traditional Chinese medicine well known for beautifying the skin and soothing of nerves.



12.

13. 里衣 (or also 中衣) This is the set of garment people in ancient days wore under their outer robes. They usually sleep in this.

14. The original line in Chinese is 硬不过二公子 which can be literally taken to mean “can’t beat the Second Young Master when it comes to being *hard*.” The 硬 is short for 硬脾氣 (obstinate or stubborn temper) and/or 嘴硬 (stubborn to admit mistakes or defeat) in response to both xcy’s comments, but it’s also a dig at you-know-what (° 5 °)





## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 36 : SCENT



Shen Zechuan suddenly imitated Xiao Chiye's action from the last time and splashed water droplets onto his face, then seized the chance to grab the clothes from his hand.

Unable to open his eyes from the spray of water, Xiao Chiye reached out an arm to pull off a dry towel. He covered it over Shen Zechuan's head and rubbed it at random. Shen Zechuan was still putting on his clothes, and Xiao Chiye's rubs sent half of his body swaying. Seething with hate, he used his bare leg to kick out at the latter's chair.

With the chair under Xiao Chiye's butt pushed back from the kick, Xiao Chiye immediately stretched out his legs, clamped them around Shen Zechuan tightly, and forcibly dragged the latter towards him. Then he continued to rub Shen Zechuan's head as if he was wiping down a puppy.

"In that case, I'll do as I please!" Xiao Chiye snapped.

"As you... you... son of... 'Er!" The towel rubs caused Shen Zechuan's voice to break up intermittently.

Xiao Chiye pulled off the towel. Without saying another word, he pinched Shen Zechuan's chin with one hand, while his other hand slid down along Shen Zechuan's nape to his waist and hips.

"Son of a bitch." Xiao Chiye said, "Did you call me a son of a bitch?"

Shen Zechuan's waist belt was not properly secured, and the outfit on his body was Xiao Chiye's old clothes. Thus, it hung loosely on his body, exposing his collarbones. The water droplets on his body wetted Xiao Chiye's fingertips as the latter moved his hand down, blending into one with that satiny touch.

"I didn't say that." Shen Zechuan backhandedly pressed down on Xiao Chiye's hand to hold it in place. "As they say, one should reflect daily on three aspects.<sup>1</sup> Second Young Master, you should really do some reflection."

"You don't understand." Xiao Chiye's nimble fingers turned over to grasp Shen Zechuan's hand instead. "The first word I knew of was 'son of a bitch'. I've long told you that your Second Young Master is a jerk. There's absolutely no need for me to reflect. And isn't this waist of yours too slender?"

"It's you who have touched too little." Shen Zechuan said callously.

“That’s right.” Xiao Chiye pretended not to understand and wandered into another direction. “I naturally haven’t touched your waist that many times.”

Shen Zechuan had no wish to put on a show with him any longer. He tightened his waist belt with one hand and said, “Since you have touched me back, then this matter is closed.”

Xiao Chiye released his legs that were wrapped around Shen Zechuan, and Shen Zechuan fastened his waist belt. Even his face had turned red from the rubs Xiao Chiye was giving him with a handkerchief.

Feeling hot, Xiao Chiye rose to pick up the eastern pearl on the ground and happened to see Shen Zechuan’s bare legs again. It dazed him for a moment, then he swiftly straightened up and took two steps back before pressing in another two steps. He said, “Sleep.”

Shen Zechuan poured a bowl of hot ginger soup. After rinsing his mouth, he sneezed again.

Xiao Chiye found the way he looked when he sneezed amusing, just like a cat... He soaked the handkerchief with cold water and wiped his face.

“Don’t go that way.” Xiao Chiye undressed and pointed to his bed. “You sleep in my bed.”

Shen Zechuan wiped his mouth and said, “Then I won’t stand on ceremony.”

He dispensed with the formalities and sat on Xiao Chiye’s bed.

Xiao Chiye shifted the tables and chairs away, and then dragged the *xumi* couch<sup>2</sup> in the room to the vacated spot about the distance of a stepping block away from Shen Zechuan. He rolled over to lie down, then pillowed his head on both arms and said, “Lan Zhou, extinguish the lamp.”

Shen Zechuan blew the lamp out and lifted his blanket to lie down with his back facing Xiao Chiye.

It was still snowing outside, but the inside of the room was warm and quiet.

Xiao Chiye shut his eyes, looking as if he was sleeping. The sensation of touching Shen Zechuan lingered on his fingertips, and it was becoming more and more vivid at this time in the darkness. Xiao Chiye opened his eyes to stare at the roof and began to think about the skies in Libei.

It’s only when one is without desires that one can become a sage.

When his shifu taught him to hold the bow, it happened to be the season when the pastures of Libei were luxuriant. He had sat on the fence at the edge of the horse ranch and looked up at the azure blue sky with his head propped up with his hands.

Zuo Qianqiu had asked, "What are you thinking?"

Hanging around Xiao Chiye's neck was the bone thumb ring. He swung his calves and said, "I want an eagle. Shifu, I want to fly."

Zuo Qianqiu sat on one side and looked at him. He patted the back of his head and said, "You are also a lad burning with desires. But in this world, it's only when one is without desires that one can become a sage. There are many matters that will end up being your cage once you harbor the desire for it."

Restless, Xiao Chiye grasped hold of the railing with both hands and swiftly hung upside down from it, his little robe covering his face in turfs of grass and dust. He said, "It's only human nature to want."

"Wanting is the prelude to joy and misery." Zuo Qianqiu carried his own great bow in his arms and wiped it carefully. "If you acknowledge that you are but a mortal with desires, then you will be swayed by considerations of gain and loss. If you want it, you must get it. You will be a little wolf with such a character. But A-Ye, there will be many things in the future that you want, but will never get. What should you do then?"

Xiao Chiye landed on the grass. He grabbed at the hem of his robe and caught hold of a big locust. He pinched the struggling locust and said half-heartedly, "Father said, where there is a will, there is a way; there is nothing that can't be obtained."

Zuo Qianqiu sighed, thinking he was still too young after all. So he helplessly pointed to the sky and said, "Alright. You want to fly, but can you really fly?"

Xiao Chiye released the locust and raised his head to look at Zuo Qianqiu. He said in all seriousness, "I can learn how to tame eagles. Once I tamed one, then its wings will belong to me. The sky it flies past will be the sky I fly past. Shifu, a man has to be adaptable."

Zuo Qianqiu looked at him for a long time before he said, "You are stronger than me... I'm a fool who can't adapt to circumstances."

Imitating an eagle, Xiao Chiye spread his arms open and ran a few steps on the grass in the wind. He said, "I want to tame a horse too."

“Eagles and horses are both strong-willed creatures.” Zuo Qianqiu followed after him and said, “Looks like our A-Ye likes people who are recalcitrant and hard to tame.”

“Taming.” Xiao Chiye said, “That’s the kind of process I like.”

Xiao Chiye thought.

It was not that he liked such a process. He enjoyed it. He was fascinated by it. It was just like torturing an eagle.<sup>3</sup> He would not let the eagle sleep for seven days, and not feed it for four. He would hang it until the feathers on the top of its head puffed up, and torture it until its “eyes were comparable to that of sesame seeds.” Only when it obeyed his orders that he could take it out for hunting.

And now, “sexual desire” was his newly acquired eagle.

Xiao Chiye tilted his head slightly and looked at Shen Zechuan’s back. That slanted clothes revealed Shen Zechuan’s nape. In the darkness, it was like a piece of unpolished jade that felt wonderful to the touch.

Xiao Chiye was hard again.

He did not move, nor did he look away. He did not believe that this kind of shallow lust could dominate him. He did not believe that he would succumb to this kind of crass instinct.

Before dawn the next day, both men sat up in unison as if they finally have had enough of it.

The guard who had been sprawling on the roof all night huffed out a breath of hot air and watched as the maidservants entered the room in a single file. He said, “Huh, nothing happened last night.”

The one drinking wine said, “He didn’t succeed.”

The one holding the brush asked suspiciously, “And you know that how?”

The one drinking wine shifted his body and watched as Shen Zechuan stepped out of the door. He said, “Look at him. He’s moving as per normal today. Other than the black circles under his eyes, he clearly looked rested.”

Both men systematically turned their heads as their eyes followed Shen Zechuan. Then they looked back at Xiao Chiye, who had just stepped out.

The one holding the brush said, “... Second Young Master doesn’t look too happy.”

The one drinking wine said, “He’s sex-deprived.”

Chen Yang draped a coat around Xiao Chiye. Seeing his grave expression, he said, "Viceroy, did he screw something up?"

Xiao Chiye replied, "Uh-huh. You could say so."

Alarmed, Chen Yang said, "Last night, he..."

"He's pretty proficient in feigning sleep." Xiao Chiye secured Langli Blade and braved the snow to descend the stairs. "Let's go. To the military drill grounds at Mount Feng."

Chen Yang chased up to him and said, "There's no one on duty today. And it's snowing. Viceroy..."

Xiao Chiye flipped atop the horse and lowered his voice, "I'm going to see the new equipment that has just arrived. Tell Gu Jin and Ding Tao to keep an eye on him."

Chen Yang nodded.

Xiao Chiye raised his head and shouted to the two men on the roof. "If you lose him again, both of you can scram too."

The two heads that had popped out from the rooftop gave a uniform nod and shrank back again.

Ding Tao put the brush and book properly back in his bosom and said, "This is just great. We have turned from Second Young Master's guards into his guards."

Gu Jin shook what was left of his wine and said, "I feel that he can fight eight men on his own. We'll just keep an eye on him."

"Just keep an eye on him." Ding Tao readied himself, then placed both hands mannerly on his knees. After sitting for a while, he said, "But, where is he?"

Both men looked at each other, then rose at the same time and said, "Shit!"



Eating his steamed bun, Shen Zechuan opened the back door to Zhao Zui Temple.

Ji Gang was shadowboxing in the courtyard. When he saw him coming, he wiped his sweat with a towel and asked, "Why are you here today?"

Shen Zechuan replied, "I'll be busy in a few days. It's convenient today."

Grand Mentor Qi was sleeping among a stack of papers. His snores boomed like thunder, so Shen Zechuan and Ji Gang did not enter the house but sat under the eaves to chat.

Wiping his face, Ji Gang asked, “You didn’t use your martial arts lately, did you?”

Shen Zechuan lifted his sleeve up to reveal the bruises, courtesy of the sparring with Xiao Chiye the day before. He said, “I fought once with Xiao’Er.”

Ji Gang was stunned, then he flew into a rage. “He actually dared to hit you?!”

“My guess is that he wants to see my internal martial arts.”<sup>4</sup> Shen Zechuan put down his sleeve and said, “Shifu, he’s truly blessed by Heaven. His physique is a notch better than the Prince of Libei. I countered his blows with the Ji Clan’s Boxing Style, but it was just like an ant trying to shake a tree.<sup>5</sup> I couldn’t move him at all.”

“Back then, Zuo Qianqiu left the capital to head to Suotian Pass, where he met Suotian Pass’s Feng Yisheng.” Ji Gang said, “Feng Yisheng took in Zuo Qianqiu as his adopted son and imparted the Feng Clan’s Art of Broadsword to him. By the time it was imparted down to Xiao the Second, it has probably already become a skill that incorporates a blend of martial arts from various schools, thus differing from us. But the Ji Clan’s style naturally has the Ji Clan’s strengths. If you can truly have a match with him on broadsword techniques alone, then you will be able to compare the differences.”

“Langli Blade was forged by a famous craftsman on Commander-in-chief Qi’s payroll. It slices through metal like cutting through mud. Common blades are useless when facing up against it.” Shen Zechuan said thoughtfully.

“The blades forged by the Qi Clan’s craftsmen are all ‘General’s Broadsword’, specially designed for combat on the battlefield. Look at Xiao the Second’s Langli Blade; if it can make an appearance on the battlefield, it would be able to split human bones with one straight slash. It was entirely made to fit the arm’s strength of that lad.” As Ji Gang spoke, he stamped the snow off his shoes. “As for us, we might not necessarily get used to wielding it even if we have the chance to. But you don’t have to worry about your blade. Shifu has already found one for you.”

“My blade?” Shen Zechuan was slightly taken aback.

“The Imperial Bodyguards is a good place.” Ji Gang smiled at him. “The amount of time you’ve been there is still short, but you will slowly come to understand in the future that it’s a place full of hidden talents in

Dazhou. She, Qi Zhuyin, may have a famous craftsman, but we have no lack of them in the Imperial Bodyguards either. I keep thinking of that blade of Ji Lei. Once Shifu brings you that blade and hands it to an old friend to reforge, it will be no less inferior to Xiao the Second's Langli Blade!"

"Isn't Ji Lei's blade Xiuchun Blade?"<sup>6</sup>

"Xiuchun Blade is the blade he generally carries along with him, but he also has my father's blade hidden in his collection." Ji Gang said with a snort. "Why isn't he dead yet? Once the Court of Judicial Review sentences him, that blade will be sealed into the armory. As long as it is in there, Shifu will have a way."

"He has been tortured for such a long time," Shen Zechuan said softly. "He won't be able to endure it for much longer."

"Did you find the person I asked you to find before the Autumn Hunt?" Ji Gang remembered this matter and hastened to ask.

"I've found him." Shen Zechuan smiled. "I'm just waiting for him to come out."



Xiao Chiye did not return even during dinnertime, so Shen Zechuan rested in his own room. It was in the middle of the night when he heard hurried footsteps outside. Following right after, someone knocked on his door.

Shen Zechuan wanted to pretend that he did not hear it when he heard a sound at the window. Xiao Chiye raised the window with his sheath and whistled at him.

Meng landed on the edge of the window and tilted its head to look inside too.

"We agreed to sleep together," Xiao Chiye was not pleased. "Why did you run back here again?"

Shen Zechuan threw a pillow out of the window, and Xiao Chiye caught hold of it. So Shen Zechuan could only get up and hugged his blanket to open the door.

Carrying his pillow in his arms, Xiao Chiye suddenly took a sniff and asked, "Did you put on some fragrance?"

Shen Zechuan replied, "I apply ten catty<sup>7</sup> of rouge a day."

"Is that so?" Xiao Chiye smiled and said.

Shen Zechuan walked in front. With Xiao Chiye standing behind him, even the night wind could not blow onto Shen Zechuan. Sensing a coolness



on his nape, Shen Zechuan swiftly looked back.

Xiao Chiye scraped him with a finger, then sniffed his own finger a little dubiously.

“What is this scent on your body?” Xiao Chiye wondered, “A whiff...”

Shen Zechuan swung the blanket over Xiao Chiye’s head and replied calmly, “That’s the smell of gunpowder on your own body.”

Xiao Chiye stood for a brief moment, then lifted the edge of the blanket with lightning speed and enveloped Shen Zechuan within it too.

With his head protruding from the eaves, Ding Tao speedily fished out a small book and exclaimed in excitement, “Way to go, Second Young Master! You caught him!”



#### Footnotes

1. 日有三省, from 曾子曰、吾日三省吾身、為人謀、而不忠乎、與朋友交、而不信乎、傳不習乎。 In Chapter 4 of Book 1 of the Analects of Confucius, Confucius’s follower Zengzi lists three questions that he asks himself every day to make sure that he remains on the straight and narrow: whether he had been true to others’ interests when acting on their behalf, sincere in his interactions with friends, and practiced what he had been taught.
2. *Xumi* couch (須彌榻, ), also known as the *Mile* couch (弥勒榻) or short couch (短榻), is basically a shorter couch.
3. 熬鷹 literally torturing falcons, it’s one of the ways to train them by not allowing it to sleep and torture it to exhaustion to wear down its wild nature.
4. 外家拳/功夫’ external’ martial arts, originates from Shaolin, where one uses one’s physical strength in combat to go on the offensive. The opposite 内家拳/功夫’ internal’ martial arts originate from Zhang Sanfeng, where one mobilizes one’s internal energy instead. The latter is more concerned about the spiritual and mental aspects rather than the physical aspects. An example of internal martial arts is Taiji/Tai Chi.
5. 蚍蜉撼树 literally, an ant trying to shake a tree; i.e., overrate oneself.



- 6.
7. 绣春刀 Xiuchun Blade is the blade of the Imperial Bodyguards during the Ming Dynasty.
8. 斤 *jin*, catty; measure of weight. 1 catty = 0.5 kg

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 37 : BLUNDERBUSS



The world darkened before Shen Zechuan; he was now much closer to Xiao Chiye. He heard Xiao Chiye say, “So it’s really the smell on me. This is way too pungent.”

Shen Zechuan switched the topic and asked, “Did you just add the blunderbuss<sup>1</sup> to the Imperial Army’s arsenal?”

“Bronze blunderbuss.” Xiao Chiye moved his finger closed to the tip of Shen Zechuan’s nose to let him take a sniff. “It was mixed together with the scent on you, so I couldn’t tell it apart for a moment.”

“There’s no scent on me.” The tip of Shen Zechuan’s nose twitched slightly. He said, “Did you raid the Eighth Great Training Divisions’ military armory?”

The blunderbuss was restricted by the imperial court. After it was improved from the original bamboo tube design into the bronze version, it became the equipment of the Eight Great Training Divisions’ Chunquan Battalion. This weapon was lethal, but it was not easy to control. The projectiles had limited range, and it took time to load. However, the Eight Great Training Divisions’ job was to guard Qudu, and it was mostly street fights when they came to blows with others. Not only was it hard to bring out the firearm’s full potential to do what it was meant to do, but it also became a burden. That was why the Eight Great Training Divisions did not popularize the use of it and chose to set it aside instead. It was only during the yearly drills at the military drill grounds that they would take it out to use.

It might not suit the Eight Great Training Divisions, but it was very suitable for Libei’s Armored Cavalry. The Armored Cavalry of Libei were heavy cavalry, with a very small number of infantry and light cavalry.<sup>2</sup> They favored straight-on assault that hit like a surge of monstrous wave. In the early years, Dazhou set up a cavalry garrison at Luoxia Pass. In order to deal with the fast speed of the Biansha Cavalry, they spared no expense to purchase horses and attempted to build Dazhou’s very own cavalry’s horse ranch. However, all the horses sent by the Biansha Tribes were often inferior steeds in their own tribes, while their own horses were true brave horses who had fought against packs of wild wolves at the foot of the

Hongyan mountains. Paired up with machetes and sturdy warriors, they were invincible everywhere they went.

It was because of this that Xiao Fangxu established the Libei Armored Cavalry with heavily armored men and horses. They formed a living metal wall in the northwest so that there was no way the Biansha Cavalry's storm-like assaults could pass through this steel wall.

The northwest was a vast, boundless expanse of grassland. If the Libei Armored Cavalry could be equipped with blunderbusses, then the long-ranged attacks of the Biansha Cavalry would turn into Libei's Armored Cavalry's advantage. Long-ranged attacks could leave enough time for the blunderbusses to be charged. By the time the cavalry arrived before them, they would be within the shooting range of the blunderbusses.

To Libei, this simply served to boost their power and strength, much like a tiger that had been given wings.

"Even with Xi Gu'an removed, the Eight Great Training Divisions are still the Eight Great Training Divisions." Xiao Chiye took a step closer and pushed Shen Zechuan forward with his chest. "There's no raiding to talk of for a military armory. It's just a change of master. Don't worry about it. I'm only just taking it to play with."

Shen Zechuan walked a few steps as if he really did not care and said, "Can you just lift the blanket away and walk?"

"The days are short, and the nights are long. Why not hold a candle for a leisure walk?"<sup>3</sup> Xiao Chiye smiled. "Want to play with me too?"

"Since it was not obtained in an open and above-board manner, then it'd be safer to hide it." Shen Zechuan lifted the blanket and made his way out. "Making your way through Qudu while reeking of gunpowder all over. You're lucky it's the middle of the night."

"It doesn't matter even if it's during the day." Xiao Chiye clamped the pillow under his arm and raised one arm high to prop up the blanket as he walked. He swept his eyes across the veranda's eaves. "Who doesn't know that I, Xiao Ce'an, love to play? Even if I hold a blunderbuss, it's also to shoot *birds*."

He emphasized the word "birds", causing Ding Tao and Gu Jin, who were sprawled above, to shudder in unison.

After entering the room, Xiao Chiye threw the blanket and pillow onto his bed, kicked off his boots in two or three tries, and stepped across the

woolen rug with the intent to take a bath. He had already taken off half of his clothes when he extended his upper body out from behind the curtain.

“Have you taken your bath?”

Shen Zechuan rinsed his mouth and said, “Yeah.”

So Xiao Chiye took a bath himself, moving fast. When he stepped out while wiping the water on his nape, he saw that Shen Zechuan had already lain down with his back towards him. Xiao Chiye looked at the nape Shen Zechuan had covered up tightly, then wiped his hair hastily and blew out the lamp.

Shen Zechuan listened as Xiao Chiye sat on the couch and opened a box to look for something.

“Lanzhou.” Xiao Chiye closed the box and asked, “Are you asleep?”

Shen Zechuan answered without feelings. “Yeah.”

“The Court of Judicial Review summoned many physicians today. Yet they did not dare to alert the Imperial Academy of Medicine.” Xiao Chiye said, “What did you do to Ji Lei?”

Shen Zechuan asked, “Do you want to listen to ghost stories late at night?”

“They are going to interrogate the Imperial Prison guards tomorrow morning.” Xiao Chiye said.

Just going through the motions.

Shen Zechuan did not know whether Hai Liangyi could tolerate such a thing, but he knew Xue Xiuzhuo could. Xue Xiuzhuo had already gotten the confession he wanted, so Ji Lei was now useless. This mess was created by Shen Zechuan, but never once had he thought to clean up the mess, because Xue Xiuzhuo and Xi Hongxuan *had* to clean it up.

When Shen Zechuan thought to this point, he said, “I’ve been toeing the line. Even if they investigate...”

Xiao Chiye lay down, then suddenly sat up and said, “Wipe my hair.”

Shen Zechuan closed his eyes and pretended to sleep.

Xiao Chiye said, “Stop pretending to sleep. Hurry up.”

Xiao Chiye said, “Lanzhou.”

Xiao Chiye said, “Shen Lanzhou.”

The bed suddenly sank. Shen Zechuan opened his eyes in shock. His blanket had already been lifted away. Xiao Chiye squeezed in behind him and nuzzled his dripping wet head on Shen Zechuan’s back, instantly soaking it.

Pulling his blanket, Shen Zechuan said, "Xiao'Er, you a three years old?!"

"More or less." Xiao Chiye replied lazily, "Didn't you already fall asleep? Please continue."

The more Shen Zechuan slept, the wetter he became. That cold mop of hair stuck to him. And following in its wake was Xiao Chiye, who smelled the same as the scent on the handkerchief last night.

Shen Zechuan opened his eyes and said, "My clothes are wet."

No one replied.

Shen Zechuan said, "Stop pretending to sleep."

Shen Zechuan said, "Xiao'Er."

Shen Zechuan propped himself up with his arms and said in the darkness, "Xiao Ce' an, you're a jerk."

The jerk handed him a dry handkerchief out of consideration, then turned his back to him and waited.



On the rooftop, Ding Tao pulled back his hands and said, "It's so cold even on snowy days. I'm afraid we won't be having an easy time this winter."

Gu Jin handed him the wine bag<sup>4</sup> and rubbed his hands and said, "We have kept watch for two nights. There should be a shift change tomorrow morning."

Ding Tao took a sip of the wine, which warmed him up a little. Folding his arms up into his sleeves, he lay down too and said as he looked at the night sky, "Nothing's happening tonight either."

"The task is arduous, and the road is long." Gu Jin covered the wine bag. His ears suddenly twitched, and he turned over to lie on his stomach. His eyes moved back and forth in the boundless darkness like a falcon.

A subtle sound of snow being trodden on rang out in the wind. Gu Jin acted decisively and flipped over his hand to toss out a flying blade. He whispered, "The northwest corner!"

Ding Tao suddenly leaped up, flew across the rooftop, and hacked at the darkness with a lightning move of his hand.

The jet-black robe in the night dodged his blow smoothly. Like a ghost, the man concealed himself into the shadows and attempted to flee. A lithe Ding Tao fell over to hang upside down from the eaves. He did not expect steel needles to come for him right in the face. Using the shaft of the brush

in his hand, he struck away the needles with a “thwack”. When he took a look again, the person had already made his escape.

Ding Tao landed soundlessly on the ground. His qinggong was so outstanding that he did not leave any footprints when he landed on this thin snow.

Gu Jin surveyed the area from the rooftop and said, “Excellent martial arts. To think he could escape my eyes. Tao-zi,<sup>5</sup> could you tell who it was?”

Ding Tao picked the steel needles from the veranda and pinched them between his fingertips to scrutinize. In just a short instant, he had already learned a lot. He said, “It’s thin as hair and dipped in snake venom. It’s not a product of Qudu, but a foreign gimmick imported by the Yongquan Harbor in the Thirteen Cities of Juexi. His qinggong is good, and his ability to mask his breathing is exceptional. Although he did not carry a broadsword with him, he’s likely from the Imperial Bodyguards.”

He carefully put the steel needles into his own bamboo tube and somersaulted back on to the rooftop.

“The Imperial Bodyguards have removed a bunch of officials from office. Skilled men of fourth grade<sup>6</sup> and below are few and far between.” Gu Jin said, “Who would come to our Prince’s Manor at this moment to scout around?”

“It’s hard to say.” Ding Tao touched his chest with trepidation. “He almost stabbed my book.”

Gu Jin drank his wine, lost in thoughts.

Ding Tao sat cross-legged and began to say in a hushed tone, “This book has been with me for many years. What’s more, it was a reward from the Hereditary Prince’s Consort. Even when I went to fight those Biansha baldies, it had never been stabbed before. What a close call. It’s really too close of a call. There are still many things written in it. Do you know? My father’s own book was stolen when someone slit his throat. Oh my god. Recorded in it are all major stuff. Back then, I chased after the book until I almost died. Jin-ge, I’m telling you. A man should always keep a journal because they will become forgetful when they grow old. Like you. You drink so much wine all day that before the age of forty, you will probably forget how much money you have been squirreling away. Why not you tell me, and I’ll write it down and remember it for you...”

Gu Jin stuffed cotton into his ears and began to meditate.

The next day, Shen Zechuan was the first to wake up.

He did not sleep. With Xiao Chiye crowding behind him, both of them had been up to their neck pulling the blanket back and forth in the night. Besides, Shen Zechuan could not sleep with such a hulk of a person beside him.

Xiao Chiye was lying still in a pretty sound sleep while hugging the pillow.

Shen Zechuan waited for him to wake. But he ended up waiting for something else instead.

That erected portion pressed against his buttocks. Brimming with vigor. Hot and obvious. The temperature on the bed rose. He did not know if Xiao Chiye was awoken by the heat or by the hardness. In any case, he cussed in a hoarse voice and sat up in one smooth movement.

Xiao Chiye tossed the pillow aside. He cast Shen Zechuan a look and saw that Shen Zechuan was also looking at him. He grabbed at his own hair and reached out a hand to cover Shen Zechuan with the blanket to forbid the latter to look. Then he got out of bed and headed straight into the pool without even wearing his shoes.

Chen Yang was waiting outside listening to signs of activities when he saw Shen Zechuan stepped out. He did not know what to say as both men faced each other. But Shen Zechuan simply pointed naturally in the direction of the bath hall and walked away.

By the time Xiao Chiye emerged, he was already clear-headed. He ate a little of his breakfast and listened as Chen Yang told him about the intruder last night.

“Imperial Bodyguards?” Xiao Chiye thought for a moment and said, “He didn’t come for me. He should be someone here to keep an eye on Shen Lanzhou.”

“Then, he’s the Empress Dowager’s man.” Chen Yang said, “But manpower is scarce now. How would there still be such skilled men in the Imperial Bodyguards?”

“The waters of the Imperial Bodyguards run deep..” Xiao Chiye stood up. “I’ll head out for morning court.<sup>7</sup> We’ll talk again when I return.”



At the end of the court session, Li Jianheng, holding the hand warmer,<sup>8</sup> sat in Mingli Hall and watched as the various officials split up into both sides. He asked apprehensively, “... So the verdict has been passed?”



Xue Xiuzhuo knelt and said, "To reply Your Majesty, Ji Lei had made a full confession regarding his intent to rebel at the Nanlin Hunting Grounds. The evidence against him is now conclusive. The Court of Judicial Review worked through the night last night to straighten out the confession, and it has been submitted to Your Majesty by Secretariat Elder Hai. In the half-months before and after the Hua Faction case, the Three Judicial Offices have repeatedly conducted joint trials. The two vice Commanders and four Assistant Commanders of the Imperial Bodyguards headed by Ji Lei are all sentenced to immediate execution by decapitation,<sup>9</sup> while the Judge<sup>10</sup> and accompanying Battalion Commanders at the Nanlin Hunting Grounds are all sentenced to prison to await execution."<sup>11</sup>

"As long as the sentence has been passed, it's all good." Li Jianheng said. "You have worked hard, Secretariat Elder. It's inadvisable to stand for long. Men, bring him a seat."

After Hai Liangyi sat down, Li Jianheng continued, "It's truly abhorrent of the Hua Clan to collude with the eunuchs and Imperial Bodyguards to plot a rebellion! Pan Rugui, as the Brush-holding Director of the Directorate of Ceremonial, is greedy for power and wealth. He's wicked beyond redemption. This person must not be held in custody to await execution; he should be beheaded right away! The words Secretariat Elder has previously said to me gave me sleepless nights. After thinking about it for a long time, I've decided to work hard for the prosperity of the state from now on."

Hai Liangyi immediately rose to bow again.

Li Jianheng quickly raised his hands and said, "Sit, Secretariat Elder, please sit. There are now many matters that I'll need the Secretariat Elder's advice on. In the future, I hope that everyone will work as one to assist me. If you have something to say, you can boldly speak your mind here."

Xue Xiuzhuo looked up in surprise, but his expression remained neutral. He knelt in unison with the various officials on his left and right and commended the decision.

Li Jianheng excitedly motioned for everyone to get up. After saying a little more, he dismissed them and invited only Secretariat Elder Hai to stay and have a meal with him.

Xiao Chiye happened to be with Xue Xiuzhuo when he came out.

Xue Xiuzhuo said, "I wonder what the Viceroy said to His Majesty. To think His Majesty would be willing to show such respect to the wise."

“His Majesty is young and strong. This is just the time for him to show his might. Even if I said nothing, he would still do this on his own accord.” Xiao Chiye said, “The Court of Judicial Review has been busy these days. It has been hard on Your Excellency Yanqing.”

“One would naturally concern himself with all matters pertaining to his post; it’s my duty.” As Xue Xiuzhuo spoke, he looked at Xiao Chiye and said with a smile, “I heard that the Viceroy has been diligently heading to Mount Feng these two days. Is there anything fun there?”

Xiao Chiye smiled too and replied, “The first snow on Mount Feng is unparalleled in the world, and several deers have been sighted recently. I’m thinking of hunting a few rounds for fun. If you are free, would you like to go and have a look together?”

Xue Xiuzhuo gave a light wave of his hand and said, “I am just a weak scholar. What would I know about hunting? I wouldn’t want to dampen the Viceroy’s spirits.”

Both men parted ways at the entrance of the palace. As Xiao Chiye watched him recede into the distance, his earlier smile waned.

Chen Yang was waiting by the horse carriage. He waited until Xiao Chiye arrived before he lifted the curtain for him and said at the same time, “Viceroy, the venerable shifu has already left for Qudu.”

Xiao Chiye nodded.

Chen Yang hesitated for a moment, then continued, “Our tail in the Court of Judicial Review has brought back word that Ji Lei’s dead.”

Xiao Chiye asked, “How did he die?”

Chen Yang raised his hands to gesture as he kept his voice down to say, “He was skinned until he looked neither human nor ghost. He was on the verge of dying last night, but Xue Xiuzhuo kept him hanging onto his last breath until the confession was presented to His Majesty. Only then did he let him breathe his last.”

Xiao Chiye sat down in silence.

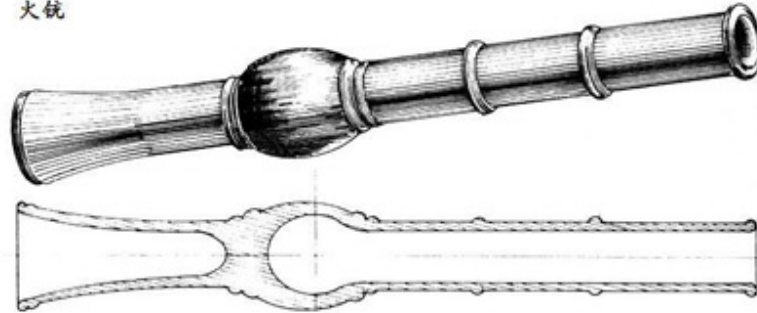
Chen Yang said, “Ji Lei interrogated Shen Zechuan in the Imperial Prison five years ago, and got Fengquan to humiliate him in public with ‘donkey roast’. Now, Shen Zechuan has returned tit for tat and also turned Ji Lei into... This person’s vindictive nature is evident. Viceroy, there’s animosity between him and us too. It’s too dangerous to let him stay with us now.”

Xiao Chiye twirled the thumb ring on his thumb and did not reply.



## Footnotes

火銃



1.



2.

3. 火銃 Huochong, or blunderbuss (according to baidu), or sometimes known as a hand cannon, is a tube-like projection firearm. The Huochong gun was an important invention as the Ming Dynasty was creating weapons to defend themselves from attackers.

4. Heavy Cavalry: heavily armed and armored men on horses. Their primary role was to engage in direct combat with enemy forces.

5. Light Cavalry: lightly armed and lightly armored men on horses. Their missions were primarily reconnaissance, skirmishing, and communications.

6. 昼短苦夜长，何不秉烛游 A line from 《生年不满百》

7. The days are short, and the nights are long. Why not hold a candle for a leisure walk? (i.e., make merry while you can).



8.

9. 酒囊 wine bag or pouch, a portable water bag typically made out of animals' hide.

10. ~子 the -zi is a suffix that means child, or sonny. 桃子 Taozi, as a word itself, means 'peach'.

11. (四)品 (Fourth) Grade; Officials were classified in nine hierarchic grades, with grade one being the highest rank. Their salaries ranged according to their rank.

12. 上(早)朝 Attend court sessions. Court sessions held in the morning for the Emperor to discuss state affairs with his ministers. It was typically held daily, but occasionally varied from Emperor to Emperor.



13.

14. 暖手 a small portable hand warmer that looks like a little pot. Also known as *tangpozi* (汤婆子).



15.

16. 斩立决 Immediate execution by decapitation. Executions that could be immediately carried out in the Ming and Qing Dynasties without waiting for the Autumn Trial (judicial hearing of capital cases during Ming and Qing) and Imperial Trial.

17. 镇抚 Judge of the Imperial Prison, which specialized in using torture to suppress corrupt officials. During the Ming Dynasty, there was a Southern and Northern Prison (镇抚司) subordinated to the Imperial Bodyguards. The Southern Prison was in charge of interpreting military laws and managing military craftsmen while the Northern Prison was responsible for cases entrusted by the Emperor.

18. 斩监候 Delayed execution of convicts on death row. Convicts of serious crimes were temporarily imprisoned, with their cases reviewed after the Autumn Trial (judicial hearing of capital cases during Ming and Qing) and Imperial Trial.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 38 : MILITARY DISCIPLINE



The snow fell for three or four days. Xiao Chiye became lazy to the point he hardly went to the military drill grounds. He had recently made the acquaintance of several Longyou merchants<sup>1</sup> and purchased some valuables such as pearls imported from Yongquan Harbor and jasper produced from Hezhou, all of which were exquisite items.

Li Jianheng was very diligent now. No matter how cold the weather was, he would attend court sessions as usual and ask Hai Liangyi to give lectures every day. When he saw Xiao Chiye neglecting his tasks, he would also exhort him a word or two. He seemed as if he genuinely had a change of heart.

Xiao Chiye was glad to see the change in him. He hunted two deers from Mount Feng and presented them to the palace. Frightened by the donkey roast the last time, Li Jianheng kept wild creatures at arm's length and bestowed the deers to Hai Liangyi instead.

It was soon to be the end of the year, when the sacrificial ceremony<sup>2</sup> and officials' banquet were major events. The Six Ministries and Twenty-four Yamen of the Imperial Palace were all up to their neck in work. The Directorate of Ceremonial lacked manpower, and there were many matters that they could not get a grasp on, so they still had to ask Li Jianheng. Li Jianheng was baffled when it came to these matters too, so he had to trouble Hai Liangyi and the Ministry of Rites to decide every time.

It began to grow busy in Qudu. When Li Jianheng saw that Xiao Chiye had nothing to do, he gave him an important job and handed him the task of reviewing the Eighth Great Training Divisions' roster. This way, Qudu's patrols and defenses fell completely into Xiao Chiye's hands.

Xiao Chiye could not turn it down, so he had no choice but to start busying around.

Shen Zechuan followed Xiao Chiye as the latter bustled about. Consequently, that made it inevitable for him to run into the Imperial Army.

Tantai Hu had yet to remove his blades after his patrol ended this one day. When he returned to the office, he saw Shen Zechuan standing outside. He rubbed his frozen, scarred face and strode over.

Shen Zechuan turned his head and watched as Tantai Hu moved menacingly towards him.

“Shen the Eighth?” Tantai Hu stopped in his tracks and said coldly to Shen Zechuan. “Shen Wei is your old man, right?”

Shen Zechuan asked, “Are you looking for my old man or for me?”

“Of course, I’m looking for you. Shen Wei has already been fucking burned to ashes.” Tantai Hu paced around Shen Zechuan and said, “Your days in Qudu are still comfortable. Look at this figure. It’s comparable to the courtesans in Donglong Street. The pampered kind with an appetite for food and wine.”

Hearing his tone, Shen Zechuan knew that he did not come with good intentions. Chen Yang said nothing beside him, while the Imperial Army in the courtyard all craned their necks to watch the show.

Tantai Hu continued, “Perky ass and a slender willow waist. Rosy peach blossom cheeks and foxy eyes. In Xiangyun Villa, you’d be a first-class top courtesan material. Why are you running around in the wind and snow with our Viceroy instead of living the good life?”

Tantai Hu stood fixed in place and stared daggers at Shen Zechuan. He continued, “It was only because Shen Wei licked the hooves of the Libei Armored Cavalry horses five years ago that the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo did not turn into manure pits for the Biansha Twelve Tribes’ horses. And now you are also learning from your old man. Which part of our Viceroy are you going to lick? The brothel prostitutes are all great talents skilled in a certain technique once they let down the bed curtains. What skill do you have that makes you worthy of standing together today with all the men who have fought battles?”

Shen Zechuan said with a smile, “If I’m not worthy, then is the Vice Commander going to revoke my authority token and drive me out of the courtyard?”

“Why would I want to waste that much effort?” Tantai Hu said, “You are the dog at our Imperial Army’s doors. Even a kick is an honor to you. It’s also on account of the Viceroy that I’m here saying a few words to you. Since you have become another man’s ‘thing’, then you must have the cognizance of being an object.”

“I hung up the Imperial Bodyguards authority token on the Son of Heaven’s<sup>3</sup> orders. And that means I’m here on official business. How is that being someone else’s ‘thing’?” Shen Zechuan said. “If I’m the Imperial

Army's dog, then all of you sirs aren't that different either. We are all men receiving a salary from the imperial court walking around Qudu. If there is any awareness to be had, then everyone must work with one mind and heart to be enlightened."

Tantai Hu's tiger-like eyes widened in a stare as he held up his twin blades and fumed, "You, the same as us? Disrespectful Shen dog! Back then, I was the Senior Battalion Commander of the Dengzhou Garrison Troops of Zhongdu." He strode a sudden step forward and seethed with hatred. "At that time, when Chashi River was defeated, my brothers were in the Chashi sinkhole! Do you know what a sight that was? Men shot alive with arrows until they turned into hedgehogs! Forty thousand men buried together in the sinkhole! Forty thousand men!"

Shen Zechuan's expression remained unchanged.

Tantai Hu said, "My old man and mother were in Dengzhou too. The Biansha Cavalry came attacking, and that traitor Shen fled, abandoning all the old, weak, women, and children in Dengzhou like my parents to the Biansha Cavalry! They massacred the cities one after another. My younger sister was dragged by the Biansha Cavalry for two *li*<sup>4</sup> before she was raped and slaughtered at the city gates! But you are living such a carefree life with no need to worry about the necessities! Just stick out your ass for others to fuck, and any sin you are guilty of can be pardoned!"

The cold wind blew in the courtyard. Chen Yang saw that the situation was getting out of hand and wanted to stop him, but it was already too late.

Tantai Hu lifted Shen Zechuan by the collar and said, infuriated, "How dare you talk back when I'm lecturing you today? You are all young masters used to a life of luxury. How would you know exactly how many people died in that battle? How would you know there are still countless people who have starved to death in Zhongbo even in this day and age?! How's life in Qudu, huh? You sleep well, live well, and there are always people absolving you of sin one after another. Then what about those people in Zhongbo who have died? Who is going to be held accountable for their deaths?!"

Shen Zechuan grabbed hold of Tantai Hu's arm and suddenly flung him over to the ground. It was such a shocking move that everyone around them retreated in unison.

Shen Zechuan rubbed two handfuls of snow and looked at Tantai Hu. He said, "Who? Ask your own people. It took an entire month for the



Biansha Cavalry to enter our territory and moved along the banks of Chashi River to Dengzhou. When Shen Wei cowered back from battle, you iron-willed, valiant men should have broken his neck and dispatched troops to fortify defenses.”

Shen Zechuan stood up.

“Even if you humiliate me and hate me, it’s no skin off my nose. This world calls for repaying a debt of blood with blood. Killing me is thus considered enforcing justice on behalf of heaven and appeasing public wrath.” He spat at Tantai Hu and smiled maliciously. “What a fucking load of crap. The one who massacred the cities is the Biansha Cavalry. They are also the one who killed those forty thousands soldiers. You want to screw me, Shen Zechuan, then get your ass straight first and wash the Biansha Cavalry’s piss off your head. My life is lowly, and my death is not to be regretted. But will my death write off the Biansha Cavalry’s debts?”

Tantai Hu said, “Don’t you fucking try to absolve yourself from guilt! Wasn’t your old man the one who let the Biansha Cavalry into the territories?!”

“Then kill me.” Shen Zechuan raised a finger to make a slashing motion across his neck. “Please, hurry and kill me. Kill me, and the Shen traitor’s bloodline will be severed.”

Tantai Hu suddenly stood up, pulled out his twin blades, and pounced on Shen Zechuan.

Having just woken up, Ding Tao had only just strode through the door when he saw what was happening. Alarmed, he shouted, “Laohu,<sup>5</sup> don’t hurt him! I have to keep watch on him!”

Tantai Hu was already beyond listening. He slashed out with his twin blades and sent the wind whistling. Ding Tao leaped three feet<sup>6</sup> high, intending to charge in, but Gu Jin lifted him by his back collar to stop him from going.

“Laohu’s entire family died in Zhongbo.” Gu Jin said. “You can’t expect him to let Shen Zechuan off.”

Ding Tao said, “But wasn’t the culprit Shen Wei? What does it have to do with Shen Zechuan?!”

Gu Jin hesitated for a moment, but did not continue the conversation.

Tantai Hu’s blade sliced the air before Shen Zechuan’s face, and Shen Zechuan spun around to kick his blade-holding wrist askew. As soon as Tantai Hu’s arm went numb, he hurled his blade out.

Right at that time, the curtain to the office was lifted. Yang Zongzhi, the Vice Minister of the Ministry of War, stared at the blade with widened eyes as it came hurtling towards him.

Chen Yang instantly raised his arm in an attempt to grab the hilt. But who would expect Xiao Chiye to be faster? With a swing of his sheath, he struck the blade down into the snow.

The steel blade stabbed into the ground with force so violent it shocked the entire courtyard of Imperial Army into kneeling. They said in unison, "Viceroy, please pardon our offense!"

Ignoring them, Xiao Chiye hung his blade back and raised his hand to lift the curtain for Yang Zongzhi. With an apologetic smile, he said, "I failed to discipline my subordinates and have thus caused alarm to Vice Minister Yang."

How would Yang Zongzhi dare to linger? After concurring awkwardly for a couple of times, he hurried out of the courtyard, got into his horse carriage, and slipped away without even wanting anyone to see him off.

Once Xiao Chiye was done seeing him off, he turned back to look at the entire courtyard of kneeling men.

Knowing that he was in the wrong, Chen Yang hastened to say, "Viceroy, it's this subordinate who has been negligent in my supervision and didn't—"

"You've watched the show long enough." As Xiao Chiye spoke, Meng landed on his shoulder. He took out some white meat and fed it to the gyrfalcon, saying only, "Zhao Hui wouldn't do such a thing."

Chen Yang's face turned white.

Xiao Chiye did not reprove Chen Yang as he stood before the others, because Chen Yang was his chief of guards and his trusted aide. He could not give Chen Yang a slap in the face right under the watchful eyes of the men, since that would make him lose his standing among his Imperial Army brothers and make him unable to hold his head up before them. But these words of his cut Chen Yang's heart the deepest.

Chen Yang and Zhao Hui were both men with good potential that Xiao Fangxu selected himself. Zhao Hui was calm and steady, and his meritorious military deeds were innumerable as he followed under Xiao Jiming's command. He was a deputy general whom few would dare to show displeasure to when he came to Qudu. Meanwhile, Chen Yang had remained behind in the Libei Prince Manor until he finally followed Xiao

Chiye five years ago. He was prudent, and he was most fearful of others saying that he was inferior to Zhao Hui. This was a contest between them brothers of the same clan.

And Xiao Chiye's words today not only gave him a wake-up call, but also made him extremely ashamed.

"When I took over as the viceroy five years ago, it was said that the Imperial Army was all a bunch of rotten ruffians who gave scant regard to military discipline and rules and who held the viceroy in contempt." Xiao Chiye stroked Meng and said, "I can't lead these kinds of soldiers. If you want to remain in the Imperial Army, either you buck up and abide by the rules, or you pack up and scam right now."

Tantai Hu's chest heaved as he said indignantly, "It's as what the Viceroy said. We have all listened to you in the past. But what is he? Can he even be called a soldier? I'm appointed the Vice Commander, and I'm several grades higher than him. Was it wrong of me to lecture him? I may feed myself with this job, but no way am I going to bend myself over for someone who sells his ass!"

"The authority token he's hanging on his waist is of the Imperial Bodyguards. And now he is on the job as a guard. If you can sit in my position before giving him the attitude, then you'd have proven yourself capable." Xiao Chiye lowered his eyes to look at him. "You think you aren't in the wrong?"

Tantai Hu straightened up his neck and said, "That's right!"

"Then why stay on and suffer indignities?" Xiao Chiye said, "Leave."

Tantai Hu suddenly raised his head in disbelief. "For this man, the Viceroy wants to remove me from office?!"

"There shall be no personal grudges in the Imperial Army. So don't fucking try to play matchmaker. I'm not doing this for anyone." Xiao Chiye lowered his voice. "I have the final say in the Imperial Army. Since you can make your own decisions, then why call me Viceroy? Strip off this armor and remove these twin steel blades, then you are free to demand repayment for any blood debt you are owed. If you can take him down within three moves, I, Xiao Ce'an, will immediately kowtow to you and acknowledge my mistake. But when you don this armor and hang up the Imperial Army's token on your waist, then you can only obey me. Every one of you here had a great show to watch today. You trample all over my dignity to your great delight. You have backbone. You're gutsy enough. So what's there for us to

talk about military discipline? Wouldn't it be much more gratifying for all of you to scram and become the Kings of the Mountains<sup>7</sup> instead?!"

Everyone lowered their heads and dared not say a word more. Meng finished eating his meat and raised his head high to stare at them.

Xiao Chiye said, "Don't you usually like to say that I'm a muddle-headed lecher? Then I'll do precisely that today. I'll revoke Tantai Hu's authority token and send him out of the door!"

The Imperial Army said in unison, "Viceroy, please be appeased!"

Tantai Hu would not admit his mistake. He pulled the authority token off with a trembling hand and said, "As brothers with the Viceroy, I've received the Viceroy's kindness these five years, and I'm even willing to lay down my life for the Viceroy! But what wrong am I guilty of today? The Viceroy wants to break my heart and dismiss me from my post because of a pretty man. Fine! I, Tantai Hu, concede defeat!"

With that, he placed his authority token and helmet together on the ground and kowtowed thrice — *thud, thud, thud* — to Xiao Chiye. Then he rose to his feet and stripped off his armor. Wearing only his inner garment,<sup>8</sup> he looked at Shen Zechuan.

"I'll see how long you can survive by seducing those you serve!<sup>9</sup> I will naturally seek vengeance on the Biansha baldies in the days to come. But you won't be able to run either!"

Tantai Hu wiped his eyes and cupped his fists to everyone around him.

"My brothers, we shall meet again!"

Then he strode a step forward and left for real.



#### Footnotes

1. 龙游商人 Longyou merchants, from the Longyou Group (龙游商帮), were famous merchants during the Ming and Qing dynasties for its operations in jewelry, book publishing, and paper-making industries.
2. 祭祀 offering of sacrifices to the gods or ancestors
3. 天子 Son of Heaven, refers to the Emperor.
4. 里 *li*, ancient measure of length, 1 *li* = approx. 500m
5. 老虎 Laohu, or Old Hu (after the Hu in Tantai Hu name), but Laohu is also a word for tiger. (the Hu 虎 in Tantai Hu means tiger.)

6. 尺 a Chinese foot. 1 Chinese foot = one-third of a meter
7. 山大王 literally, King of the Mountains, i.e., bandits.



- 8.
9. 里衣 (or also 中衣) This is the set of garment people in ancient days wore under their outer robes. They usually sleep in this.
10. 以色侍人 from 以色事人, which refers to using one's own beauty to win the adoration and favors of men.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 39 : WOLF & TIGER



A charcoal fire burned in the hall, making the room hot.

Chen Yang had already been kneeling for a little less than an hour. Xiao Chiye sat at the head seat reading military books. Imperial Army generals of all ranks were also kneeling beyond the curtain. It was silent, both on the inside and outside.

As the saying goes, “if the general has yet to have the prestige to speak of, then he should first awe and intimidate to boost his prestige.”<sup>1</sup> When Xiao Chiye took over the Imperial Army five years ago, he had put on an initial show of strength and power upon assuming office. What he wanted was the absolute authority to command this pack of heroes. In these five years, he had been fair in meting out rewards and punishments. He never skimmed on the money that was meant to be paid out to the Imperial Army. Not only did he not give less, he even spent much more to make up for any deficiency. He was very generous to his subordinates. Yet, that cloak of his was still the same one his eldest sister-in-law had sent over three years ago.

The Autumn Hunt enabled the Imperial Army to hold their heads high. It put them in the limelight, overshadowing the Eight Great Training Divisions. For a moment, they had the world at their feet. These soldiers, who have been oppressed for a long time in Qudu, used to put on a submissive front before the Eight Great Training Divisions. Now, they even dared to boss the Eight Great Training Divisions around.

This was not a good sign. Complacency would lead one to get too carried away by success.

Xiao Chiye needed an opportunity to knock some senses into the Imperial Army. And the Tantai Hu today was it.

Chen Yang did not dare to raise his head. Xiao Chiye rapped on the table, and Chen Yang immediately got up to refill the tea for Xiao Chiye. Once the cup was filled, he kneeled back down again.

Xiao Chiye never said a word the entire night, so Chen Yang kneeled on the ground all night.

Many words, left unsaid, could make one feel more ashamed than if it had been said.

Xiao Chiye had to attend morning court the next day. After dressing and tidying himself up, he said to Chen Yang, "There's no need to follow me today. Take a break."

Chen Yang had knelt until both his legs were numbed. With his hands on the ground, he kowtowed and said in a hoarse voice, "Master..."

He had always addressed Xiao Chiye as Viceroy. This call came right from the heart.

Sure enough, Xiao Chiye stopped in his tracks. But still, he did not look back.

Chen Yang kowtowed again and said, "I implore Master to punish me."

Xiao Chiye raised his hand to signal to those waiting upon him to leave. It was only when there was no one else in the hall that he turned aside to look at Chen Yang. "If a man has done nothing wrong, then what punishment is there to speak of?"

The sweat on Chen Yang's forehead dripped past his eyes. "This subordinate has realized the errors of his ways." He said.

After a long silence, Xiao Chiye said, "These years, Zhao Hui has followed day on war expeditions to the frontier. He has been climbing the ranks. Within five years, he should receive his own residence and a conferred title. You are both good men Father himself picked out. Why is it that he, Zhao Hui, could have that kind of honor and glory while you, Chen Yang, have to follow and rot away with a hoodlum?"

Chen Yang's lips paled. He said, "How would this subordinate dare to think so? The Hereditary Prince has his own strengths. But it's Master who is my pillar! Zhao Hui and I are both brothers of the same clan. We share weal and woe together."

"It'd be best if you truly understand this principle." Xiao Chiye said, "Brothers who fight among themselves and family who draw swords at each other<sup>2</sup> are all rotten to the core. Outsiders don't even have to make their moves for you to meet your end before them. You followed me and remained in Qudu, leaving all the matters back at home to Zhao Hui to look after. His younger sister married the Vice Director of the Ministry of Rites, and you are the one who filled in the role of family from her maternal home and backed her during Spring Festival<sup>3</sup> and other festivities. You can contend with will and spirit if you want to make great contributions and accomplish great tasks, but not so when it comes to moral principles. It's having righteous ardor and heroic spirit that makes a good man. What's

your fear and hurry to compete with him? Zhao Hui wouldn't do what happened yesterday, because he has his dignity to consider. You are now the chief of the Imperial Army's guards, yet you still need to rely on that bit of trick to inspire confidence in others. For that bit for gratification, you would even let others trample over your Master's dignity. Tantai Hu came from Zhongbo. You know that. But you still swapped him to yesterday's roster so that he could vent his anger and resentment. So, what is it, Chen Yang? Have you been following me to fool around to the point that you now have to play games like this to win others over? For this moment of satisfaction, you would not even hesitate to dent your Master's dignity."

Stung by remorse and self-reproach, Chen Yang lowered his head and said, "I've let Master down—"

"You've let yourself down." Xiao Chiye suddenly said in an indifferent voice, "Come back on rotational duty once you've figured it out. Let Gu Jin follow me these few days."

Dazed, Chen Yang knelt on the ground and raised his head to watch as Xiao Chiye lifted the curtain and stepped out.



Shen Zechuan finally had a night of sleep last night. At present, he was standing beside the horse carriage, puffing out warm air as he watched the gyrfalcon hover in the snowy sky.

Xiao Chiye stepped out of the door and got up the horse carriage. Gu Jin took the horsewhip and looked at Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan did not look at him. The curtain partially opened, and Xiao Chiye signaled to him with his eyes.

Shen Zechuan immediately felt the stares on his back as the Imperial Army who had been freezing in the courtyard the entire night all looked at him. He smiled at Xiao Chiye, then made his way up.

Gu Jin drove, and the carriage started to sway.

Xiao Chiye handed a hand warmer<sup>4</sup> to Shen Zechuan. When Shen Zechuan accepted it, Xiao Chiye stuck the back of his hand to the back of Shen Zechuan's hand.

"So cold." Xiao Chiye said.

Shen Zechuan raised his finger to push away Xiao Chiye's hand. He leaned against the wall and held the hand warmer.

Xiao Chiye said, "You don't look too happy."



Shen Zechuan warmed up his hands and said, "I'm happy." He looked at Xiao Chiye and said with a smile, "It makes me happy that the Second Young Master spoke up for me and helped me out of a predicament."

Xiao Chiye said, "This Second Young Master did not do it for anyone."

"That may be so." Shen Zechuan said, "Now that the prestige has been established, then when are you going to bestow them favors?<sup>5</sup> There aren't many days left for me to be a guard. If you want to use me, you must hurry."

Xiao Chiye looked at him and said nothing.

Shen Zechuan lifted his chin slightly in a pose similar to a relaxing posture. He exhaled and said after a pause, "I'm not your match when it comes to governing others. Shen Lanzhou is a good target. Put him before you, and you can defend yourself and put on a deliberate show of strength to intimidate the tiger.<sup>6</sup> Maybe he can even warm your bed. This kind of killing three birds with one stone is truly hard to find. Xiao'Er, you sure are impressive."

There was a cacophony of human voices outside the carriage, while the atmosphere within the carriage grew increasingly heavy. Both men were just a few inches apart, but they seemed to be separated by a natural chasm. When the carriage arrived at its destination, Gu Jin tactfully did not say a word to disturb them.

Having warmed his hands, Shen Zechuan put the hand warmer back on the small table and said, "What a pity."

Xiao Chiye said, "What?"

"Everyone thinks you enjoy yourself to your heart's content every night," Shen Zechuan licked the tip of his teeth and said unhurriedly to him. "Who would have known you, Xiao'Er, to be a diligent and conscientious Liuxia Hui?<sup>7</sup> I haven't even touched your saliva before, let alone talk about being fucked by you."

With that, he made to lift the curtain and get off the carriage. He did not expect Xiao Chiye to hook his waist belt.

"That's right." Xiao Chiye smiled playfully. "Look at how eager you are to cross swords on the bed. I shall comply with your wish."

Shen Zechuan said, "I don't want anyone with such fierce eyes."

The curtain swayed. He had already gotten off the carriage.

Xiao Chiye's fingertips turned up empty. He waved them, as if wanting for more.



After Tantai Hui's incident, the Imperial Army became less ostentatious. All of them tucked their tails between their legs and behaved themselves, thus reverting to the way they were before the Autumn Hunt. Chen Yang, even more prudent now, no longer dared to close an eye when others stirred up trouble. He had previously hurt his foot in Libei, and the cold was harsh in Qudu a few days later, so his foot would hurt for each day he was on duty.

One day, after dinner, Xiao Chiye threw Chen Yang several bottles of medicinal paste. When Chen Yang went back and opened them, they turned out to be the valuable paste that Xiao Jiming had gotten from the Venerable Yigui a few years back. He could not help but reproach himself again. From then on, he was even more diligent in his work.

On the other side, Tantai Hu went home and found himself in dire straits just a few days later. Everyone in his family was dead, yet he had adopted three children from Zhongbo, all of whom lived on his salary. He was not married either, so he had no wife to manage affairs at home. All the money he received every month was spent until nothing was left. At present, he was in a short supply of rice and noodles, and he also had to prepare for the new year too. He was a veteran of Dengzhou, and he had buddies in Qudu. But all along, he had always been the one to take care of others. Now that it was his turn, he could not bring himself to borrow money from others, so he tightened his belt to feed the children. But this was, after all, not a long-term solution.

Tantai Hu was even thinking of being a loan shark and tagging along with others to collect debts when Chen Yang appeared on his doorsteps for a visit.

"The new year is right around the corner," Chen Yang put down the money and said. "The Viceroy still remembers that there are three children in your family."

Tantai Hu turned his face away as he sat on the chair and said, "Since I'm no longer a soldier of the Imperial Army, then there's no reason for me to accept money from the Imperial Army."

"You are truly a bonafide tiger."<sup>8</sup> Chen Yang said with a severe countenance. "Why are you still pissed with the Viceroy? You struck out at

Shen Zechuan with many people watching that day. Where is your respect for the Viceroy? Being too lax in military discipline is a major taboo. You have been a Vice Commander for so long. Don't tell me you don't understand that."

Tantai Hu said, "What can I do? Whenever I see Shen the Eighth, I'll remember my parents!"

Chen Yang sighed and said, "Even so, you shouldn't have humiliated him and, consequently, the Viceroy too. You know the Viceroy's temperament after following him for a few years, so why did you still shoot your mouth off?"

Tantai Hu rubbed his head.

Chen Yang continued, "I was at fault too. I knew you were rash, but I didn't stop you. Admit your mistakes if you make one, and accept your punishment if you receive one. A real man can take temporary setbacks and adapt to circumstances. Must you go to the extent of quitting before you think yourself a real hero?"

"Then what can I do? I have already handed in the authority token!" When Tantai Hu spoke to this point, he felt aggrieved and sad, "I've followed the Viceroy for five years and worked myself to the bone during the Autumn Hunt. It wasn't easy for the Imperial Army to finally make a name for itself. I get afraid when I see that fox going in and out the whole day! The way he looks... I was really afraid that the Viceroy's future would be ruined! I was getting anxious, and I hate him to death! Ding Tao said something about how it's not his fault. That's right, who doesn't know that? But who could stand it if they were in my shoes? It was my parents and siblings who died, not a dog by the roadside!"

Chen Yang was silent too.

Tantai Hu stamped heavily on the ground and wiped his face haphazardly. The scar-faced man still shed tears when he recalled the past. He choked with sobs and said, "Anyone would not be happy to see a person they hate right in front of them, let alone someone with such enmity. That year when Zhongbo troops were defeated... Chen Yang, all of us who survived had our families broken up and ruined, while we ourselves barely escaped by the skin of our teeth! Who's going to take pity on us? Look at those three children in my house. They haven't even begun to recognize a few words before they were turned into orphans who have to dig mud under

the hooves of the Biansha Cavalry's horses in order to live. We are all lowly creatures."

Chen Yang patted him and waited for him to calm down a little before saying, "But now that you have joined the Imperial Army, the Viceroy is king. Hu-zi,<sup>9</sup> five years ago, when the Viceroy cleaned up the Imperial Army, he had wanted to take in non-native military households<sup>10</sup> like you guys, but the Ministry of War did not agree. Do you still remember what the Viceroy said?"

Tantai Hu's shoulders shook slightly.

Chen Yang continued, "Isn't the reason you still want to be a soldier today because of what the Viceroy said that day—'The feuds of our families has yet to be avenged, and the humiliation of our nation has yet to be redressed'? The Imperial Army will one day ride the horses out of the mountain pass. Isn't killing the enemies with your own hands then much more gratifying than blaming another man today? How is it that you've forgotten this all with the passage of time?!"

Tantai Hu said, "How would I dare to forget? I've never forgotten it for even a day. I gave this life to the Viceroy to use as he wished, all for that one day to come."

"Then it's all good, isn't it?" Chen Yang got up and pushed the money to Tantai Hu. "Brothers don't bear each other overnight grudges. The Viceroy treats us as brothers. This money is from the Viceroy himself. After you've celebrated the Spring Festival, return to your original squad, hang up the Squad Commander authority token, and do your duties well."

With mixed feelings, Tantai Hu saw Chen Yang out of the door.

When Chen Yang returned, he saw Shen Zechuan. Both men greeted each other on the veranda. As he lifted the curtain and went in, Shen Zechuan knew that the matter was done.

Shen Zechuan was bored to death as he watched the falling snow.

A vicious man<sup>11</sup> like this could be disguised as fake even if he was real, and be made real even if he was fake. Others simply would not be able to tell whether the expression he put on was happiness or anger, nor would they be able to tell if he was being sincere or hypocritical.

It did not take long before Chen Yang came out again. He lifted the curtain, nodded at Shen Zechuan, and said, "The Viceroy is waiting inside for you to have a meal together."

Shen Zechuan turned around and saw Xiao Chiye looking at him.

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### Footnotes

1. 将威未行, 则先振之以威 “If the general has yet to have the prestige to speak of, he should first use forceful means to build up his prestige.” From Jixiao Xinshu; New Treatise on Effective Military Discipline 《纪效新书》 by Qi Jiguang (戚继光). It is a military treatise or manual written in 1560 by Qi Jiguang, a Ming Dynasty General famous for defending China from the Japanese pirates' invasion.
2. 兄弟阅墙, 同室操戈 both practically mean internal strife.
3. Spring Festival, which celebrates the start of the new year from the first day of the first month in the lunar calendar.



- 4.
5. 暖手 a small portable hand warmer that looks like a little pot. Also known as *tangpozi* (汤婆子).



- 6.
7. Refer to footnote #1, about the military strategy “if the general has yet to have the prestige to speak of, then he should first awe and intimidate to boost his prestige.” The next steps following this would be to use kindness to win them over and make friends with them in good faith. Only then will the soldiers work hard for you. From Jixiao Xinshu; New Treatise on Effective Military Discipline 《纪效新书》 by Qi Jiguang (戚继光).
8. 震虎 from 敲山震虎 put on a deliberate show of strength as a warning. The tiger here refers to Tantai Hu (and also the rest of the Imperial Army by extension).
9. 柳下惠 Liuxia Hui, also Zhan Huo, was a man of eminent virtue, and was said on one occasion to have held a lady in his lap without the slightest imputation on his moral character (mentioned in Chapter 31)
10. 虎 is literally tiger (also the Hu in Tantai Hu), but it’s also a northeast dialect (虎了吧唧) to describe people who are particularly dumb and would do things without thinking, speak without thinking, etc. So Chen Yang is also saying he’s a fool.
11. ~子 the -zi is a suffix that means child, or sonny.
12. 军户 One of the three households sorted according to their occupation: civilian (民户), military (军户), and craftsman.
13. 狼虎 literally wolf and tiger (or predators), also refers to a vicious and ruthless person

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 40 : TEARING & BITING



Fresh vegetables were a rare sight in winter, and so the ones that fetched a high price in Qudu now were all green vegetables. Having been rewarded by Li Jianheng, Xiao Chiye's dinner table tonight included a plate of crisp, shredded cucumber.

"Side dishes that accompany the main dishes help to invigorate the spleen and eliminate toxins."<sup>1</sup> Xiao Chiye scooped up a bowl of hot soup and pushed it towards Shen Zechuan. "You've been standing outside for so long. Warm yourself up and have a refreshing meal before you take a rest."

"As the saying goes," Shen Zechuan wiped his hands and took a seat. "One who is unaccountably solicitous is hiding evil intentions.<sup>2</sup> So, what instructions does the Second Young Master have?"

"Plenty." Xiao Chiye said. "We'll talk as we eat."

Both men lifted their chopsticks together.

There was no one else inside the room. The two bowls of rice were quickly eaten clean, as was the plate of shredded cucumber that they split between themselves. Neither of them touched the meat dishes.

"The Spring Festival<sup>3</sup> is right around the corner, and my shifu is coming to the capital." Xiao Chiye drank the soup. "If Ji Gang-shifu is free, we can arrange for both elders to meet."

"A new year celebration, or a Hongmen banquet?<sup>4</sup> You have to make it clear." Shen Zechuan set down the chopsticks. "My shifu doesn't stake his life on games."

"New year celebration." Xiao Chiye said. "There are only both of them left in this generation, and they have not seen each other in so many years."

"Sure. I'll prepare a big gift later and ask shifu to come out of obscurity." Shen Zechuan had eaten his fill.

Seeing him get up, Xiao Chiye said, "Rest in my room as usual tonight."

Shen Zechuan looked back and smiled as he said, "Naturally, I won't run. We'll take our turns in the bath. Take your time. I'll go first. "

With that, he lifted the curtain and headed inside to wash his face and rinse his mouth.

Xiao Chiye called for the servants to clear the table. As he stood by the window, he saw that it was snowing outside. He turned his head and saw Shen Zechuan's silhouette through the hazy curtain fabric.

Shen Zechuan removed his outer garment. It was as if he was peeling away a layer of coarse shell to reveal the fresh, tender, and succulent flesh within. When he lowered his head to undo his waist belt, the curve of his nape danced with tangerine-yellow light as if to add a velvety touch of exquisiteness to that already smooth part.

Looking at him through the curtain fabric was just like scratching an itch through a boot. It magnified that temptation, which was brimming with desire, and scattered it, sending it wandering aimlessly through his limbs and bones. It tickled him so badly that it made him irritable and gave him certain violent thoughts. The man being like jade himself counted for nothing. What bothered Xiao Chiye the most was Shen Zechuan's desire.

That pair of eyes. And that kind of smile. Whether by design or accident, he seemed to exude such a sexual desire.

"Come and hug me."

"Come and touch me."

"Come and sweat it out with me to your heart's content."

This desire was as unaggressive as a drizzle, but unbeknownst to him, it had invaded his mind. Shen Zechuan himself seemed oblivious to it. He retained another kind of indifference that was diametrically opposed to lust as he breezily threw out this contradictory puzzle for others to think about.

Xiao Chiye did not want to continue to think. He was keenly aware that the "eagle" this time was not that easy to tame. He could only be his own master; he could not tolerate himself getting so easily and repeatedly aroused by his impulses.

Xiao Chiye turned back his head, closed the window, and went to the bath hall.



Both men slept on each side with a block in between. Their backs were to each other, and their breathing was steady as if they had already fallen asleep.

Xiao Chiye kept close to his thumb ring and thought of many matters.

This thumb ring did not belong to him. At first, it belonged to Feng Yisheng of the Suotian Pass. When Feng Yisheng died in battle, he left the thumb ring to Zuo Qianqiu. Wearing this thumb ring, Zuo Qianqiu made a



name for himself during the battle at Tianfei Watchtower, where he shot an arrow at his wife, killing her.

It was because of this that Zuo Qianqiu's hair turned white, and also because of this that he never recovered from the setback. He had achieved fame and glory, but the person was dead. There was no way Zuo Qianqiu could go on the battlefield again. His hands, which once made significant achievements at Tianfei Watchtower, could no longer wield the bow freely.

As a child, Xiao Chiye had followed Zuo Qianqiu to ask him, "How did you end up shooting your wife to death?"

Zuo Qianqiu sanded the bowstring and asked, "Do you really want to be a general?"

Xiao Chiye nodded.

Zuo Qianqiu said, "Then don't start a family. A general dying in a hundred battles is actually not that terrifying. What's terrifying is that the general, in all likelihood, will come to be confronted with choices. What you want, and what you must shoulder, are all different things."

Zuo Qianqiu looked at the bow in desolation. The grassland wind caressed his white hair. He said in a daze, "I hope you will never be trapped in such a desperate situation. When a man reaches that stage, he will die no matter what he chooses."

"You saved tens of thousands of people at Tianfei Watchtower." Xiao Chiye leaned over the railing. "Why didn't you want to be conferred a title?"

Zuo Qianqiu laughed and said, "Because I died in battle."

It was not until Xiao Chiye grew up to be a youth that he understood Zuo Qianqiu's words. In the battle at Tianfei Watchtower, Zuo Qianqiu's beloved wife was taken prisoner. Between opening the gates to surrender, or shutting the gates to fight to the death, he could only choose one.

Zuo Qianqiu chose neither. He headed out of the city all by himself and drew his bow to shoot his beloved wife to death.

Legend had it that the shot was the most steady shot he had ever fired in his life. He hit his target among countless people. The rain was pouring that night. No one knew if he had cried himself hoarse, or when his hair turned white. When the soldiers retreated at dawn, Zuo Qianqiu stood upon the white expanse of bones to collect his wife's corpse and bury her.

From then on, his reputation of "Thunder Sinking the Jade Stage, Zuo Qianqiu" spread far and wide. Those who respected him would also curse

him behind his back. A man who was that heartless would only make the common man think of him as a scourge, as if generals like him were all naturally born to be this cold-blooded.

Xiao Chiye treasured this thumb ring very much. But he also feared it. He was afraid that he would one day be caught in a dilemma too. So he had never spoken of 'like' lightly.

Chen Yang had been with him for so long, and he still did not know what Xiao Chiye was fond of. The wine he loved. The food he liked. The clothing he preferred. The truth was so mixed up with falsehood that no one could really tell.

Libei, Libei!

It was as if only this word was the destiny he had no way of hiding. He already had a taste of being in someone else's control because of desire. So how could he court trouble for himself again?

Xiao Chiye sat up soundlessly and looked at Shen Zechuan. He raised his hand. He just had to exert some force, and he could smother this desire to death.

Shen Zechuan looked like he was having a nightmare. As he frowned, his temples were both drenched in a cold sweat. His back was already a little damp.

Xiao Chiye bent over to look at him and saw a Shen Zechuan he had never seen before.

Shen Zechuan was trapped in the tide of blood. He was soaking wet all over. He touched himself. It was blood. The dream repeated itself every single day. He felt as if he was going mad.

All of a sudden, Shen Zechuan gave a few subtle twitches. His tightly pursed lips slowly loosened apart to mutter something in his sleep amid his outbreak of cold sweat.

He was this helpless.

Something else from that deep, heavy fear suddenly dawned on Xiao Chiye. He scrutinized Shen Zechuan, like a massive beast observing its prey.

Shen Zechuan was not invulnerable. Other than that unexplainable probing and dreading of each other, what they had was an even more inexplicable empathy between fellow sufferers.

Shen Zechuan felt weary. He would no longer cry in his dreams, or strive to dig through the corpses. He had seen through the nightmare. He

knew Ji Mu was dead.

Hurry up.

It was as if Shen Zechuan was an apathetic bystander.

Let's get this over and done with.

He urged it on brutally and ruthlessly, even wanting this blood to spill even more, and this snow to fall even harder. How else could he lay bare this nightmare? He no longer had any fear. This flesh and marrow had already been soaked rotten in the blood! He was a stray dog feeding on rotting flesh. The filthy water and abhorrence were merely evidence of his existence.

Shen Zechuan suddenly opened his eyes and reached out to put his hands against Xiao Chiye's chest. In just a few moments, he asked calmly while dripping with cold sweat, "Can't sleep?"

Xiao Chiye's chest was scalding hot. He could feel the iciness of Shen Zechuan's palms through the thin fabric. He replied, "I ate too much."

Shen Zechuan said, "A timid person would have been scared to death if he saw a person right upon opening his eyes in the middle of the night."

"I heard you calling me," Xiao Chiye said without batting an eyelid. "I have to determine if you were cursing me."

"If I curse you, it wouldn't be in my dreams." Scalded by Xiao Chiye's body temperature, Shen Zechuan wanted to retract his fingers.

Unexpectedly, Xiao Chiye pressed his hands back and asked, "Are you cold?"

Shen Zechuan's temples were still soaked. He smiled and said, "Yeah. I'm so cold."

He had reverted to that seductive Shen Lanzhou. He did not care the least whether Xiao Chiye had been tempted. This kind of ability was innate; it came to him naturally. He was a scum.

Xiao Chiye gripped his hands and pinned them down at the head of the bed. Sniffing his scent in the darkness, he said, "You sleep in my bed. You know very well what I think of every night. You said that I'm impressive. Shen Lanzhou, the impressive one is you."

"Uh... what's to be done then?" Shen Zechuan still sounded a little hoarse. He said nonchalantly, "I didn't do anything."

"I want to do it." Xiao Chiye bent his head down to stare at him. "I want to do you."

“Choose some other ways to let me die.” Shen Zechuan let him clasped both of his hands together. “It’s too much of a failure to die in bed.”

“I changed my mind.” Xiao Chiye caressed aside Shen Zechuan’s damp hair with a freed hand and looked at him as if he was scrutinizing a jewel he had bought. “I don’t want you to die.”

Shen Zechuan said, “I’d advise you not to bite this neck.”

“Lanzhou.” Xiao Chiye said his name with a sigh and jested, “Will you let me off even if I didn’t?”

Shen Zechuan looked at him.

Xiao Chiye asked, “Is it such a pleasure to tease me?”

“Yeah.” Shen Zechuan sensed Xiao Chiye gradually drawing closer to him. “It pleasures me to see the pitiful look of a little wolf at a loss.”

“Then, we can be even more pleased.” Xiao Chiye said, “The Empress Dowager has been putting up with it without making any moves. What did she promise to give you? Throw it away. I’ll give you much, much more.”

“Uh-huh...” Shen Zechuan laughed, “I guess freedom is not included in the list of things you’re giving me. Xiao’Er, how is it that you never know that everything you want is all written in your eyes. You want to lock me up right this moment, am I right?”

“I want to make a gold chain.” Xiao Chiye said, “It’s too much of a pity for this neck not to be adorned with something.”

“Dog chains were originally used to leash wolves.” Shen Zechuan was so close to Xiao Chiye that he could hear the latter’s breathing. He said, “I want to put a gold chain around your neck too. For each word you say, I’ll yank it once.”

“Let’s not.” Xiao Chiye raised his eyebrows. “With your salary, you won’t be able to afford it even if you empty your pockets.”

The tips of their noses were about to bump into each other. Xiao Chiye’s thumb ring was pressing against Zechuan’s wrist, which had already reddened from his grip.

Xiao Chiye said, “Since it’s—”

Shen Zechuan raised his head and kissed him on the lips. Icy derision followed right on the heels of this encounter of soft lips.

“Want to go wild with abandon?” The expression in Shen Zechuan’s eyes was deranged as he murmured, “Do you dare? Try tearing me apart, Xiao’Er. I don’t care.”

The tightly wound string that was Xiao Chiye's limit snapped with a "twang", and those already tempestuous waves of emotions gushed forth with a roar. Amidst this mocking and instigation, he ruthlessly pinned down Shen Zechuan and kissed him back as if he was biting him.

Lust interweaved with murderous intent. Hatred entangled with pity. Exactly who between them was the more detestable and pitiable one?

Tongues intertwined in this wet kiss, where Xiao Chiye kissed Shen Zechuan, and Shen Zechuan gave all he could to respond. There was the sensual sound of licking between their lips and teeth as desire burned up two abnormal men.

Xiao Chiye suddenly released his grip on Shen Zechuan's wrist and supported his back up, wanting them to press against each other intimately, skin to skin.

This was mutual loathing.

Tainting the other party with the filthy stain that was their own. Letting hatred turn into a bond that could not be torn apart. It was too much of an agony to live like this, being the only ones who could hear their own howls in the night. So why not come together and tear each other bloody? Let this visceral intimacy metamorphose into a form of solace they could rely on.

This life was already rotten enough.



#### Footnotes

1. 小菜佐食，醒脾解浊 from Suiyuan Shidan, or Recipes from the Garden of Contentment: Yuan Mei's Manual of Gastronomy 《随园食单》. It's a work on cooking and gastronomy written by the Qing Dynasty poet and scholar Yuan Mei (袁枚).
2. 无事献殷勤，非奸即盗 rape or robbery are the "evil intentions" specifically mentioned in the idiom
3. Spring Festival, which celebrates the start of the new year from the first day of the first month in the lunar calendar.
4. 鸿门宴 Hongmen Banquet; a banquet set up with the aim of murdering a guest. Refers to a famous episode in 206 BC when future Han emperor Liu Bang (刘邦) escaped attempted murder by his rival Xiangyu (项羽)

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 41 : LANZHOU



Clothing was shoved up high, and skin that radiated out like moonlight felt icy cold to the touch. There were no caresses, only the tearing apart of each other. The thick, tangible night melted away into an expanse of spring water—into a night of heated passion and intoxicating pleasure. Xiao Chiye scooped up this water. He struggled to prop himself up among the tidal waves of emotions and saw Shen Zechuan's eyes as he gasped for breath.

In this pair of eyes, there was none of the temperature of one drowning in lust. They even reflected his absurd behavior at this very moment.

Xiao Chiye felt a wave of thrill cutting through him like a blade. He fondled Shen Zechuan until he made him hot—until he made this water rage. He bound Shen Zechuan from high in the clouds into the crooks of his arms and squashed him hard as he licked and nipped at him wantonly. Biting down on the back of Shen Zechuan's neck was like taking in a mouthful of enchantment potion<sup>1</sup> into his mouth.

The night was thoroughly wet, and the bedding was soaked in sweat. Intertwining limbs thrashed around on the bed, and it was in these urgent collisions that Xiao Chiye gradually got a grasp on happiness. He progressed swiftly, surrendering himself in that mass of soft clouds, and hardening in the same mass of soft clouds. He pushed up hard silently against Shen Zechuan's vital spot, so much that Shen Zechuan had to strain to gulp even as his raised neck fearlessly exposed itself before Xiao Chiye's eyes.

Xiao Chye kissed this neck and scooped up both of Shen Zechuan's knees. He was no longer a hypocrite untempted by lust.<sup>2</sup> He was an ordinary man who stormed the enemy's den and went in for the kill in the dark. He made it impossible for Shen Zechuan to remember the Chashi sinkhole, and made it just as impossible for Shen Zechuan to forget this intense merging of bodies.

They had no life-saving straw to clutch at. This was a night of indulgence to break free of their misery. Pleasure blazed through their bodies like a raging inferno. Shen Zechuan reached out for the headboard, and Xiao Chiye dragged him back and locked him in an embrace.

“Go on, show me how feral you can get.” Xiao Chiye whispered, “You want me to go wild with abandon, so how dare you run? Don’t you want to see who is more savage? I’m not afraid.”

Shen Zechuan’s cheek chafed against the bedding as he closed his eyes and gasped for breath. The expression of pain, of being unable to take it, on this face was all a captivating seduction.

How did he blossom into such a visage?

Xiao Chiye pinched his chin and held it up to kiss him without letting him pant or rest. In the time the sides on the back of his waist<sup>3</sup> were numbed, he ejaculated completely into him.

Shen Zechuan was still shuddering from the climactic high, but Xiao Chiye did not stop. He turned Shen Zechuan over and thrust in again.

The cold wind howled endlessly outside the window, and the suppressed sounds of panting cut through the darkness. Xiao Chiye dripped with sweat as he kissed Shen Zechuan over and over again.

He did not want to concede defeat.

But he had already been vanquished.



Xiao Chiye fell asleep.

The ferocity and fury in his features had all dissolved away into a kind of displeasure from being brash. He held onto one of Shen Zechuan’s wrist, making it seem like both men were snuggling against each other this winter night, consequently turning those merciless kisses into a scalding hot furnace.

Outside, the snow fell for the entire night, drifting gently like willow catkins. The sound of wind was nowhere to be heard.

When it was nearly daybreak, Shen Zechuan extracted his wrist from Xiao Chiye’s grip. Xiao Chiye’s fingers chased after him, moving under the bedding.

Chen Yang, who was outside the door, saw Shen Zechuan come out of the room.

“Military drill grounds.” Shen Zechuan said concisely.

Chen Yang nodded. As he was about to make way, he caught a glimpse of the injury on Shen Zechuan’s lips. He looked as if he was about to say a word, but hesitated.

Shen Zechuan glanced at him and saw through what he was thinking, so he said, “The Imperial Bodyguard’s reorganization deployment order should

be issued these few days. Thank you for your kind treatment during this period of time.”

Chen Yang said, “A few days earlier—”

“What’s over is over; there’s no need to speak of it.” Shen Zechuan was gratuitously cold today. He said, “We will all be patrolling Qudu in the future, so it’ll be inevitable for us to bump into each other. I’ll act with caution, and I’d advise the various Imperial Army brothers to be prudent as well.”

Chen Yang paused.

But Shen Zechuan smiled and continued, “It hasn’t been easy for the Imperial Army to be where they are today. But time changes, and every dog has its day, so who can say for sure when it comes to the future?”

Without waiting for Chen Yang to answer, he lifted his robe and left.

Ding Tao patted the snow off his shoulders and fell over to hang in mid-air. Swinging with his brush in his mouth, he gazed at Shen Zechuan’s back with a frown.

On seeing this, Chen Yang asked, “What’s the matter?”

Ding Tao said: “Don’t you think he is a little sad today?”

Chen Yang turned his head to see the corner of Shen Zechuan’s robe. He said, “Is that so? He seems fine to me. He’s smiling.”

Ding Tao fished out his book from his bosom and wrote a few characters while suspended in mid-air. He lamented, “Maybe it was because he had a fight with the Second Young Master last night. That was quite the commotion from what I’ve heard.”

Feeling a little embarrassed, Chen Yang looked up and said, “Gu Jin, didn’t you teach him about the birds and bees? From my calculations, this lad is already sixteen. In Libei, it’d be time for him to marry a wife.”

Gu Jin did not reply.

Chen Yang said, “Do you hear me?”

“He has cotton stuffed in his ears!” Ding Tao stuffed the book back into his bosom and turned back to remove the cotton in one of Gu Jin’s ears. He shouted, “Jin-ge! Chen Yang is calling you!”

Gu Jin gave a start and nearly slipped down from above. He shoved Ding Tao’s face away and frowned as he poked his head out to ask, “What?”

Chen Yang pointed to Ding Tao and said, “Send him away. Sell him and add to your wine budget this month.”



Gu Jin grasped Ding Tao by the neck and said, "He can't sell for much going by this weight."

There were movements inside the room, and all three men simultaneously fell silent. After a while, Xiao Chiye came out of the room. As he put on his clothes, he swept a glance around, then looked at Ding Tao.

"Dage will be coming to the capital in a few days," Xiao Chiye's lips hurt a little when he spoke. He pressed his tongue against it but gave up quickly. "There's no need to submit reports of trivial issues."

Ding Tao nodded his head hard, like a little chick pecking at grains.

After a moment's pause, Xiao Chiye asked, "Why are you still here?"

Ding Tao scratched the back of his head in puzzlement. He looked at Chen Yang, then at Gu Jin, and finally back at Xiao Chiye. He said, "Young Master, I'm on duty today."

Xiao Chiye questioned, "Where's the man I told you to keep an eye on?"

Ding Tao said, "He, he already left..."

Xiao Chiye said nothing. When Chen Yang led the horse over, Xiao Chiye flipped onto it. Just before he left, he pointed to Ding Tao. "Throw him out."

Ding Tao had yet to climb up the horse. Before he could react to Xiao Chiye's words, he was already hoisted up by Chen Yang and Gu Jin. The color drained from his face as he clutched his little book and said, "Please don't. Young Master, Young Master! I did nothing wrong these days—"

He had already been tossed out.

After throwing him out, Chen Yang stepped forward and said, "Master, shifu should be arriving today."

Without saying a word more, Xiao Chiye spurred his horse on and headed out of the city.



Shen Zechuan did not go to the military drill grounds at Mount Feng. Instead, he braved the snow to return to Zhao Zui Temple.

Ji Gang had not seen him for several days, so he rushed to buy roast chicken after letting Shen Zechuan in. It had been a while since Grand Mentor Qi last saw him too. At this moment, he was holding a brush and squinting his eyes to write characters. On seeing Shen Zechuan enter, he hurriedly threw the brush away and called out to him, "Lanzhou!"

Shen Zechuan lifted his robe to sit upright opposite Grand Mentor Qi.

Grand Mentor Qi said, “The Imperial Bodyguards’ deployment order is about to be issued soon, right? Where do you want to go?”

Shen Zechuan replied, “The Imperial Carriages Office. Close to the Emperor.”

Grand Mentor Qi nodded. On seeing the wound on Shen Zechuan’s lips, he switched the topic and asked, “Has something happen outside lately?”

After a moment of silence, Shen Zechuan said, “Now that His Majesty has Hai Liangyi to protect him, I fear that even a hopeless case can pose as a pillar of the state, much like a rotten wood pretending to be a beam.<sup>4</sup> Back then, when I saved Xiao’Er, it was because the ascension of His Majesty to the throne was a foregone conclusion. Killing him would, on the contrary, mess up the chessboard.”

“A messed-up chessboard is nothing. What’s to be feared is a messed-up heart and mind.” Grand Mentor Qi looked at him. “Have you gained any new perspectives all these days you were staying by Xiao the Second’s side?”

Shen Zechuan wiped the ink stains on his fingertips and thought for a long time before saying, “It’s too much of a pity for him to be born after Xiao Jiming. It’s fine if they can keep him under control in this life, but if they can’t...”

Shen Zechuan looked at Grand Mentor Qi, but did not continue his words.

But Grand Mentor Qi said, “Lanzhou, you still don’t get it.”

Shen Zechuan was slightly stunned.

Grand Mentor Qi stood up and paced for two steps. Gazing at the snow in the courtyard, he suddenly let out a long sigh. “You killed Ji Lei.”

Shen Zechuan stopped wiping.

In a rare philosophical state, Grand Mentor Qi said, “Lanzhou, we are both trapped here. We live on hatred, but we mustn’t let ourselves be killed by hatred. Five years ago, you couldn’t have done such an utterly ruthless act. But five years later, you can already take charge to do such a clean and efficient job of it. I imparted the classics to you, but I don’t want you to be manipulated by hatred. It’s hard to be righteous when you take the lives of the living. You won’t be able to turn back if you fall too far. Without exorcising your inner demons, you will forever be trapped in a nightmare. Ji

Lei deserves death, and it's still death for him even if you end him in one slash. Think about your days in Duanzhou. I have no wish to see you walk a cold-blooded and cold-hearted path. You said it's a pity Xiao Chiye was born after Xiao Jiming. What I'm going to tell you is the exact opposite."

"Just imagine for a moment that Ji Mu is the Hereditary Prince of Libei today. Can there be no other reason for him to leave you in Qudu other than a lack of alternatives?"

"The sharp edge of a treasured sword comes only by honing it. Xiao Chiye is a sword. He has yet to notice it himself, but his elder brother has, for many years, placed high hopes on him. Libei has never been stingy with praises that he deserves either. If he's a son without a use,<sup>5</sup> they would have chosen to dote on him to make him happy. But Xiao Jiming not only took him to battles, he even gave him a free hand in leading the troops. Since he's already left with no room for retreat, then was his handing over his younger brother really just to make him miserable? Five years ago, in Libei, Xiao Chiye did not know how to exercise restraint, but now, he has already learned how to rein in his arrogance and willfulness. Everything learned from word-of-mouth can be superficial; It's only those you come to understand through your own sufferings that are the real masterstroke. Xiao Jiming is a great elder brother. Being born after Xiao Jiming is never the most pitiful thing about Xiao Chiye. Lanzhou, this brotherly sentiment should be something you understand the most. Yet it has now become the brotherliness you understand the least."

Grand Mentor Qi paused for a long time, looking somewhat gloomy and depressed. Then he looked at Shen Zechuan again and kneeled to pat Shen Zechuan slowly on the head with his wizened palm.

"Teacher taught you the classics and gave you the courtesy name Lanzhou. Unruffled is the orchid<sup>6</sup> that grows on stone steps. Boundless is the horizons of the boat<sup>7</sup> that crosses the sea of misery. Wide is the heart that accommodates a hundred rivers, and broad is the vision that encompasses a thousand lakes. You're a good child. Killing is merely a means to an end.<sup>8</sup> Hatred may be hard to eliminate, but your heart must never change.<sup>9</sup> Lanzhou, oh Lanzhou, don't you still have your shifu and teacher? Why must you force yourself into such a corner? It may not be a bad idea to just voice out your unhappiness these five years."

Shen Zechuan stared blankly at Grand Mentor Qi.

“Twenty-five years ago, His Royal Highness the Crown Prince left. How I long every day, and resent every night, for not being able to take that blow for him, to kill the enemy with my own hands. I stewed in resentment until I turned into this state. I became your teacher. I.” Grand Mentor Qi choked a little with emotion. “I want you to kill my enemy for me. But I can’t have you turn into a blade who has forgotten who you are... You are a person, Lanzhou. Don’t forget your carefree days in Duanzhou. Although Ji Mu died, he didn’t die because of you. It’s Heaven’s decree. What is past is past. You did not escape and survived the Chashi sinkhole to shoulder a sin. You are the continuation of existence for him, for those 40,000 soldiers! Silly child, Ji Gang has been so careful, so how did he still let you lead yourself so astray that you’d blame the wrong person?!”

Shen Zechuan closed his eyes.

He heard Ji Mu’s calls, and he thought of Xiao Chiye’s scent. At this very moment, he finally understood why he was so infatuated with that scent. That was the brilliance of the scorching sun—the light that could allow him to escape from the Chashi sinkhole.

Even if it were only for a moment, it would allow him to forget the tides of blood and the rain of arrows, to forget the cold and the corpses. He could no longer remember the days in Duanzhou. They were too distant. So distant that they seemed to be the memories of his past life. He could no longer even recall Ji Mu’s heartily laughing face. He had plunged into a nightmare, tormenting himself every single moment.

Ji Mu was dead.

Why wasn’t he the one to die that day?

The fact that his shifu did not blame him was the greatest reproach of all. What he could not struggle free of was the sense of guilt that would haunt him for a lifetime. There was no way he could tell Grand Mentor Qi candidly that, with the passage of time, he had finally killed off himself.

Xiao Chiye was the reflection on the other end who had everything he did not have. He observed Xiao Chiye, clumsily trying to imitate him so that he could let himself look more like a person. He could not tell anyone that the Shen Zechuan living in this body was a repulsive killer.

He was already standing at the edge of the abyss.

Shen Zechuan lowered his eyes under Grand Mentor Qi’s palm like a child respectfully listening to his teachings. He listened devoutly. Yet, it was

in this very instant that he realized he was no longer able to shed tears.

His throat throbbed slightly. Eventually, he said, feeling comforted, “It’s... as Teacher said.”



Three days later, the Imperial Bodyguards’ deployment order was announced. Han Cheng, the original Assistant Commander of the Eight Great Training Divisions, was transferred over to be the Imperial Bodyguards’ Commander-in-chief, while staff from the Imperial Bodyguards’ Twelve Offices were reassigned. Shen Zechuan was redeployed from the Domesticated Elephants Office to the Imperial Carriages Office, and Ge Qingqing was promoted from Company Commander to Judge.<sup>10</sup>

Shen Zechuan’s new authority token had the word “Emperor’s Entourage”. The Imperial Carriages Office was a great place to go, since being close to the Emperor would make it easiest for him to get into the Emperor’s good graces.

Xiao Chiye, originally the Imperial Army’s Viceroy, also took on the post of the Eight Great Training Divisions’ Commander, thereby legitimizing his authority over the patrols of Qudu. After that one night, he welcomed Zuo Qianqiu and stayed at the military drill grounds in Mount Feng. Even until the time Shen Zechuan left the Imperial Army’s residence, both men never saw each other again.

“Master.” Chen Yang attended to Xiao Chiye at the latter’s side and said in a soft voice, “The original arrangement was the Domesticated Steeds Office. Who would have expected it to be the Imperial Carriages Office when the deployment order was issued.”

Xiao Chiye was solving a ‘Chinese Rings’ puzzle.<sup>11</sup> His hand movements slowed as he said, “That could only mean he didn’t care for it.”

Chen Yang said, “But isn’t going to work in the Emperor’s presence makes it much easier for him to meet with misfortune that’ll cost him his life? Secretariat Elder Hai was the one who urged the former Emperor to kill him back then.”

“Demanding repayment right on the crux of the matter. His heart is not on carrying out his duties lawfully.” Xiao Chiye tossed away the rings and said, “Ji Lei is dead. Han Cheng is a stand-in from the Eight Great Training Divisions. The Imperial Bodyguards is now without a master. What do you think he wants to do by stepping up now?”

Chen Yang pondered for a moment and said, “If he becomes...”

“If he succeeds.” Xiao Chiye looked towards the military drill grounds.  
“Then he will have his claws and fangs.”<sup>12</sup>

Chen Yang did not venture to speak.

A little while later, Xiao Chiye continued, “The Ji Clan dominates the Imperial Bodyguards. He has Ji Gang as his shield. It’s simply effortless for him to move up using past relationships and old sentiments as his blade. Although we can’t get our men in, we can limit his chances. There has to be a justification for getting a promotion and riches. If nothing goes wrong before the Emperor, then he can be held back from making any moves. Since the Imperial Army now has the responsibility of patrolling, then why trouble the Imperial Bodyguards?”

Chen Yang said, “This subordinate understands it now .”

Xiao Chiye drank a mouthful of water, thought for a moment, then said, “Pick a low-key place and lay the table for a feast. Him and I – we’ll pick our fights and we’ll still have our meals.”

He pursed the part of his lips that had been bitten.

“After all, we could be considered fellow disciples of the same school of martial arts.”

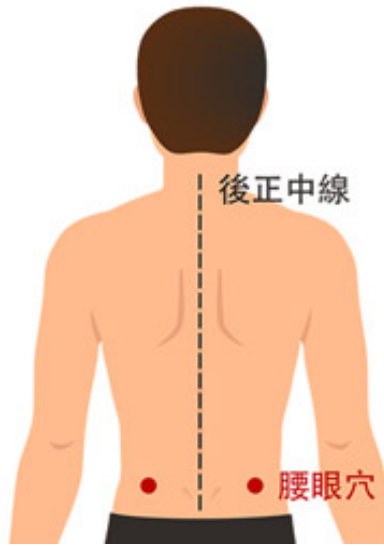


### **Lianyin’s Note:**

This chapter is the uncensored version.

### Footnotes

1. 迷魂汤 mythological magic potion to bewitch someone
2. 坐怀不乱 In the Spring and Autumn Period, Liuxia Hui of Lu stayed at the city gate overnight where he met a homeless woman. Fearing the woman would be frozen from the cold, he sat her on his lap (or embraced her in his bosom) and blanketed her with his clothes. The night passed without him making a single indecent move. This later came to describe an upright man unaffected by temptations even with a beautiful woman close by.



- 3.
4. 腰眼 either side of the small of the back
5. 朽木(也能)充栋梁 rotten wood pretending to be a pillar; i.e., a hopeless case posing as a pillar of the state.
6. 废子 It's also a term in Weiqi to mean a useless stone (worthless chess piece). But it can also be literally read as useless son
7. From his name "lan" 兰 orchid; one of the Four Gentlemen (四君子) in Chinese art that refers to four plants: the plum (梅), the orchid (蘭), the bamboo (竹), and the chrysanthemum (菊).
8. From his name "zhou" 舟 boat. The word Lanzhou (兰舟) as a whole also refers to a boat made of lily magnolia wood; i.e., a poetic term for boat.
9. 杀人不过点头地 used as a metaphor to leave yourself some leeway doing things. Don't go too far so as to avoid hurting innocent people or bringing more pain and misfortune to others, which isn't necessarily beneficial to yourself.
10. He's basically telling him to be magnanimous and broad-minded. Don't push his enemies too far. He may hate, but he mustn't let hatred change him.
11. 镇抚 Judge of the Imperial Prison, which specialized in using torture to suppress corrupt officials. During the Ming Dynasty, there was a Southern and Northern Prison (镇抚司) subordinated to the Imperial Bodyguards. The Southern Prison was in charge of interpreting military laws and managing military craftsmen while the Northern Prison was responsible for cases entrusted by the Emperor.



- 12.
13. 九连环 literally 'nine interconnected rings'. Also known as Baguenaudier, a disentanglement puzzle featuring a loop that must be disentangled from a sequence of rings on interlinked pillars.
14. 爪牙 also refers to lackeys or pawns or accomplices



## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 42 : RED PLUM BLOSSOMS



Xiao Chiye fixed the date for the feast before the Banquet of a Hundred Officials. Chen Yang went to deliver the invitation, but Ge Qingqing was the one who came to receive it.

“Lanzhou has been on duty in the Emperor’s presence lately. He doesn’t have any free time, so I’ll receive this on his behalf.” Ge Qingqing kept away the invitation. Once he was done exchanging conventional greetings with Chen Yang, he said. “The Imperial Army now has the world at its feet. I suppose Deputy General Chen is busy as well?”

“The Viceroy has been working hard on official documents every day. As men who follow and serve him, there’s no such thing as being busy.” Chen Yang drank the tea and said, “Ge-xiong received a blessing out of misfortune this time and was promoted to Judge.<sup>1</sup> Your future is bright. That’s truly impressive.”

Both men feigned civility as they spoke cordially with one another and tried their best not to disgrace themselves. Conflicts had arisen between the Imperial Bodyguards and Imperial Army lately, resulting in some discord. They were now at a point where they would loathe each other on sight.

It was only when his cup was changed to a fresh cup of tea that Chen Yang got up to say his farewell. Ge Qingqing saw him out, and Shen Zechuan, who was inside, lifted the curtain to walk out.

“This invitation came at a bad time.” Ge Qingqing handed the invitation to him. “Are you really going?”

“Why not?” Shen Zechuan opened the invitation and saw Xiao Chiye’s forceful and bold calligraphy.

“Xiao the Second’s inhibition of the Imperial Bodyguards is building up momentum these days. Our missions keep getting intercepted by the Imperial Army. Furthermore, he has the trust and favor of the Emperor. If he were to do something right this moment...” Ge Qingqing’s voice trailed off.

“What he wants to do couldn’t be any more obvious.” Shen Zechuan closed the invitation. “He wants to suppress the Imperial Bodyguards and turn Qudu into a territory under his control so that His Majesty only has his

Imperial Army to rely on. As to be expected, he will still deal a few more blows to the Imperial Bodyguards.”

“Exactly. It’s too risky at present to take Uncle Ji along to the feast.” Ge Qingqing said.

Shen Zechuan offhandedly tossed the invitation onto the table and said, “This involves Zuo Qianqiu. He won’t lay a trap here.”

Ge Qingqing still did not feel too reassured.

The wound on Shen Zechuan’s lips had healed. He put on his overcoat and said, “I’m going out for a while.”

Shen Zechuan waded through the snow and headed out. The snow was not heavy today, but the wind was strong. He arrived at Donglong Street and made his way to Ouhua Pavilion at the opposite corner of Xiangyun Villa.

Xi Hongxuan had recently composed some classical poems.<sup>2</sup> The tunes on the music scores were handed to the courtesans on Donglong Street to sing, and it unexpectedly turned into a grand occasion. Best of all, he had hollowed out the ground at the foot of Ouhua Pavilion stage and filled it with open-mouthed copper jars with only a layer of wooden plank spread out on top. At the same time, he also bought a new batch of young girls from Juexi. After training them for many days, he secured bells on their ankles, so that when they danced on the stage with their wooden clogs stepping out a rhythm, the sounds of the bells would merge into the copper jars. It was ethereal and wonderful.

At present, those on the stage were still singing Xi Hongxuan’s poem. Grasping his folding fan, he reclined against a rattan chair on the third floor and listened with closed eyes. A maidservant did not make any sound as she stepped on the woolen rug wearing only plain socks. She knelt outside the bead curtain and said softly, “Second Master, the guest has arrived.”

Without opening his eyes, Xi Hongxuan shut his fan.

The maidservant rose to her feet and lifted the curtain for Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan entered and saw another girl kneeling at Xi Hongxuan’s feet to massage his legs for him.

“Invite Young Master Shen to take a seat.” Xi Hongxuan was still tapping out a rhythm as he focused on the singing.

The kneeling girl shuffled over on her knees and attempted to help Shen Zechuan take off his shoes. Shen Zechuan raised a hand to stop her and sat

down on a chair.

It was only when the tune ended that Xi Hongxuan sat up. As he drank his tea, he pointed at the girl with his fan and said, "She's new and untainted."

Shen Zechuan did not look at her.

Xi Hongxuan laughed. Looking at him, he said, "Don't tell me you've really involved yourself with Xiao the Second? What? You still want to keep yourself chaste for him?"

The hair on Shen Zechuan's temples looked as if they were soaked in ink, yet in this warm room, the contrast made his facial features seem distant. It gave him an otherworldly aura. He said, "Since you've called me here, then cut the chatter."

Xi Hongxuan spread open his folding fan. With his obese body crammed into the rattan chair, he said, "We are buddies. I see you having a hard time staying by Xiao the Second's side, so I called you here today to let you have a good time. If we were to speak of being pitiful, then you, Shen Lanzhou, wins hands down. Xiao the Second gave you a kick in the past, sowing the seeds of illness and making you chronically sick and frail. And now you still have to pretend to be chummy with him. He is really your nemesis."

"That's right," Shen Zechuan did not evade the topic. He seemed resigned. "He's such a jerk."

"But from how I see it, he doesn't seem to be planning to leave the Imperial Bodyguards any leeway." Xi Hongxuan said. "Lanzhou, looks like your pillow talk didn't really sway him."

"You are a besotted man." Shen Zechuan accepted the warm handkerchief the girl presented to him to wipe his hands. A smile at the turn of his eyes, and that coolness he wore when he stepped through the door vanished without a trace and subconsciously embellished his usual expression. "You think of your dear sister-in-law with such perseverance and consistency. After bedding her once, you shower her with favor and love her to bits. But it's just a one-night stand between Xiao'Er and me. How could it be considered love?"

"So what you're saying is..." Xi Hongxuan picked up the chopsticks. "You're just having a fling?"

"Even having a fling is an art." Shen Zechuan said, "Everyone tumbled in bed once, each with his own needs. It's over once the merrymaking is

done. If you keep thinking of it every day, then it wouldn't be purely a fling anymore, would it?"

Xi Hongxuan clasped his hands and laughed out loud. He said, "Well, well! What a fine Lanzhou. I was afraid he might have you by the balls, and you'd forget that we are the ones who are comrades in the same boat. Here, here. Come and taste this dish. These are wild vegetables delivered with the greatest urgency from Qinzhou. It's good stuff that even the Imperial Kitchen doesn't have."

Both men picked the dishes to sample.

Xi Hongxuan said, "This Xiao the Second is truly something else. No one paid him any attention in the past, and then he showed his true mettle in the Autumn Hunt. Now he can't hide it anymore, so he simply charges head-on with disregard to obstacles posed by the others. He took over the military affairs of the Eighth Great Training Divisions, yet handed all the key positions to his trusted aides. As a result, none of the Eight Great Clans has any real power. But he kept up his pretenses so flawlessly that no one could get any dirt on him at all. Tell me. Doesn't that piss you off? Isn't that hateful?"

Shen Zechuan saw a dish of shredded cucumbers on the table, but he did not touch any of it. He said, "Xiao'Er burned all his boats at the Nanlin Hunting Grounds. He staked it all on the chance that His Majesty will remember their friendship and let him go. But this hope was all in vain, much like drawing water with a sieve. What's more, he ended up being closely watched by the Six Ministries. He can't turn back time, so he could only ensure that he holds real military power in Qudu. Compared with the Eight Great Training Divisions, the Imperial Army is like fireflies and the bright moon. They are useful, but not *that* useful. It hasn't been easy for him to finally gain the upper hand now. Naturally, he will not pass up the opportunity."

"In the past, there was still Pan Rugui in the Twenty-four Yamen, and the Eastern Depot could, no matter what, take him down a notch. But now that Pan Rugui is dead, the Eastern Depot has gone into decline too. Fine then, there's really no one in such a big Qudu who can beat him, Xiao Ce'an!" Xi Hongxuan took a bite of the food and said, "I've not been in His Majesty's favor these days. His Majesty now listens to Hai Liangyi, having made up his mind to be a wise monarch of a golden age. He's no longer that willing to play with me now."

Shen Zechuan finished his food and said unhurriedly, "A person who has lived for over twenty years would have already formed a fixed temper. If a mere few words can make him mend his ways, then nothing else in this world will be difficult."

Xi Hongxuan's chopsticks paused. He said, "You mean..."

"Hai Liangyi is a gentleman among gentlemen." Shen Zechuan set aside his chopsticks. "He's like the water so crystal clear you can see its bottom. His encounter with the current Emperor is like water coming into contact with hot oil. Sooner or later, it will explode and splatter all over. Xue Xiuzhuo has long reached this position, but why isn't he willing to go further? Grand Secretariat, isn't it? It's not like he isn't qualified. What the Central Administration lacked right this moment are precisely talents."

Xi Hongxuan mulled it over in silence.

Shen Zechuan said, "Now that foreign enemies are before us, how can the Eight Great Clans still stand divided and do things their own ways? You have already become the head of the Xi Clan. As they said, fortunes rise and fall. Now that the opportunity is within reach, don't tell me you're going to let it go?"

Xi Hongxuan set aside his chopsticks. He wiped his sweat with his handkerchief and looked at Shen Zechuan to ask, "You want me to contact the Eight Great Clans and get them to join forces to deal with Xiao the Second?"

Shen Zechuan said, "Xiao'Er is only just one of them. Nowadays, the civil officials are in favor. Consequently, the Imperial College looks to be on the up and up. Within a few years, the sons of common birth from humble families will enter the official ranks one after another. When that happens, what's going to happen to all the precious sons of the Eight Great Clans who are used to loafing around? If the poor rise in power, leading to an emergence of new nobles, then Second Young Master,<sup>3</sup> the Eight Great Clans will no longer be the 'Eight' Great Clans."

Xi Hongxuan said, "Even so... this is too thorny an issue. Leaving everything else aside, that Yao Wenyu will never agree. He's Hai Liangyi's student, one whom Hai Liangyi himself personally instructs. These years, he has traveled over the world for his studies and made the acquaintance of countless talents and sages. He definitely won't form an alliance with us."

Shen Zechuan said with a smile, "Eight Great Clans just mean the eight great clans. There's no reason for it to be just these eight clans. If the Yao

Clan doesn't cut it, then just change to another one."

Xi Hongxuan did not eat anymore. He pushed aside his chair and walked around the room. After some time, he looked at Shen Zechuan. "But do you have any way to keep Xiao the Second still? If he wants to protect the Emperor, then he won't just sit and do nothing. I'm not worried if it's just him. But there's the Libei Armored Cavalry standing behind him. With Xiao Jiming around, Xiao Ce'an can't be touched nor harmed. He's too tough to deal with!"

"Xiao Jiming is formidable, but his power and prestige all lie at the frontier." Shen Zechuan propped up his head. The eyes under the shadows could not be seen clearly. He gave Xi Hongxuan one last push. "Qudu is your place. As they said, a mighty dragon is no match for a serpent in its territory.<sup>4</sup> Ways are aplenty if you want Xiao'Er to be too up to his neck dealing with his own affairs to interfere."

Xi Hongxuan was so deep in thought that he did not realize that Shen Zechuan had said "your" and not "our". He asked, "What ways?"

Shen Zechuan let out a soundless laugh and said, "Xiao'Er's influence depends entirely on His Majesty's trust. They have been buddies for many years with merry days of drinking behind them. What's more, Xiao'Er has saved his life. So there's indeed nothing to be done about it for a moment. But things like friendship are just like autumn dew hanging on branches. It'll be gone once you leave it out to dry under the full, blazing sun."

Xi Hongxuan looked at Shen Zechuan. He recalled Ji Lei on that rainy night, and all the mountain games and wild vegetables he had swallowed earlier churned in his stomach. He forcibly braced himself so that he would betray nothing in his expression and said with a smile, "Since you have got it all worked out, then tell me."

After Shen Zechuan left, Xi Hongxuan lay back on the rattan chair and got the waiters to clear the table. It was a challenge for him to turn over, so he needed someone to help him. He felt alarmingly stifled for no reason and had the men open the windows.

Xue Xiuzhuo came out from the partitioned-off area. Xi Hongxuan lamented, "You heard it too, right? Fortunately, he was born as Shen Wei's son. If he were to rise in power, he would be even more difficult to deal with than Xiao the Second."

"To use someone, you have to use the right method." Xue Xiuzhuo poured tea. "There is no one in this world who has no desires and wants.

Shen Lanzhou has his weaknesses too. As long as we have a grasp on it, then even the most vicious dog is nothing to be feared.”

“But we can’t find any.” Xi Hongxuan tapped the center of his forehead with his fan. “Look at how callous he is towards Xiao the Second. It’s obvious he turned his back on him after getting off the bed. Humiliation and flattery don’t work on this kind of evildoers. You can’t even threaten him.”

Xue Xiuzhuo swallowed the tea, smiled, and said in a gentle and refined manner, “What’s the hurry? Just do as he says. Success or not, it’s all a disaster for Xiao the Second. When the time comes, he will expose his own true motives.”

Shen Zechuan headed downstairs, but did not rush to leave. The procuress greeted him. She only knew he was Xi Hongxuan’s honored guest, so she fawned on him and said, “What’s Master looking at? Looking cannot be compared to trying them out in person.”

Shen Zechuan sized up the gorgeously dressed courtesans and asked, “Do you have male courtesans?”

The procuress twisted her body around and said to the person behind her, “Lead this Master upstairs and get a few clean, tender-faced boys to serve him.”

Shen Zechuan sat in the room for a short while before three male courtesans entered. He swept a glance at them; they were all neatly tidied up.

The procuress was astute and knew how to choose appearances. After looking through the entire building, she could not find anyone who was more gorgeous than Shen Zechuan, so she took the unconventional gambit of sending him delicate-looking youths.

The boys stepped forth to take off Shen Zechuan’s shoes, but Shen Zechuan slightly shifted his feet away; thus, they kneeled and did not dare to move again.

Shen Zechuan gazed out of the window. After a while, he said, “Strip.”

The three of them obediently shed off their clothes. Shen Zechuan looked at those fair shoulders when they were midway through stripping, but from start to end, his heart remained as calm as still water. He then looked at their hands; each looked like girls’ hands, as if they had led pampered lives.

There were no calluses on their hands. And they were not wearing thumb rings either.

Shen Zechuan slowly breathed out a sigh and rose to his feet. Without even bothering to announce his departure, he pushed the door open and left, leaving behind the three male courtesans to look at each other in astonishment.

Ding Tao had been following Shen Zechuan. Seeing him finally walk out of Ouhua Pavillion, he meticulously jotted down a note in the little book that was now crumpled from being clutched by him. By the time he was done recording, he saw Shen Zechuan merging into the crowd. Ding Tao did not dare to be negligent, so he hurriedly chased after Shen Zechuan and followed him at a safe distance.

Shen Zechuan was not really walking that fast, yet, in just a blink of an eye, he disappeared.

Ding Tao let out an exclamation of surprise and hurried over, only to have his path blocked by a tall and sturdy man wearing a bamboo hat. As soon as he neared the other party, he knew that this was a man well-versed in martial arts!

It was jam-packed with people all around. Ding Tao did not wish to hurt them, so he endured it and did not act out. This, consequently, allowed Shen Zechuan to shake him off. He shook a fist, but then he felt a sense of familiarity from that tall and sturdy man earlier.

The snow intensified as soon as it was dark.

The tall and sturdy man walked for some distance while holding down his bamboo hat. But the moment he turned, he entered a blind alley.

Shen Zechuan stood behind him and cast a glance at him. He said, "You've been following me for half a month. What do you want?"

The tall and sturdy man pressed his bamboo hat lower, but let out a laugh and said, "How sharp. To think you noticed it early on."

"Your breath-concealing skills are outstanding." Shen Zechuan said. "Didn't you teach me some tricks yourself? You disappear without a trace the moment you are released from prison, so that they'd chase after you out of Qudu. You sure have gone to great pains."

The man lifted his bamboo hat to reveal a face with stubble. Qiao Tianya blew at the wisp of hair before his forehead and said, "It'd have been fine for you to lure me into a wine shop. Do we have to stand here and talk?"

"Jade Rabbits are hard to catch." Shen Zechuan looked at him for a moment and said, "Should I call you Qiao Tianya? Or Songyue?"



“As you please.” Qiao Tianya said, “Call me Qiao Tianya, and we’d be acquaintances. Call me Songyue, and you’d be my master.”

“Your Excellency is a capable man. How did you come to bow down and submit to my teacher?” Shen Zechuan asked.

“What can I do?” Qiao Tianya let out a self-mocking laugh. “I owe my life to Grand Mentor Qi, and I have to repay it by toiling hard like an ox or a horse for him for the rest of my life.”

“So the reason everything went smoothly at the hunting grounds that night...” Shen Zechuan said. “... was because of your help.”

“Taking you as my master means that it’s your cues I’m taking.” Qiao Tianya said, “You originally wanted to kill the Prince of Chu that night, but you didn’t expect Xiao the Second to be so bold as to stuff him right before the Imperial Bodyguards to dupe them and lead them on a wild goose chase. However, you are quick-witted. You could actually even seize the opportunity to give Xiao the Second a helping hand.”

“That’s all the capability I have.” Shen Zechuan said.

Qiao Tianya patted the snow off his shoulders and said, “I’ll follow you in the future, Master. If there’s meat to eat in the future, don’t forget to give me a bowl of soup to drink. I’m much easier to provide for than those guards of Xiao the Second.”

“Ding Tao is young,” Shen Zechuan threw the money pouch at him in passing. “Chen Yang and Gu Jin are the ones who are the tough nuts.”

Qiao Tianya took the money and said, “You have gotten such a clear handle on Xiao the Second. But he is still thinking about how you’ve saved his life.”

Shen Zechuan smiled, “You really want to follow him, huh.”

“I’m a guard with unwavering loyalty,” Qiao Tianya innocently raised his hands. “If Xiao the Second is willing to buy me for a thousand gold, I’ll naturally be willing to go through fire and water<sup>5</sup> for him.”

Shen Zechuan said, “A pity it’s already crowded around him. How would there be any place left for you?”

“My littler master...” Qiao Tianya tilted his head and squinted an eye to say, “... has a truly vicious mouth.”

Shen Zechuan put on a “you flatter me” expression.

“But this line...” Qiao Tianya grinned, “... is applicable to both of us.”



Eight days later, Shen Zechuan and Ji Gang arrived as planned.

Ding Tao had obviously made his complaint known. Gu Jin, who did not drink today, stood outside the door. From a distance away, he saw Qiao Tianya, who was following behind Shen Zechuan.

Ding Tao immediately tiptoed and whispered, “Jin-ge, that’s him. He’s the one!”

Shen Zechuan and Ji Gang were led through the door by Chen Yang. Qiao Tianya naturally had to remain outside. But he did not have that self-awareness, and his leg that was about to stride forward was blocked by Gu Jin.

“I heard you stood in this lad’s path a few days ago.” Gu Jin looked at the bamboo hat with sharp eyes. “What kind of hero are you for bullying a child?”

Ding Tao snorted with righteous indignation and parroted, “What kind of hero?!”

Qiao Tianya burst out laughing. He backhandedly took off his bamboo hat and said with a cheeky grin, “Aren’t we here for a meal tonight? So why are we still going to fight? It’s the first time I’ve seen this little buddy here. Bro, have you gotten the wrong person?”

Ding Tao let out an exclamation and fumed, “How can you say that? I wouldn’t mistake you for someone else!”

Gu Jin stopped Ding Tao and faced Qiao Tianya.

Two men of almost the same height came face-to-face until they were almost bumping against one another.

Gu Jin said, “Today is not the right time. Let’s set a date for later.”

“I’m not free.” Qiao Tianya tugged at that wisp of hair before his forehead and threw Gu Jin a provocative smile. “After all, my Master only has me. Where on earth would I have that much free time to raise a younger brother for fun?”

Gu Jin coldly spat out a mouthful of saliva and said, “Tell me your name. There will be plenty of occasions for us to meet in the future.”

“This humble servant is Qiao Yueyue.” Qiao Tianya tapped his temple at Ding Tao with two fingers. “Also known as Xiaosongsong.”<sup>6</sup>

Chen Yang led Shen Zechuan and Ji Gang inside. This courtyard was deep. They passed the *chaoshou* veranda<sup>7</sup> and stepped through a moon gate<sup>8</sup> to the elegant view of an entire courtyard full of red plum blossoms.

Xiao Chiye was standing under a tree waiting when Shen Zechuan stepped in. They exchanged glances for a fleeting second, but before that

subtle feeling could be conveyed, both men simultaneously averted their gazes.

Xiao Chiye welcomed Ji Gang and greeted him with a smile, "Please excuse me for not going out to meet *shishu* even though *shishu* has braved the snow to come here. The wine and dishes have been prepared. Shifu has been waiting inside for a long time."

Ji Gang looked at Xiao Chiye and stopped him from paying his respects. He said, "Your shifu has broken away from the Ji Clan over twenty years ago, and your martial arts now has a distinctive style of its own. Since we aren't from the same school of martial arts, there is no need to be overly polite."

Xiao Chiye said, "Our martial arts can be traced to the same origin, and so that means we are from the same school. It's all thanks to the initiation of the Ji Clan Fist Style that I could master the blend of martial arts from various clans today. I've long heard of *shishu*'s reputation, and I admire *shishu* for it. So no matter what, this respect must be paid."

Xiao Chiye bowed in respect and led Ji Gang inside. He did not forget to turn his head and said to Shen Zechuan, "Lanzhou and I have not seen each other for a long time, too."

Shen Zechuan strode through the door and said with a smile, "Shixiong has such power and influence now. You must be busy."

"We are from the same school of martial arts." Xiao Chiye said in a neutral tone. "I'll have to leave some time aside for you no matter how busy I am."

"How would it do for you to delay your work because of me?" Shen Zechuan said, "I've been on idle duties every day lately, and this is already all thanks to shixiong for looking out for me."

"With pleasure." Xiao Chiye lifted the curtain. "If you want to be busy, just come to me. I will sweep the couch clean to await you any time."<sup>9</sup>

Shen Zechuan's nape started aching when he heard the word "couch". There seemed to be a lingering heat at those spots where he had been bitten before; it was so scalding that his smile faded.

Zuo Qianqiu was dressed in a wide-sleeved robe with slanting collars, with white hair pulled up into a bun. He did not look like a refined scholar or an awe-inspiring general. He was clearly several years older than Ji Gang, yet he looked younger than Ji Gang. If he had to be described, then it would be that he had an otherworldly aura to him. It seemed that the rumors

in the martial fraternity of him becoming a monk were not totally groundless.

Zuo Qianqiu turned around and saw Ji Gang.

Ji Gang was dressed in short-length plain cotton clothing<sup>10</sup> with a thick jacket. He stood there, with a disfigured face, and looked at him. In an instant, the past came surging forth. Cheers and laughter of youths rang close in his ears, but the man before him was already old and white-haired.

Xiao Chiye broke the silence and said, "Both shifu shall have their meals in here, while Lanzhou and I shall wait outside."

"Chuan-er, fasten your overcoat properly." Ji Gang looked lonely as he turned sideways and urged Shen Zechuan, "Come in if you feel cold."

Shen Zechuan nodded.

Zuo Qianqiu said, "A-Ye, take care of your shidi."

Xiao Chiye smiled in acknowledgment, and both men retreated out.

It's cold outside, yet it's a rare clear night.

Shen Zechuan descended the stairs and saw the deep woods of red plum blossoms. There was a bridge within. This courtyard was so refined it did not seem to be Xiao Chiye's style.

"This courtyard was bought with money from the Yao Clan." Xiao Chiye seemed to know what Shen Zechuan was thinking. He stood behind Shen Zechuan and raised his hands to brush aside the red plum blossoms to reveal the surrounding clear stream. "Pretty. And expensive too."

"And you still bear to part with the money." Shen Zechuan did not look back.

Xiao Chiye bumped lightly into Shen Zechuan's back with his chest and raised a hand to cover the top of Shen Zechuan's head. He leaned in close to Shen Zechuan's ear and said flippantly, "Red plums blanketed in snow. Fragrance enveloped Lanzhou. His smile's worth a thousand gold."

"You must have even put up your pants as collateral." Shen Zechuan really began to smile slowly.

"I had to spend a sum, yes. But Yao Wenyu was already selling it at a low price." Xiao Chiye paused and continued, "You ran pretty fast. To avoid me, you've spent a lot of effort too."

"It's not that I'm avoiding you." Shen Zechuan lifted his finger to push away Xiao Chiye's palm. "But is there an important matter we need to discuss face-to-face?"

Xiao Chiye smiled and said with a little ruthlessness thrown in, “Can’t you dote on your Second Young Master a little after bedding him?”

Shen Zechuan took a few steps forward to leave Xiao Chiye’s chest, then turned to scrutinize Xiao Chiye without saying a word.

In this starry night adorned with plum blossoms, both men finally, in retrospect, came to understand something.

Xiao Chiye discovered that what he had grabbed that night was water. Once it flowed past, it was really gone. Shen Zechuan was not even the slightest reluctant to leave. After the frenzy of biting and tearing at each other, that lingering heat had also ended up buried under the colors of the night. In the ecstasy where Shen Zechuan had raised his neck in intoxication, he had not seared him – Xiao Ce’an – into his memories at all.

Once again, Xiao Chiye distinctly realized one thing.

He was the only one who was defeated by lust that night.

“I advised you before.” Shen Zechuan raised his fingers to hold down the plum blossoms branch and said bewitchingly to Xiao Chiye, “That it’d be best not to bite this nape.”

“Bedroom pleasure...” Xiao Chiye revealed a frivolous smile. “... is not something I can do alone.”

“The greatest difference between you and me is desire. You are covered in desire all over. You spare no effort to hide your wild ambitions. A nape is merely one of the minor adversities. You hold me back, wanting to resist it, wanting to defeat it, but in the end, you still lose to it. But Ce’an.” Shen Zechuan plucked a plum blossom, tore the petal, and delivered it to his mouth. “I don’t even have lust. So how are you going to pit yourself against me?”

Xiao Chiye drew a step closer and grabbed Shen Zechuan’s flower-holding hand. He bent over to press in close to him and said breezily, “What is one time? So boring. We should do it a few more rounds. You couldn’t use those courtesans from Ouhua Pavilion, and you didn’t dare to touch those boys too. You pretend to be a celibate and aloof sage. But I wasn’t the one who gasped and panted so delicately that night.”

Xiao Chiye pulled Shen Zechuan’s hand to his lips, pressed against it dangerously, and scoffed.

“It’s true I’ve lost to lust. But if you are that steadfast, then why did you try stirring up a storm under the sheets<sup>11</sup> with me? Shen Lanzhou, you are much more afraid of succumbing to desire than I am, aren’t you?”

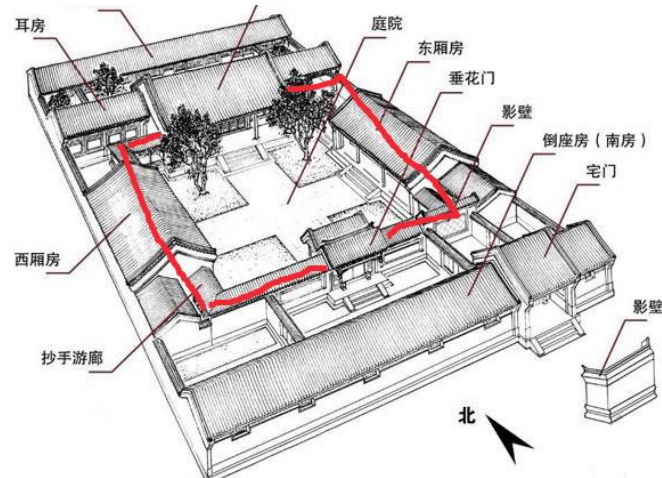
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## Footnotes

1. 镇抚 Judge of the Imperial Prison, which specialized in using torture to suppress corrupt officials. During the Ming Dynasty, there was a Southern and Northern Prison (镇抚司) subordinated to the Imperial Bodyguards. The Southern Prison was in charge of interpreting military laws and managing military craftsmen while the Northern Prison was responsible for cases entrusted by the Emperor.
2. 词 Ci, a type of classical Chinese poetry.
3. Refers to Second Young Master of the Xi Clan.
4. 强龙压不过地头蛇 One with great power cannot defeat a local villain in the latter's own territory.
5. 赴汤蹈火 go through fire and water; brave dangers and death.
6. The Xiao in Xiaosongsong means little, so “little songsong”. He's cutesifying his name here.



- 7.
8. 抄手游廊 a kind of veranda



9.



10.

11. 洞门 An opening in a wall separating different courtyards within a residence or palace. It's also known as a moon gate (月亮门).
12. 扫榻以待 literally, sweep the couch to wait, i.e., clean up to await guests. A couch (榻) is a long and narrow wooden couch that also functions as a  $\rightarrow bed \leftarrow$



13.

14. 云雨 literally cloud and rain; a literary term for making love, sexual intercourse



## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 43 : ATLAS



After three bouts of drinking in the house, much of the sense of estrangement had dispersed. Although they still had not warmed up to each other, it was already more than enough for them to have a chat over wine.

Ji Gang removed the muffler around his neck and took a sip of wine. When Zuo Qianqiu saw the burn marks on his exposed neck too, he could not help but ask, “Back then, the Biansha Cavalry invaded Duanzhou. How did you... how did you end up in this state?”

Ji Gang twirled his wine cup around and smiled, “Shen Wei beat such a quick retreat that Duanzhou did not even hold out for a day. The horses of the Biansha Cavalry were too fast, and my legs aren’t as fast as they used to be, so how could I have escaped? At that time, I was already ready to fight to the death.”

At this point, he thought of Hua Pingting and could not help but choke with emotion. He turned his head aside and rubbed his face. He did not continue.

Zuo Qianqiu downed the cup of wine and said, “Shen Wei deserved to be killed!”

“It wasn’t just Shen Wei who deserves death.” Ji Gang said bitterly, “The defeat of the Zhongbo troops was so fishy. For the blame to be pushed to Shen Wei alone means that they were certain he wouldn’t survive.”

Zuo Qianqiu said, “You have been away from Qudu for a long time. How can you be so sure that Shen Wei was a scapegoat?”

“Five years ago, when Chuan-er entered the capital, someone plotted against him while he was in the Imperial Prison.” Ji Gang said, “At that time, Shen Wei was already dead. Yet someone still wanted to wipe out his family to eradicate potential sources of trouble. Why? Wasn’t it precisely because they wanted to silence him?”

Zuo Qianqiu drank his wine in silence. After a while, he said, “Now that they are all dead, I’m afraid it won’t be easy to relaunch a thorough investigation into the defeat of Zhongbo troops. Is your disciple thinking of seeking revenge for Shen Wei?”

The wine had already gotten to Ji Gang’s head. These five years, he had completely abstained from drinking, and he could be said to have broken his vow of abstinence tonight for Zuo Qianqiu. Holding on to the table edge

for support, he sneered, “Revenge. Why would Chuan-er want to seek revenge for Shen Wei? Zuo Qianqiu, how can you be as narrow-minded as they are?! Are you telling me that everyone in the world with the surname Shen is guilty of sin? Chuan-er has grown up. He’s sensible enough to know better, and he can tell right from wrong. He and Shen Wei just happened to be born as father and son. Other than that body of flesh he got from Shen Wei, they have nothing to do with each other. Why are all of you pushing him into such a corner? Shen Wei is already dead! Shouldn’t you look to the Biansha Cavalry to avenge this so-called blood feud of Zhongbo?!”

Ji Gang suddenly smashed the wine cup. His chest heaved.

“Conducting a thorough investigation of the Zhongbo’s troops defeat isn’t for anyone, but to get to the bottom of the matter. Why should he be made to bear such a sin?! You have been a general too. Haven’t you thought of it? Five years ago, someone could make the Zhongbo’s troops suffer a defeat. Five years later, he could do the same to another place! Back then, the Biansha Cavalry could keep up with such a tight pursuit. Would they have been able to do it without inside help and map?!”

Zuo Qianqiu sighed and said, “Gang-di,<sup>1</sup> please be appeased. Back then, when Jiming rushed over to Zhongbo, the first thing he did was to cut off the main route leading from Zhongbo to Dancheng in order to investigate where the Twelve Tribes of Biansha’s information came from. But the situation was critical at that time. Do you know how difficult it was? All the evidence pointed to Shen Wei. Yet, Shen Wei just had to burn himself to death, leaving behind a son of common birth whom he did not favor. How could anyone not get suspicious?”

After a moment of silence, Ji Gang said, “That kick your disciple gave him almost killed him.”

Zuo Qianqiu downed the wine again and said, “I won’t defend him, but listen. Gang-di, we each have our own experiences, and we each act in accordance with our own wants.”

Ji Gang sneered and said, “Sure thing. Just pay lip service and consider it a closed case.”

Without saying a word more, Zuo Qianqiu turned over an empty cup and shouted out, “A-Ye!”

The door opened right at once. Zuo Qianqiu poured wine with one hand and tossed a cup over with the other hand and said, “Apologize to your *shishu* and *shidi*.”

Ji Gang leveled his chopsticks and caught the wine cup on the tip. He said, "We were the ones whose skills left much to be desired back then. Chuan-er, come and make the toast!"

As soon as the words left his mouth, he turned the wine cup towards Shen Zechuan. Xiao Chiye blocked it mid-air and said, "Lanzhou, let's not fight with Shixiong over this, alright?"

Shen Zechuan lifted his leg to hit Xiao Chiye's arm askew. That wine cup wobbled and fell. He said, "It's hard for one to defy his shifu's orders. Shixiong, please give way to me."

Both men's palms intersected. Xiao Chiye backhandedly pushed back Shen Zechuan's arm. That wine cup was about to hit the ground, but Shen Zechuan extended his leg and lifted it to bring the wine cup up again.

There seems to be the sound of the wind as both men exchanged blows. That wine cup rose and dropped, but not even a drop of wine was spilled.

Without letting up his chopsticks, Ji Gang ate a few mouthfuls of cold dishes and said, "This martial art stance is not imparted from the Ji Clan."

Zuo Qianqiu looked at both men and said, "That's the Xiao Clan's martial arts. It's like a raptor grabbing its prey. Once caught, it'll be hard to break free. Lanzhou, focus on attacking his lower body to throw him into confusion."

Shen Zechuan immediately withdrew his hand and took a step back to throw out a sudden kick. Xiao Chiye dodged a little. He wanted to say something to Shen Zechuan, but in the end, he said nothing in the presence of both shifu. As he parried the blow, he grabbed hold of Shen Zechuan's ankle and took advantage of the obstruction of his body to grope Shen Zechuan's leg along the curve of Shen Zechuan's calf. Then he gently led Shen Zechuan toward himself.

"How ruthless," Xiao Chiye's expression was calm. "Your kick makes me too powerless to resist."

Being touched by Xiao Chiye caused Shen Zechuan to almost lose his balance, and he still had to catch hold of the wine cup. Xiao Chiye patiently waited for him to catch the wine cup before he suddenly threw out a punch right in Shen Zechuan's face.

"Ji Clan Fist!" Ji Gang's chopsticks paused. He held back for a moment, but in the end, he conceded, "... No wonder Chuan-er praised him."

This body of his was simply too suitable. His punch was so perfectly executed that even Ji Gang could not find fault with it.

Shen Zechuan made a grab for the wine cup with one hand, but it was ill-advised for him to press on and catch hold of it, so he abruptly leaned back. The wind that exploded forth from Xiao Chiye's fist swept past his temple. Before he could get up, Xiao Chiye strode forward and pressed in towards him. In passing, he lowered the fist he had thrown out and reached inside Shen Zechuan's collar to pinch out the remnant of the plum blossom that Shen Zechuan had bitten earlier.

"You've fallen for my trap." Xiao Chiye's eyes glinted with mischief as he sent this half of the plum blossom into his mouth. Shen Zechuan wanted to get up, but Xiao Chiye thwarted his attempt and raised his head to say quickly, "The wine is spilled!"

Stunned, Shen Zechuan lifted his head for a look—and Xiao Chiye grasped hold of his hand and pushed his thumb up along Shen Zechuan's inner wrist to drink up the wine in one toast from Shen Zechuan's hand.

"Thank you shidi, for the wine." Xiao Chiye immediately stepped back and said gentlemanly, "The taste of it leaves a lingering aroma on the buds."<sup>2</sup>

The inner side of Shen Zechuan's wrist was still scalding from being stroked by Xiao Chiye. He rose to his feet and bowed with a brandish of his sleeves before putting the wine cup back on the table.

Ji Gang did not know about the exchange of undercurrents between them. On seeing the outcome, he said, "The difficulty in blending the stances of a hundred schools of martial arts is in threading them together into one. You have taught him well."

Zuo Qianqiu said, "He still has a long way to go. Lanzhou specializes in Ji Clan mental techniques. His focus is truly impressive."

Both men poured wine again, while Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan retreated out for the second time.

The moment the door closed, Xiao Chiye grabbed hold of Shen Zechuan and said, "This bout of drinking won't end tonight. It's cold outside. Let's sit inside the house."

The original study of the Yao Clan was to the north of the corridor. In order to keep the room dry so that the books would not be damaged, a sleeper wall was built underneath. The books had yet to be removed at the

moment, and all four shelves of the open bookcase were full of antique calligraphy and paintings.

Xiao Chiye took off his overcoat and sat at the desk with one leg over the other to flip through a book. He said, “This courtyard was originally built by the Old Master of the Yao Clan. Plenty of good stuff is hidden here. Yao Wenyu doesn’t like to play with them, so they have been shelved here all this time and have never been moved before.”

Shen Zechuan wiped his hands clean before touching the books on the bookshelf.

Those from the Yao Clan loved books. The Old Master of the Yao Clan had sorted them out into different categories and arranged them neatly. It had been so long, and yet the pages were still clean. It must have been Xiao Chiye who got someone else to take good care of them once he took over the compound. There was not even a speck of dust on them.

Both men each stayed at a side. No one spoke again.

Shen Zechuan, having kept his eyes open, saw a Hongyan picture book in the local records. He opened it and, sure enough, saw the chorographical map of the Hongyan Mountains.

[For help with the upcoming text, you can refer to the maps [HERE](#).]

Hongyan Mountains were divided into two ranges: the east and west. The west mountain range passed through Luoxia Pass to connect to Quancheng and separate out Huaizhou. It used to be the line of defense at the borders of Dazhou. Later, Xiao Fangxu expanded the territory and extended the line of defense all the way to the east mountain range, thereby shaping Libei’s Great Commandery into the way it was today.

Shen Zechuan flipped towards the back and saw a detailed description of the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path.

Qudu dispatched to all the granaries in the world, with army provisions mostly transferred from Juexi’s Qinzhou. Deliveries towards the two major regions of the north and east could not be done through the waterways, so they could only dig out bridle paths for the specific purpose of transporting provisions. The situation in Qidong was more complicated, whereas Libei’s Northeast Provisions Bridle Path was clear-cut. Food provisions were transported from Qinzhou to Yongyi Harbor,<sup>3</sup> from Yongyi Harbor to Qudu, then from Qudu to Quancheng. From Quancheng onwards, they could spur

the horses on in a straight line along the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path to reach Libei Great Commandery.

The Northeast Provisions Bridle Path was an important military supplies transportation route of Libei, guarded by multiple layers of Libei Armored Cavalry. Even if the Emperor himself went, he would not be able to pass through without Xiao Jiming's Commander's Tally<sup>4</sup> for Authorization of Passage. All along, the defense of the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path had always been unassailable no matter how brutal the battles at the borders were. Not once had they ever allowed the Biansha Cavalry to get close before.

In fact, five years ago, when the troops of Zhongbo were defeated, the reason Xiao Jiming had been able to deploy troops to the south so swiftly was because the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path just happened to cut across the northwestern side of Cizhou. This gave him the confidence to dispatch his troops right at once.

"The Northeast Provisions Bridle Path." At some point in time, Xiao Chiye had leaned over towards him. He swept a few glances down along Shen Zechuan's hands and asked, "Are you interested in the deployment of troops into battles too?"

"Nope." Shen Zechuan replied without thinking.

"Doesn't matter. Second Young Master will teach you." Xiao Chiye held Shen Zechuan by the wrist and led his finger to slide towards the easternmost Chashi River. "You recognize this place, right? The Chashi River of Zhongbo is Dazhou's easternmost line of defense. Pass through it, and you'd be in the Great Desert of Biansha. Come to think of it. It's pretty interesting. All along, Biansha had only dared to attack the Bianjun Commandery."

Shen Zechuan looked down along his finger at the southeast corner of Tianfei Watchtower. There, close to the desert looking like the only breach to Dazhou, was the Bianjun Commandery.

"Because the Bianjun Commandery is too much of a coincidence. The places above it have Tianfei Watchtower to bar the way, while the places below it have Suotian Pass to block off access from the side. Only the Bianjun Commandery is a strategic point in the southeastern part of Dazhou that cannot make use of the terrain to fortify its defenses." Xiao Chiye moved closer and focused on the map. "It's here where the Lu Clan defends. You know of Lu Guangbai's title? The reason he's called 'Fire

Beacon Amidst Blowing Sand' is because the Lu Clan defends tens of thousands of *li*<sup>5</sup> of desert fire beacon towers. The Biansha Cavalry are crafty. They like to launch night assaults. Every time they cross swords, Lu Guangbai has to light up the fire beacons. The Bianjun Commandery Garrison Troops is Dazhou's best infantry for night attacks. They are experts at laying ambushes."

Xiao Chiye was a little excited by the time he spoke to this point. So he simply held Shen Zechuan's finger and pointed to the Bianjun Commandery.

"Of the four generals in the world, shifu is the general most skilled in defenses, as necessitated by the terrain of the Tianfei Watchtower, so there is no need to press an attack or dispatch troops. Don't be fooled by how unremarkable the Bianjun Commandery look. In fact, the one best at attrition warfare<sup>6</sup> is Lu Guangbai. Even my eldest brother and Commander-in-chief Qi aren't as formidable as him when it comes to this."

"There are no cavalry in the Bianjun Commandery." Shen Zechuan turned his head slightly to the side and cast a glance at him.

Xiao Chiye smiled. He seemed particularly relaxed at this moment. He said, "Lu Guangbai doesn't need them. His soldiers are the bane of all cavalries. The Lu Clan has been standing guard in the desert for generations. The climate is bad, and the wasteland can't be cultivated at all. They are genuinely poor, so they can't afford to raise horses. But even without horses, the battles still need to be fought. So the Lu Clan developed a battle array through trials and errors for the specific purpose of resisting cavalries."

Shen Zechuan looked back at the map. "By interesting, are you referring to how unusual it was for the Biansha Cavalry to deviate from their usual way of doing things to storm the Chashi River's line of defense five years ago?"

"That's right." When Xiao Chiye was deep in thought, he would turn his thumb ring out of habit. But at this moment, he was holding Shen Zechuan's hand; thus he ended up pinching the latter without seeming to be conscious of this act. "You have to know one thing first. The Twelve Tribes of Biansha is a collective title. At the start, there were over twelve tribes of them in the desert. The Huiyan Tribe, which has dealings with Libei's mutual trade market, is a small tribe that was driven out of their land rich in water and grass by the other tribes. To survive, they threw in their lot with

Dazhou. In short, the current Twelve Tribes of Biansha are distinguished between the strong and weak too. They never had a designated sovereign, so they have never been able to come to an agreement with us and could only fight. Actually, each battle fought is a heavy blow to Biansha. Their strongest tribe – the Hanshe Tribe – lies to their north, dealing primarily with the Armored Cavalry of Libei. While their swiftest Gouma Tribe lies to the south, dealing primarily with the Garrison Troops of the Bianjun Commandery. These are fixed patterns formed over long periods of confrontations—but five years ago, the Hanshe Tribe and Gouma Tribes came together in the middle to deliver a severe blow directly to the Chashi River’s line of defense without warning.”

Xiao Chiye paused.

“There is only one possibility in such a situation.”

“They had a plan all worked out in advance.” Shen Zechuan said.

“They were sure that Zhongbo could not stop them, and Libei and the Bianjun Commandery would not come to the rescue in time.”

“And that was how rumors that Shen Wei had colluded with the enemies came about.” Xiao Chiye said. “It was a very risky thing for them to dive straight in. It won’t be easy for them to rely solely on their spoils of war to continue battling<sup>7</sup> in an unfamiliar environment. They are already used to galloping across the desert. To them, combat on the streets is like fighting with their hands and feet bound. Furthermore, the closer they got to Qudu, the more obvious the intent for their troop deployment was.”

“Breaching Qudu was not at all a good choice. Qudu is the heart of Dazhou. Stay here for too long, and they would end up trapped in a three-way siege from the Libei Armored Cavalry, Qidong Five Commanderies Garrison Troops, and the Eight Great Training Divisions.” Shen Zechuan lowered his eyes. “I’ve never believed that the Biansha Cavalry wanted to attack Qudu.”

“You are too smart.” Xiao Chiye praised him. He slid Shen Zechuan’s finger across the entire map and pointed to Juexi at the westernmost part. “I think they wanted to head here. Juexi faces the sea. It has two major harbors and three major grain reserves prefectures. All the military provisions from Libei, Qudu, and Qidong come from here. As long as they entered within Juexi’s boundary, they wouldn’t even need to attack and take down the cities and towns and they would already have all three parties by the throats.”



“If there were no inside help, then this would be a flight of fancy.” Shen Zechuan pondered over it and said.

“It’s just a straight line from east to west from Zhongbo to Juexi. Crossing through Zhongbo is the shortest route. Shen Wei opened the gates for them and gave them the courage and provisions to continue further in. Without the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path, dage would not be able to send troops for at least another seven days. Seven days. If the Eight Great Training Divisions failed to defend Qudu, then the Biansha Cavalry would have already arrived at Yongyi Harbor.” Xiao Chiye said, “This was one reason for Libei’s wrath. There is no room for blatant disregard of ethics in the face of the enemy’s forces. We can forgive Shen Wei for the defeat of his troops, but we will never forgive Shen Wei for this stab in the back.”

Shen Zechuan suddenly turned his head and looked at Xiao Chiye in close proximity.

“What’s the matter?” Xiao Chiye did not intend to release him.

“Shen Wei colluded with the enemies,” Shen Zechuan revealed an odd smile. “Shen Wei colluded with the enemy... The Twelve Tribes of Biansha wanted to attack Juexi. But where did Shen Wei get his hands on Juexi’s military map?”

“The Ministry of War has it.” Xiao Chiye said, “Money makes the mare go. Bribe them heavily, and you can buy it.”

“In that case,” Shen Zechuan said, “... anyone else beside Shen Wei could have done it.”



#### Footnotes

1. Younger brother Gang
2. 口齿生香 literally emitting fragrance in the mouth, but the entire word by itself means words or text that are profound or significant.
3. It says Guanyi harbor in this chapter in JJWXC, but I think it’s supposed to be Yongyi Harbor unless this Guanyi Harbor is a small harbor not mentioned in the rest of the novel and map.
4. 兵符 a tally used in ancient China as a proof of military authorization.
5. 里 *li*, ancient measure of length, 1 *li* = approx. 500m

6. 消耗战 Attrition warfare is a military strategy where the enemy is worn down to the point of collapse through continuous losses in personnel, equipment, and supplies.
7. 以战养战 using the manpower, food provisions, weaponry/armory, money, one obtained from an invaded and occupied city to fund the next battle.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 44 : NIGHT CHAT



“That may be so.” Xiao Chiye lowered his eyes, “But the one directly connected to the success or failure on the frontline was Shen Wei.”

The expression in his eyes looked particularly tender and loving when he lowered them this way. The brilliance from earlier had yet to dissipate. It shimmered in his eyes, like fireflies in the night.

Shen Zechuan looked at him for a moment and said, “The Ministry of War has no personnel transfer these years.”

“Investigate if you want to.” Xiao Chiye said. “I won’t stop you.”

“Of course you won’t.” Shen Zechuan shifted his gaze back to the book. “Because you want to investigate too. The most obvious suspect should have been the Hua Clan, but Shen Wei was already a tainted blade. There are thousands of simpler ways to dispose of him. Involving too many people would only just make it easier to leave behind a trail that could be used against them.”

“You killed Ji Lei, no?” Xiao Chiye smiled. “He should have given you plenty of information. There is no fun in hiding it away, is there? Lay it out on the table so that we can speculate together.”

“I know everything you have said, yet what I’ll be saying is known only to me.” Shen Zechuan extracted his hand bit by bit. “It’s really too unfair a trade.”

Xiao Chiye thought for a moment, then said, “How about this then? We’ll do a one-for-one exchange.”

“Sure.” Shen Zechuan said, “You go first.”

Making use of his height, Xiao Chiye barricaded Shen Zechuan at the side of the bookshelf and raised a hand to flip through the pages at random. He said, “Don’t you know the rules? Secrets have to be said on the quiet.”

Shen Zechuan leaned forward and said, “Said on the quiet, not said while sticking together.”

“What if the walls have ears?” Xiao Chiye put the book back, propped up his arm, and smiled at him. “After all, I’ve only just bought this compound. I have yet to acquaint myself with it that well. It’s better to exercise caution.”

“Xiao’Er.” Shen Zechuan looked at the book. “You’re truly an asshole.”

“That’s right.” Xiao Chiye said, “But what can you do? Alright, I’m going to start.”

Shen Zechuan waited for a moment but did not hear any sound. The moment he turned his head, he realized that Xiao Chiye was still looking at him.

It was only when both men’s breathing intersected that Xiao Chiye said, “Shen Wei didn’t set himself on fire. The fire at the Prince of Jianxing Manor was set by the Imperial Bodyguards. The one who went there with the orders was Ji Lei. You know that, right?”

“Yes.” Shen Zechuan said calmly. “It’s no secret.”

“Then, do you know the real reason for the fall of Duanzhou?” Xiao Chiye asked.

Shen Zechuan could not turn his eyes away. He could not even take his time to ponder over it. Because the instant he could not keep up with Xiao Chiye’s train of thought, he would easily fall into the other party’s trap.

Shen Zechuan said, “When the Chashi River was attacked, Shen Wei ordered the Duanzhou Garrison Troops to retreat, leaving behind the Hereditary Prince, Shen Zhouji, to head over to Chashi River to provide support. Shen Zhouji was cut from the same cloth as his old man. He abandoned the Chashi River soldiers and took his own bodyguards to flee right before the battle, but he was dragged through the public road to his death on the same day itself by the Biansha Cavalry. With Shen Zhouji’s death, the Chashi River’s morale took a beating. After the soldiers were massacred, Duanzhou no longer had any military forces to stand before them.”

“That’s right.” Xiao Chiye said, “But there’s one thing you don’t know. While Shen Zhouji was still alive, he worked with Shen Wei to strangle the Commander of the Duanzhou Garrison Troops, Tantai Long, to death.”

Tantai Long. Tantai Hu!

No wonder Tantai Hu said that his own brother had been in the Chashi Sinkhole too.

Shen Zechuan frowned and asked, “Strangled to death?”

“Because Tantai Long insisted on deploying troops to meet the enemy head-on. He repeatedly contradicted Shen Wei in public. After Shen Wei’s withdrawal order was issued, Tantai Long defied the command and refused

to obey. So Shen Wei pretended to make amends with wine. After the drink, he joined forces with Shen Zhouji to strangle Tantai Long to death in his room.” Xiao Chiye paused. “Laohu doesn’t know. He thought Tantai Long was killed in battle. And this is the first matter I’m telling you. Your turn.”

Shen Zechuan quickly sorted out his thoughts and said, “Shen Wei was a participant in the struggle for the throne and carried out assassinations for the Empress Dowager. Afterward, he was closely watched by the Empress Dowager. Sensing danger, he bribed Pan Rugui and went to Zhongbo.”

“One mustn’t lay a hand on one’s watchdog.” Xiao Chiye said. “Under normal situations, the Hua Clan would not choose this kind of risky way to take down Shen Wei. There is no benefit to the Empress Dowager, who is already in control of Dazhou’s administration and governmental affairs. The demand for money after the battle far exceeded the availability in Dazhou’s Treasury. The Empress Dowager still wants to be the Grand Emperor<sup>1</sup> behind the screen.<sup>2</sup> Doing so would be detrimental to herself. Shen Wei wasn’t worth the price.”

Shen Zechuan gave a slight nod of his head and said, “So whatever Ji Lei said might not necessarily be entirely right, because he himself was just a pawn too. If you want to investigate this matter, you have to start from the Ministry of War, which could lead you either way to the top or bottom.”

Xiao Chiye said, “I’ll investigate the top. You investigate the bottom.”

“Top and bottom are all linked; they are inseparable.” It was only when Shen Zechuan spoke to this point that he realized that Xiao Chiye was making a pass at him. He flipped through the book and feigned obliviousness.

With a hint of a smile, Xiao Chiye stepped aside and said, “Take a seat.”

It was hot inside the house. Xiao Chiye was dressed in a scarlet court robe<sup>3</sup> with an embroidered lion.<sup>4</sup> He was now a bona fide Second-Grade<sup>5</sup> Viceroy of two armies in Qudu. Presumably, he had headed straight here after leaving the palace and had yet to change out of his attire. His facial features were all the more dashing set against the contrast of his outfit as he sat in the chair; it had even dismissed the frivolous air around him.

Both men faced each other across the table. Xiao Chiye looked on as Shen Zechuan read the book. He did not even bother to hide it now, and that undisguised interest of his circled Shen Zechuan’s neck and settled on Shen

Zechuan's hands. He was no longer fixated on one spot; he wanted to see all of Shen Zechuan's body.

Shen Zechuan's fingers would bend when he reached out to flip the pages. This made Xiao Chiye think of a different moment when Shen Zechuan's fingers – slicked with hot, damp sweat – would also curl up like this to grip the bedding even as they rocked like the surging waves.

Shen Zechuan felt as though his fingers were still being grasped and played with in a certain man's palms. Feeling restless out of the blue, he closed the book and looked right at Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye said, "Hm?"

Shen Zechuan slightly clasped his fingers together and said with a curve of his lips, "The Imperial Army is bogged down with tasks lately. I'm afraid you won't have the time to investigate other matters."

Xiao Chiye twirled his thumb ring around and said, "Being busy is just temporary. If the Imperial Bodyguards have the time to spare, they can share our Imperial Army's worries and help with our problems."

"I'm just a mere soldier. I have no official post, nor do I enjoy the trust and favor of the Emperor. How could I command the Imperial Bodyguards?" Shen Zechuan leaned back slightly against the back of the chair. "The Imperial Army has to manage patrols in Qudu, as well as private cases of the Imperial Court. They have to be prudent in everything they do, while the Viceroy has to go to great pains and expend great effort. It isn't easy."

Xiao Chiye was truly busy now that he had suppressed the Imperial Bodyguards. He could read the provocation in Shen Zechuan's words. So he laced his fingers, set them right before Shen Zechuan, and said with certainty, "You want to create trouble for me."

"Tit-for-tat." Shen Zechuan said mildly. "You intercepted all my duties, thereby giving me free time. Naturally, I have to thank you properly."

"There are so many ways to express your thanks. Why not choose one that would delight everyone?" Xiao Chiye said, "Looks like you indeed have friends in the Six Ministries."

"Having money at home is not as good as having friends in the Imperial Court. My friend told me something. I guess you'd be interested too." Shen Zechuan said.

Xiao Chiye stared at him and said, "I'm all ears."

But Shen Zechuan surveyed the study and said, "Come to think of it, it's a pity that I have yet to meet this 'Unpolished Jade Yuanzhuo',<sup>6</sup> Yao Wenyu. Are you on good terms with him?"

Xiao Chiye said, "A passing acquaintance. He can't be compared to you."

"The Yao Clan is on the decline, yet they still stand among the Eight Great Clans. It's inevitable that there would be people who can't accept this." Shen Zechuan said, "Yao Wenyu is Secretariat Elder Hai's pupil, yet he doesn't join the Imperial Court as an official. This is just like throwing away his weapon to let others slaughter him as they please."

Xiao Chiye said, "Even though the Yao Clan seems to be on the decline on the surface, the remnants of power and prestige accumulated over three reigns are still there. Yao Wenyu might be a refined man of leisure, but he is by no means a fool. Who would want to mess with the Yao Clan?"

Shen Zechuan put on a contemplative expression and said, "How would I know about that?"

Xiao Chiye fell silent, but he reacted quickly and said, "You aren't that generous a person. By going out of your way to give me news, you've instead made me uneasy, Lanzhou."

"We are going to investigate the case together. Anything I can help with, I'll not decline to." Shen Zechuan said, "It's only when I saw you on good terms with the Yao Clan that I remembered this. The Eight Great Clans have stood tall for a very long time. Seeing how powerful and mighty you are now, wouldn't it only be expected if they were to be scheming something? If the Yao Clan isn't willing to associate with them, then they would inevitably become the target of their ire."

Xiao Chiye took over command of the Eight Great Training Divisions and upset the Eight Great Clans' military power. All along, the Eight Great Training Divisions were the Eight Great Clans' assets for contingency purposes that circled around Qudu. Losing an official post was nothing; they still had the younger generations at home to replace them. But losing the Eight Great Training Divisions meant that they would fall under the control of others for real. It was one thing for them to mutually contain one another, and another to be controlled by Xiao Chiye. As the saying goes, it's a general truism of the world that anything long divided will surely unite, and anything long united will surely divide.<sup>7</sup> And now, Xiao Chiye was the common foe the Eight Great Clans had to reunite again to deal with.

What Shen Zechuan had said was not wrong, but Xiao Chiye could still smell something fishy about these seemingly honest words.

Xiao Chiye said without batting an eyelid, "The threat I pose to them hasn't reached that extent yet."

"The permanent solution would be to nip it in the bud. You have already displayed your abilities during the Autumn Hunt. Pretending that nothing had happened now is merely deceiving yourself, much like plugging your ears while stealing a bell." Shen Zechuan said.

Xiao Chiye suddenly asked, "Who's your friend?"

Shen Zechuan smiled at him and said, "Even if I tell you the truth, would you dare to believe it?"

Xiao Chiye stared restlessly at Shen Zechuan.

He wouldn't believe him.

Shen Zechuan was good at bewitching others. Every word he said while he was sober was a cocktail of truths and lies. This man was so difficult to deal with that Xiao Chiye even felt that he was much easier to talk to in bed.

"I'll ferret him out." Xiao Chiye leaned closer to him. "You only need to expose your trail, and you won't be able to escape my eyes."

"You are already about to be unable to fend for yourself." Shen Zechuan said cheerfully. "You'd best think of a way first to ride out this storm safely."

"To think your heart doesn't even ache for me at all." Xiao Chiye suddenly made a switch away from his solemn expression. "One night together as husband and wife is affection for a hundred more.<sup>8</sup> Lanzhou, you are too callous."

Shen Zechuan imitated his previous words and said, "That's right. But what can you do?"

Xiao Chiye sat down and propped up his leg again. Reclining back against the chair, he pondered for a moment and said, "This matter is an easy one to resolve. It's not really that big of a deal. I'll have to thank you for your reminder tonight."

"That's really too kind of you." Shen Zechuan said. "One hundred taels will do."

"No money." Xiao Chiye dragged out his words. "My annual salary as a second-grade official is only one hundred and fifty taels. But even without



money, I can use something else in exchange. This Second Young Master will warm your bed for you.”

“Then forget it.” Shen Zechuan smiled politely. “I’m used to sleeping alone. I don’t need to warm my bed.”

“Habits can be changed.” Xiao Chiye lifted his fingers to his nose to take a sniff. Casting a sidelong glance at him, he jested, “Are you getting used to sniffing my handkerchief so far?”

Caught off-guard, Shen Zechuan clenched his hands, leaving red marks on his fingertips.

Xiao Chiye sized up the beauty under the lantern. He looked as the latter forcibly braced himself to put on a calm front, then at his reddened fingertips. Finally, he pointed to his own ear and said in a wicked tone, “Lanzhou, you’re blushing.”<sup>9</sup>



#### Footnotes

1. 太上皇 *Taishang Huang*; Emperor Emeritus or Grand Emperor; a title assumed by an emperor’s father who abdicated in favor of his son; also refers to a backstage ruler (or someone holding the power behind the scenes), etc.
2. 垂帘(听政) literally to (hold court) behind a screen or curtain. A practice in ancient China, where the Empress or Empress dowager was allowed to preside over the imperial court without actually being seen by her subjects since women were prohibited from politics. This would usually be done by a child emperor’s mother, who would serve as regent and rule in place of the Emperor.



- 3.
4. Round-collared robe/attire typically worn by officials in the Ming Dynasty.
5. 补子 rank badge, or mandarin square, was a large embroidered badge sewn onto the surcoat of an official to indicate the rank of the official wearing it. (i.e., the square image on the robe in the previous footnote). Squares depicting birds were used for civil officials while animals were used for military officials. So for a second-grade military official like Xiao Chiye, this animal would be a lion.
6. 品 Officials were classified in nine hierarchic grades, with grade one being the highest rank. Their salaries ranged according to their rank.
7. 璞玉元琢 literally, Unpolished Jade Yuanzhuo (Yuanzhuo is Yao Wenyu's courtesy name); unpolished jade here refers to a talent who is still unknown but with the potential to be "polished" into someone that shines, like a top scholar (also known as a zhuangyuan (状元), who would have a bright future before him.)

8. 天下之(大)势，分久必合，合久必分 From Romance of the Three Kingdoms (三国演义) It is a general trend of the world that long periods of division precede unity and long periods of unity precede division.
9. 一夜夫妻百日恩 Husband and wife for a night, affection (devotion) for a hundred days (or for life). Once the relationship between husband and wife is established, deep feelings last forever.
10. Or take your pick:
11. “Lanzhou, it’s red.”
12. “Lanzhou, red tide incoming.”
13. “Lanzhou, aksjlsdsakjl.”

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 45 : NEW BLADE



Blush.

Shen Zechuan's heart was originally as still as deep waters, but at this moment, even he was shaken by that word. Xiao Chiye's handkerchief, which lay in his sleeve pocket, was like a fire that had been stuffed within. It inexplicably obeyed Xiao Chiye's commands and sent the flames burning all the way up to his ears. He knew that the slight redness flushed on the snowy paleness of his skin was particularly striking. Even if he denied it, it would convince no one.

He seemed to be caught by Xiao Chiye in a certain predicament where bright mirrors surrounded them on all sides. The way Xiao Chiye looked was as if he wanted his true colors to be revealed, and his protective shell to be cast aside.

Shen Zechuan licked his lips to get rid of the troubling dryness. He balled up his fists and ignored such a provocation from Xiao Chiye, refusing to give Xiao Chiye a chance to pry further.

"It's time to sleep." Shen Zechuan declared, "Let's call for them."

Xiao Chiye felt Shen Zechuan's "I'm ignoring you" reaction to be like a scratch that tickled him so suggestively that it stirred up his desire to press home the attack after his victory. However, if he were to emerge victorious, he could not rush it; impulsiveness would only make it easy for him to fall into traps. So he let him off this time and said, "Both shifu have their own arrangements, so there's no need to worry about them. If you want to sleep, the East Wing has been vacated."

Shen Zechuan stood up right away.

Ji Gang and Zuo Qianqiu were so dead drunk that they were still not sober the next day. Shen Zechuan carried Ji Gang onto the carriage and took him back.

Xiao Chiye watched the carriage ride away and said to Chen Yang, "Keep your eyes closely on the Eight Great Clans these two days. See who's on the move."

Chen Yang nodded in acknowledgment of his order.



Accompanied by the swaying of the carriage, Shen Zechuan closed his eyes and rested. The carriage made a detour, and midway through the journey, they swapped to an unremarkable horse-cart before arriving at Zhao Zui Temple.

Qiao Tianya carried Ji Gang on his back and followed Shen Zechuan into the courtyard. Ge Qingqing had been waiting for a long while. When he saw them, he hurriedly stepped forward to receive them.

"It's alright." Shen Zechuan assured. "Shifu is just drunk."

Grand Mentor Qi, who was standing under the eaves, instructed, "Qingqing, help Ji Gang inside and let him sleep it off."

Ge Qingqing took Ji Gang from Shen Zechuan and carried him into the house.

Qiao Tianya strode forward in a few steps, went on his knees in the snow, and asked, "Has Grand Mentor been doing well?"

"All is well upon seeing you." Grand Mentor Qi lifted his hand and said, "Now that you have already changed your name to Qiao Tianya, that indenture<sup>1</sup> is no longer of any use, yet you are willing to stay for that bit of sentiment. I should thank you."

"To Grand Mentor Qi, what happened in the past was merely an effortless lift of your finger. But to me, it was a kindness that saved my life." The merriment on Qiao Tianya's face vanished. He added, "During the year of Yongyi,<sup>2</sup> when Emperor Guangcheng had corrupt officials killed, my father and brother were both framed by others. If Grand Mentor had not been judicious and discerning enough to offer a helping hand, the twenty lives of the Qiao Clan would have died unjust deaths before the Meridian Gate."<sup>3</sup>

"Your father and brother were both honest and upright subjects. It was just a brief moment of misjudgment that they were wrongly accused. Even without me, they would still be safe and sound." Grand Mentor Qi replied.

Qiao Tianya paused for a long while before he professed, "The Qiao Clan cannot thank Grand Mentor enough for his kindness."

During the years of Yongyi, when Qiao Tianya's father still served as an official in the Ministry of War, Emperor Guangcheng was tough on corruption. Senior Qiao, having been reported by others, was found by the Chief Surveillance Bureau to be in the possession of properties and lands of unidentified origins. While he was helpless against accusations, Qi Huilian re-investigated the case and freed Senior Qiao and a few others from the

Ministry of War. Consequently, Qi Huilian married off his daughter to the eldest son of the Qiaos. Yet, this was not the end of the matter; a few years later, the Eastern Palace was falsely accused, and Qi Huilian was demoted from the Grand Mentor to a commoner. The same time when he followed the Crown Prince into Zhao Zui Temple, Senior Qiao defected to the Empress Dowager.

The Eastern Palace fell. Empress Dowager Hua had its remnants thoroughly investigated using Pan Rugui's authority of office in endorsing memorials<sup>4</sup> and Emperor Guangcheng's name. As a result, Senior Qiao was thrown into prison again. This time, without Grand Mentor Qi as his guarantor, both he and his eldest son were beheaded. The rest of the Qiao household were banished to Suotian Pass. Qi Huilian's daughter died on the way. She was Qiao Tianya's eldest sister-in-law.

"Let us not bring up the past," Grand Mentor Qi tugged on his snow-white hair and spoke, "It was not easy for you to be freed of the underclass status.<sup>5</sup> But you must think it through: once you become subjected to Lanzhou, it will be a lifelong commitment. You will no longer be in control of your life or death."

Qiao Tianya's hair fluttered in the wind; his smile was unruly and unrestrained. He said, "Grand Mentor, I already have no home to return to. In this lifetime, I've repeatedly received favors from both you and Eldest Sister-in-law. These were originally sinful debts that I had no way of repaying. Now that I can be of use, I shall dedicate my life to Master. Qiao Songyue died with Eldest Sister-in-law in the Cang Commandery. The Qiao Tianya of today is merely a blade. There is no life nor death, let alone freedom, in a blade. Since this is a dark time when evil powers hang over us like overcast clouds that make the road you walk difficult, then pull out this blade that is myself and use it as you please."

Grand Mentor Qi slowly walked out. Holding the pillar for support, he looked towards Shen Zechuan and said, "Lanzhou, this year is about to end. Teacher has yet to give you a gift for your coming-of-age."<sup>6</sup>

Shen Zechuan's sleeves were blown apart by the breeze. He had a feeling of what was to come.

Grand Mentor Qi said, "You can face everything head-on by yourself now. But this road will be long: killing the sworn enemies, demolishing the Eight Great Clans, overturning the past trials, and bringing peace to

Zhongbo. None of it is easy. Ji Gang will give you a blade, so will I. Receive it well.”

Flurries of snow drifted down in the inner court. Shen Zechuan lowered his head and let Grand Mentor Qi lay cold fingers on top of his hair.

Ji Gang woke up when it was time for dinner. He had some congee before he called Shen Zechuan into the house.

“Do you still remember the blade I mentioned to you the last time? It was delivered last night. It’s been on my mind since.” Ji Gang shifted aside the shelf inside the house to reveal a blade stand in the back.

The first time Shen Zechuan saw this blade, his heart stirred. He could no longer move his eyes away.

“Ji Lei cannot use it.” Ji Gang used a clean handkerchief to wipe at the blade’s edge slowly, “But this blade suits you very well. I had someone re-forged the sheath. Its past name cannot be used anymore; you should give it another name yourself.”

Still engrossed in the blade’s luster, Shen Zechuan studied it with fascination.

The straight blade of almost three and seven tenth *chi*<sup>7</sup> meant that its unsheathing had to be sufficiently fast. Its width of two fingers would make swift attacks especially easy to maneuver. The hilt, made of sandalwood, was also newly forged. There was no decorative carving on it. Only the top was plated in gold with a white pearl embedded within.

This was an excellent blade that had been thoroughly tempered. Even after having been shelved and forgotten for so long, it still cut an imposing, grim presence when unsheathed. It was as if it were immersed in the clear waters of autumn; not only was it pristine and untainted, but it also carried with it an air of solitary haughtiness.

“Shifu has recently been pondering over a matter. It was only when I saw Xiao’Er last night that I realized I have been too inflexible in my teachings that you have become a little too overcautious and hesitant.” Ji Gang laid down the handkerchief and said, “Once you wield this blade, even Xiao’Er’s Langli Blade will not be able to match its speed. The sandalwood hilt is sufficiently light and will allow you to be more agile. Of all martial arts in this world, speed is the only thing that cannot be defeated. This is my father’s beloved blade. When it comes to the Ji Clan’s martial arts, we now say that one has to be firm and ferocious. But the Ji Clan’s mental technique was founded and created by my father. What worked for

him will surely work for you. You can take a different approach and blaze out a new trail as well.”

Shen Zechuan held the hilt of the blade and lifted it.

“Give it a name.” Ji Gang retreated several steps aside.

Shen Zechuan held it lovingly, unwilling to let go, and asked, “Shifu would give me a blade of this caliber?”

Ji Gang laughed heartily and said, “Shifu wants to box. I don’t like using blades. This blade would be wasted if I didn’t give it to you.”

Shen Zechuan thought for a while, then said, “Then I shall change its name to ‘Yang Shan Xue’.”



In the evening, Grand Mentor Qi sat on his heels across the table. He wrote down the surnames of all the Eight Great Clans on a piece of paper.

“It will soon be the Feast of A Hundred Officials. The Four Great Generals will soon be reunited, and the regional officials will be returning as well.” Letting the ink dry, Grand Mentor Qi spoke, “With the ascension of the new Emperor, there will surely be ‘surveillance’ next year. This matter is of utmost importance and is tied to the political stability during the year of Xianyang. Everyone will use the Feast of a Hundred Officials and the annual leave as an opportunity to reassess the situation in court. If Empress Dowager wants to stage a comeback and return to power, she will definitely not let this opportunity slip.”

“After the death of Hua Siqian, the Empress Dowager has been restrained inside the Palace and has not shown her face since. The younger generation of the Hua Clan has been demoted and banished. If she wants to make a move now, she could only use external help.” Shen Zechuan furrowed his brows. “But with the failing precedence of Xi Gu’an, who would still dare to act rashly and be the Empress Dowager’s accomplice?”

“Cowardly rats will not achieve greatness. All collaborations in this world are motivated by mutual benefits. As long as the Empress Dowager still holds the bargaining chips, why would she worry about finding a new ship to board?” Grand Mentor Qi drew a few strokes under “Hua” on the paper, and continued, “Moreover, the men in her clan cannot be depended on. You’ve forgotten: it is a woman that the Empress Dowager has been personally mentoring.”

“The Third Missy.” Shen Zechuan said, “Teacher is referring to Hua Xiangyi.”



“Given the height of her favors while Emperor Xiande was still alive, Hua the Third was going to be conferred the title of Princess of Dazhou.” Grand Mentor Qi said, “But she eventually did not become the Princess of Dazhou. It was not because Emperor Xiande was stingy, but because the Empress Dowager would not allow it.”

Shen Zechuan sipped a mouthful of tea and contemplated for a moment. Swallowing the tea, he said, “I understand now.”

“Then let us hear your thoughts on it.”

Shen Zechuan propped his arm on his knee and said, “If Hua Xiangyi had become the Princess of Dazhou, then her marriage would be out of the Empress Dowager’s hands. The marriage of a princess is a state affair, subject to the discretionary choice of the Emperor and the court officials. But if she remains as the Third Missy, then only the Empress Dowager has a say in whom she will be married off to. In that case, Teacher, does the Empress Dowager want to marry her off?”

“If the mountain does not come to me, then I will go to the mountain.” Grand Mentor Qi dipped his brush in ink. “The Empress Dowager has forsaken a chariot to save the general.<sup>8</sup> Losing Xi Gu’an means that she has lost control of military power in Qudu; but if Hua Xiangyi marries Xiao Chiye, then this matter will be easily resolved.”

Shen Zechuan lightly tapped on his teacup. Holding the cup, he lowered his eyes and said, “This is harder than ascending the heavens. Xiao’Er will never hand over his power.”

“I have heard that Hua Xiangyi’s beauty could make an entire city swoon. There is no guarantee that Xiao’Er would not change his mind if lust overcomes him.” Grand Mentor Qi commented pointedly.

Shen Zechuan held a mouthful of tea in his mouth and did not say a word.

Grand Mentor Qi said, “But this is indeed not easy to do. Even if Xiao’Er had the heart to do so, Xiao Jiming would not sit idly and let him. The Hua Clan and the Xiao Clan are like fire and water who cannot mix; there is no reason to bury the hatchet and make peace when the advantage is on their side.”

Shen Zechuan gave it some thought and said, “Losing military power but having the central administration in his control is a good choice as well. But at this time, there are barely any exceptional up-and-coming officials. Hai Liangyi still heads the Grand Secretariat, and the Empress Dowager

cannot lower Hua Xiangyi's status and have her become a concubine. Then, there is no other fitting candidate for a groom in all of Qudu."

"If there isn't any in Qudu, she can look elsewhere," Grand Mentor Qi wrote the word "Qidong" and said, "Libei won't do, but there is still an opportunity in Qidong."

"Commander Qi and Lu Guangbai have both yet to marry." Shen Zechuan said, "Then it can only be Lu Guangbai. However, the Lu Clan are longtime close friends with the Xiao Clan. Theirs is by no means a relationship one can drive a wedge between overnight."

"Why didn't you put your guess on the Qi Clan?" Grand Mentor Qi said with dissatisfaction. "Other than Qi Zhuyin, the Qi Clan still has one more person."

"It can't be..." Shen Zechuan looked astonished.

A few days later, Xiao Chiye accompanied Li Jianheng outside the city to welcome the two Qidong Commanders-in-Chief. Lu Guangbai returned with him. On the way, he removed his helmet and said, "I heard some news during the journey. Do you know about it?"

Xiao Chiye spurred his horse forward and asked, "What?"

Before Lu Guangbai got his chance to speak, Qi Zhuyin spurred her horse towards them from behind and slapped him on the back.

"Commander!" Lu Guangbai yelled in pain.

Qi Zhuyin rarely looked unhappy. She grabbed her blade and leaned forward to ask Xiao Chiye, "When did these rumors spread in Qudu?"

Xiao Chiye was even more confused.

Qi Zhuyin clenched her teeth and fumed, "Someone is going to be my stepmother."<sup>9</sup>

Stunned, Xiao Chiye said, "Old Commander Qi wants to take a new concubine?"

"Concubine." Qi Zhuyin sneered derisively, "They're already saying that he's going to take a second wife! Third Missy Hua is going to be my stepmother. Is she even my age?"



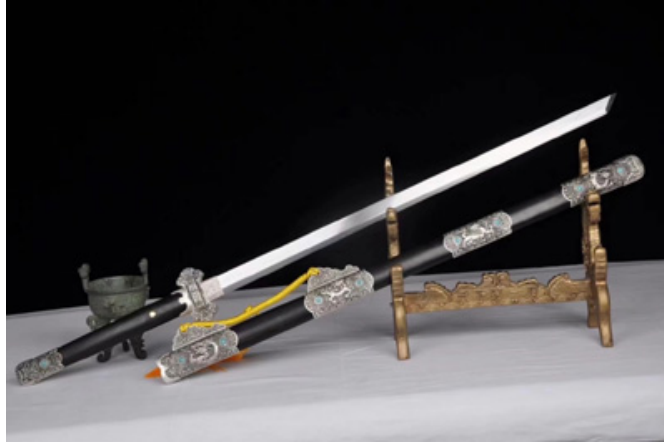
### **Author's Words:**

Yang Shan Xue is modeled after a Tang Blade,<sup>10</sup> which differs from a Xiuchun Blade.<sup>11</sup> A straight blade edge is fairly beautiful. I quite like it. Thank you for reading.

## Special Thanks to: [Eggy](#), [Yunyun](#), [Lin](#), [Rie](#), [Lam](#)

### Footnotes

1. 卖身契 more specifically, it's an indenture or a deed of sale of oneself or one's family member to someone else (e.g., into slavery, etc.)
2. This is the name of an era during which a specific Emperor reigned.
3. 午门 Meridian Gate, or Wumen, is the southern gate and the only entrance now to the Forbidden City. It is said that capital punishment was carried out outside the Meridian gate, but there are no accurate records to verify this. Nonetheless, punishment by flogging of officials who had offended the Emperor did take place in the courtyard in front of the gate.
4. 批红 compilation of an endorsement on a memorial; chief eunuchs had the right to note down remarks in red color (*pihong* 批紅) on the incoming memorials, even before the Emperor had seen them.
5. 贱籍 citizens of the lowest social class in ancient China who did not belong to the four classes of scholars, peasants, artisans, and merchants.
6. 及冠 or 弱冠, a man's 20th birthday, i.e., coming of age at 20 for a male.
7. 尺 *chi*; a Chinese foot, i.e., one-third of a meter
8. 弃车保帅 is literally to sacrifice the chariot (rook) to save the general (king) in Xiangqi, or Chinese chess, which is a strategy board game that represents a battle between two armies, with the aim of capturing the enemy's general. It means to make minor sacrifices to safeguard major interests.
9. 小娘, *xiaoniang*, the term refers more specifically to the concubine of one's father.



10.

11. 唐刀 Tang Blade; a Tang dynasty officer's saber, or "Tang Dao". The blade would be either straight or curved and often only have a one-sided tip.



12.

13. 绣春刀 Xiuchun Blade is the blade of the Imperial Bodyguards during the Ming Dynasty.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 46 : BANQUET



Hua Xiangyi was indeed not as old as Qi Zhuyin. She was younger than Qi Zhuyin by two years. Having been kept deep in the inner palace these days, she had thinned down a lot. Realization dawned on her when she saw Qi Shiyu's portrait on the table in front of the Empress Dowager.

The Empress Dowager held her hand and grasped it for a long time before saying, "It's a May-December marriage, but Qi Shiyu will still dote on you."

Hua Xiangyi touched the purple palace robe and laid her head on the Empress Dowager's knee. The Empress Dowager stroked her long hair and said, "There's no need to feel aggrieved. All of Hua Clan's daughters are married away like this. A few years after you marry him, you will become the bonafide mistress of the Qidong Five Commanderies."

After lighting the incense in the palace hall, Matron Liuxiang wordlessly motioned for all the maids and eunuchs to leave.

Hua Xiangyi smiled and said, "I just can't bear to leave you, aunt. Cangjun Commandery is so far away; I'll have to wait a year if I wish to see you again."

"Aunt can't bear to leave you either." The Empress Dowager hugged her gently. Hua Xiangyi snuggled against her like she did when she was little, listening as the Empress Dowager said, "When I married Emperor Guangcheng, I was only fifteen. That year I left Dicheng, the one thing I couldn't bear parting with the most was my family's swing. I liked sitting on it. With each swing in the wind, I could hear the clamor beyond those high walls. My mother coaxed me and told me that after I came to the Imperial Palace of Qudu, the Emperor would build me an identical swing as long as I wanted it."

Hua Xiangyi stayed still and silent.

The Empress Dowager was the person most favored by Emperor Guangcheng, yet what Emperor Guangcheng gave was not what the Empress Dowager wanted. The moment she set foot into Qudu, she discovered that all the doting her husband showered on her was merely fleeting, like the clouds in the sky. She had to vie endlessly with countless women in the harem just for that one moment of joy.

In Qudu, the most worthless thing of all was love.

The Empress Dowager patted Hua Xiangyi's head and said, "Since I came to Qudu, thirty-seven years have already passed by in a blink. Now my little baby niece is also to be wedded. I've really grown old. In Qudu, I realized that men are powerful in this world because they can take the imperial exams and serve as officials to rise in rank; they can also ride horses into battles whilst wielding spears. Us women are taken into lady's chambers and taught virtue and precepts. No matter how talented and intelligent you are with a thirst for knowledge, there will come a time when you have to eventually marry."

The Empress Dowager's eyes were calm.

"When Father taught me, he said that in this world, he and the Emperor would be the sky above my head. How ridiculously funny. Becoming the Empress means that I share the empire equally with the Emperor. Who could be the sky above my head? No one! My brothers at home are all useless and muddleheaded. Generation after generation, the Hua Clan can only rely on marrying off daughters to keep up the appearance of an affluent clan; yet we aren't allowed to make a single complaint. What kind of kinship is this? Since the world wants to differentiate between the strong and weak to determine success and failure, then I, too, can emerge victor."

The Empress Dowager stroked Hua Xiangyi's temples.

"Remember this: this time, it is not Qi Shiyu who chose you but you who chose him. I may be defeated in the days to come, but it certainly won't be now. My baby niece is going to Qidong not because there is no other option, but to bide your time and ready yourself for action. No matter what happens in the future, you may sigh, but you must never wallow in self-resentment and self-pity. In this game of chess with the world at stake, one can only make a move with no regrets. Since we are surrounded and eyed by a pack of wolves with no way of escape, then we shall fight them to the bitter end."

The bamboo tube in the palace hall swung lightly. Hua Xiangyi slowly grasped the Empress Dowager's hand back.

"I will not forget Aunt's teachings."



The Feast of A Hundred Officials was on Yuanchun<sup>1</sup> night. Local officials entered the capital one after another. There were a lot fewer family feasts and banquets this year, as they all knew that Hai Liangyi was keeping a close watch on them. Even coming together in great numbers could turn

into evidence of clique forming. It had not been long since Li Jianheng's ascension to the throne. Everyone all wanted to use the Feast of A Hundred Officials as an opportunity to observe this new master of theirs.

They still did not know which way the wind was blowing in Qudu, so everyone spoke and acted with prudence. Only the matter of Hua the Third spread like wildfire, leaving Qi Zhuyin with nowhere else to vent her unhappiness.

Xiao Chiye was still secretly investigating the Eight Great Clans in recent days, but this matter had also piqued his interest. It just happened that Xiao Jiming had entered the capital, so both brothers had a chat in the residence.

"The Hua Clan wants to rise again from the ashes. No matter how much of a lecher Old Commander Qi is, he must not agree to this marriage." Xiao Chiye said off-handedly as he took out Libei Armored Cavalry's current year expenditure accounts for a look.

"That's really hard to say." Xiao Jiming sat at the table and flipped through the military affairs.

Xiao Chiye raised his eyes and asked, "How would this benefit his Qidong?"

Xiao Jiming endorsed the document with his name and said, "You're in Qudu, and you have taken over the Eight Great Training Divisions. Haven't you checked the Eight Great Training Divisions' accounts?"

Xiao Chiye responded, "I took a look at the account when the Court of Judicial Review was purged. The surplus money and military provisions from the Eight Great Training Divisions were all supplied to the Imperial Army this year to make up for the shortfall. What's wrong?"

Xiao Jiming pondered over the document for a moment and said, "When Hua Siqian was still alive, the annual salary and provisions for the Eight Great Training Division was several times higher than that of the Bianjun Commandery. The money that Xi Gu'an couldn't account for—Where could it have gone? Since Hua Siqian could have two accounts for one payment, then couldn't the Empress Dowager have kept another account book? Money comes and goes like flowing water, but the audit remains a constant. As long as he could swap the auditing official to his own and place the said official right under the Eight Great Training Divisions' noses, they could write the account book in any way they so desire every year. The Hua Clan's properties have been searched and their

possessions, confiscated. But who would dare to touch the Empress Dowager's private coffers? This money is now Hua Xiangyi's dowry. Whether it's for official or personal reasons, Qi Shiyu ought to be tempted."

Looking displeased, Xiao Chiye said, "The current commander-in-chief of Qidong Five Commanderies' military forces is Qi Zhuyin. Qi Zhuyin will not agree to it."

"Even so." Xiao Jiming finally looked at Xiao Chiye. "She can't stop it."

Xiao Chiye lay down and thought for a while before saying, "All these years, the Qi Clan has had a pretty good relationship with us. If Qi Shiyu really marries Hua the Third, Libei will no longer be Qidong's buddy."

"That's of little importance. Once the Biansha Twelve Tribes come attacking, everyone still has to fight side by side." Xiao Jiming said, "With Hua the Third, the Qidong Five Commanderies' Garrison Troops will have money."

"Then tell them to buy Libei's horses in the future." There was a cold, tough glint in Xiao Chiye's eyes. "How long can the Empress Dowager's private coffer last? Providing for 200,000 soldiers is not as simple as raising 20 dogs. The consumption of military expenditure is alarming. It's definitely not something a single person can sustain."

"If the Empress Dowager has the Qi Clan to assist her, then the impasse in Qudu can be broken." Xiao Jiming said, "Once power returns to her hand, she will be able to recoup the money."

Xiao Chiye sat up again and said, "This marriage must not come to pass."

Xiao Jiming said, "There's still a way."

Xiao Chiye looked towards him and said, "The easiest is to kill Hua the Third."

Xiao Jiming looked at him in surprise and said, "You are also a thorn in others' flesh now. The Eight Great Clan will only be too anxious for you to make a move."

Xiao Chiye said, "Rumors are rife now. If we try to stop it after the new year, it'd be too late."

Xiao Jiming pondered it over in silence. After a while, he said, "If the Empress Dowager wants to put this marriage together, then she must show herself, and the Feast of A Hundred Officials is her only opportunity. This



matter is of great importance. Hai Liangyi might not necessarily be willing to let it happen. When the time comes, there will be a war of words.”

“The Hua clan has three generations of daughters who were married away to Qidong. If we were to delve into it seriously, then Hua the Third might really turn out to be Qi Shiyu’s distant blood relative.” Xiao Chiye set aside the book and suddenly burst out laughing. “No... I want Hua the Third to become a distant blood relative of Qi Shiyu. This marriage must not come to pass.”

Xiao Chiye got up and pushed the door open to call for Zhao Hui.

“It’s the Spring Festival.” Xiao Chiye said. “You still have yet to see your younger sister.”

Zhao Hui looked at Xiao Jiming, who smiled faintly.

Zhao Hui understood and said, “I’ll pay her a visit tomorrow morning.”



Han Cheng, the new Commander-in-chief of the Imperial Bodyguards, was the third son of lawful birth from the Han Clan, one of the Eight Great Clans. He used to be the Assistant Commander of the Eight Great Training Divisions. During the Nanlin Hunt, he happened to be on a break. He did not follow Xi Gu’an, nor did he heed the Empress Dowager’s instructions. Rumor had it that he was still asleep when the Imperial Army knocked on his door. As such, he escaped the autumn wind<sup>2</sup> that had purged the Hua Faction.

But Shen Zechuan knew that this man was someone Xue Xiuzhuo had planted there.

On the eve of the Feast of A Hundred Officials, the Imperial Bodyguards sorted out their duty arrangements. According to the plan, Shen Zechuan had to remain before the Emperor, so it came as no surprise when he got the authority token.

Han Cheng personally delivered the authority token to Shen Zechuan. Both men were inside the Imperial Bodyguards’ office. He said, “Everything is in order, except the easterly wind.<sup>3</sup> When the time comes, I’ll be at the side too. No matter what, His Majesty mustn’t be hurt.”

“Of course.” Shen Zechuan hung up the authority token and said with a smile, “This time, we will be depending on His Excellency the Commander-in-chief.”

Han Cheng felt apprehensive, but it would not do for him to reveal it. So he could only repeat, “If this matter fails and gets exposed, you and I

will be sentenced to death for this crime. But if it succeeds, then the Imperial Bodyguards will be able to swipe a slice of the pie from the hands of the Imperial Army. Everyone will live well from then on, and good days will be upon us.”

“Please rest assured, Your Excellency.” Shen Zechuan said with a serious expression. “We brothers are of one mind. Nothing will go wrong.”

Seeing how composed and confident he was, Han Cheng breathed a sigh of relief.

Outside, the snow fell increasingly harder. Even by the time it was dawn, it never stopped.



Before the Feast of A Hundred Officials, there was a sacrificial ceremony.<sup>4</sup> The Imperial Army was already on the alert and ready for battle early in the morning. Xiao Chiye was neatly dressed in his court attire today. When he strode through the palace gates, he came face to face with Han Cheng. Just as he was exchanging conventional greetings with the latter, he saw Shen Zechuan.

“The Left Guard stands guard before the Emperor.” Xiao Chiye asked Han Cheng, as he looked at Shen Zechuan and pretended not to be acquainted with the latter, “So why is it assigned to Imperial Bodyguards of the Company Commander rank and below?”

“The Imperial Bodyguards have now been reorganized, and many positions have been left vacant.” Han Cheng said and looked back. “The ones who were picked are all first-rate experts. Many of them are disadvantaged by the fact that the year for promotion is not upon them yet, so they all seem to be of junior positions.”

Xiao Chiye was on guard when he saw Shen Zechuan. But even if he could suppress the Imperial Bodyguards a notch, he did not have the authority to command the other party to swap the men. Because no matter how much the Imperial Bodyguards was inhibited, both it and the Eastern Depot took commands directly from the Emperor. As long as Li Jianheng said nothing, anyone else who gave orders summarily would be overstepping their authority.

As if knowing what he was thinking, Shen Zechuan exchanged glances with him with eyes that spoke of a meaning Xiao Chiye could not read.

Ahead of them, the Domesticated Elephants Office had already herded the elephants out. Li Jianheng was about to step out of the hall soon. Unable

to stay for long, Xiao Chiye strode forward and left.

This was the first time Li Jianheng held the ceremonial greatsword in his hands. It was so heavy he almost could not lift it. Even before he stepped out of the palace doors, he already felt his neck aching with that royal crown atop his head. This coronation attire,<sup>5</sup> which had him shouldering the sun and the moon and bearing the stars on his back,<sup>6</sup> finally revealed in him a trace of sober, imposing bearing from his typical gleeful and playful attitude.

Li Jianheng's palms were sweating. He held up the greatsword before striding out of the door.

The court elephants, draped with red velvet and gold saddles, stood at both sides. The various officials kowtowed and shouted out wishes of longevity upon the Emperor. Li Jianheng stood atop the stairs, his broadened field of vision taking in the panorama of thick clouds in the east, with skies and lands cloaked in a blanket of boundless snow. He stood up high above, so high it was almost as if he was up there in the clouds. The deafening sounds of "long live, Your Majesty" reverberated in his ears. Li Jianheng's heartbeat quickened. Pleasant surprise gradually washed over his face as his eyes successively moved down from Hai Liangyi to Xiao Jiming to all living beings in the world kneeling before him. He was the one and only supreme ruler!

This is how it feels like to be the Emperor.

Li Jianheng could not help but grasp the greatsword tightly. In this grand show of obeisances made to him, he felt as if he had obtained the strength and courage to contend with Heaven. This feeling was poles apart from the feeling of sitting in the Imperial Court. It was the thrill of being kowtowed to for the first time ever since the hunting grounds.

Li Jianheng advanced along the long stairs and walked towards the ceremonial terrace. He walked very, very slowly, reveling in this entire journey of honor and glory.

Of the tens of thousands of people, only Shen Zechuan slowly raised his head. He looked along the tall stairs past Li Jianheng's figure, where he, too, saw the dark and gloomy sky amidst the dancing snow.



As the feast began, the Court of Imperial Entertainments began to dish out meals, while the Imperial Winery followed on their heels to serve wine

without pause. Li Jianheng was fond of sweets, so the Imperial Bakery made quite a number of silk-nested tiger's eye candies.

Li Jianheng sat on the Dragon Throne, with the Empress Dowager and Hua Xiangyi below him, followed by Muru, who had just been conferred the title of Imperial Concubine. Shen Zechuan and Han Cheng stood at the bottom of the steps, opposite the Imperial Army. A eunuch from the Imperial Food Service knelt behind Shen Zechuan to the right. Every dish on Li Jianheng's table had to be first tasted by the Imperial Food Service eunuch.

Li Jianheng was in high spirits tonight. He repeatedly urged all those present to drink up, while he himself was somewhat intoxicated. Sitting on top, he said, "Ever since I've ascended to the throne, I've been fortunate to be assisted by wise talents. With a clear mirror<sup>7</sup> like Secretariat Elder Hai by my side, there isn't a day I dare to forget to self-reflect."

He began to shoot his mouth off as soon as he drank too much.

"I'm very grateful to Secretariat Elder Hai, and I wish to regard Secretariat Elder Hai as the Second Father<sup>8</sup> of the Court. Such honor and glory have never been accorded to past Secretariat Elders before. Now, I shall give Secretariat Elder..."

Second Father!

How could he speak of such words? The way he put it drained the color from Hai Liangyi's face. Hai Liangyi had already got up in astonishment, wanting to kneel in protest. At the same time, Li Jianheng belched from the wine, still waving his hand.

"No need for Secretariat Elder to panic. It's what I should do..."

"I think this is improper." The Empress Dowager looked at Hai Liangyi and paused for a moment. It was as if she saw through Hai Liangyi's shock at that very moment. Turning to Li Jianheng, she said softly, "Secretariat Elder Hai is the leader revered by all scholars in the world. His character is solemn and dignified. Since entering the court to serve as an official, he has had clean hands. He speaks bluntly and resolutely. If His Majesty were to equate this kind of trusted aide to a Second Father, then even if this would demonstrate Your Majesty's favor, the Secretariat Elder's intent to criticize social evils of the times for public interests would be lost."

Seeing the Empress Dowager's mild demeanor, Li Jianheng laughed and said, "In the past, King Xiang<sup>9</sup> valued relationships and respected Fan Zeng<sup>10</sup> as his Second Father. Today, I want to express my gratitude for

Secretariat Elder's assistance too, and address him as Second Father. It sounds intimate, and the title itself would give me pause for self-reflection! Secretariat Elder, Secretariat Elder, so how about it?"

Hai Liangyi, already kowtowing, said, "This absolutely mustn't be done!"

It was as if Li Jianheng was splashed in the face with cold water. That sternly uttered phrase of "mustn't be done" put a damper on his enthusiasm, making him displeased. His expression underwent a few changes before he eventually forced a smile and said, "It's just a form of address for me to be on more intimate terms with the Secretariat Elder. So what does it matter?"

Hai Liangyi said, "Your Majesty is the sovereign, poles apart from an overlord<sup>11</sup> confined to a narrow corner. This old subject was born in the mountain ridges of Hezhou. I'm truly nothing but an uncouth, lowly person. How can I share the same address of 'father' as the sagely Emperor Guangcheng?!"

Li Jianheng's original intention was to win over the hearts of Hai Liangyi as well as all the scholars in the world. He wanted to use this to affirm that he was not an idiot who disrespected learning. But that was all the few books he had read. How could he have known that a mere address could evoke such vehement rejection from Hai Liangyi? He had no way to back down this very moment, like a man who found it difficult to dismount a tiger he had ridden.<sup>12</sup> He even sobered up a few degrees.

Li Jianheng could not bring himself to insist on it and embarrass himself further, so he thought of playing dumb and glossing it over. Thus, he said, "If the Secretariat Elder is unwilling, then forget it..."

"My thinking is that," Hai Liangyi said, "Those at the bottom will imitate the propensity of those at the top! Now that His Majesty has created this precedent tonight, then there will be people who will attempt to follow suit in the future. When that happens, they will collude to form cliques and factions that impede the imperial court, thereby jeopardizing the entire state. It has only been a month since the dust from the Hua Faction case settled. Past experiences, if not forgotten, will serve as a guide for the future. It's truly improper for Your Majesty to drink until dead drunk tonight!"

Li Jianheng clenched the wine cup tightly in his hands and surveyed the crowd below. It was only when he saw the officials hanging their heads low and not daring to look directly at him that his fury eased off some. He could not flare up at Hai Liangyi, but he did not want to admit the errors of his

way today either. He sat restlessly on this Dragon throne. Having tasted the sweetness of submission from all living beings, how could he willingly open himself up to censure?

He was the Emperor.

Li Jianheng's eyes were already bloodshot from enduring it. He drank the last mouthful of wine and said, "... Let's drop this matter. Help Secretariat Elder back to his seat."

Hai Liangyi was aware that tonight was not the time to admonish him, but it was hard to change his frank and outspoken nature. "I still have something to say."

Li Jianheng pursed his lips into a tight line and said nothing.

Silence reigned in the banquet hall. Without getting a response, Hai Liangyi continued to kneel in place. They were now at a deadlock. No one else touched their chopsticks. Even the music from the reed instruments had ceased.

Suddenly, a "clack" rang out.

Xiao Chiye laid down his chopsticks at his own seat and laughed out loud, "It delights me to see the relationship between Li Jianheng and Secretariat Elder. The so-called sagely ruler and virtuous subject is nothing more than precisely this, with the Emperor and his subjects in harmonious council on state affairs, so the ancient saying goes. The presence of such a sagely ruler and upstanding official in Dazhou means that the age of prosperity is sure to fall upon us soon."

"It's the blessing of the officials that His Majesty advocates freedom of speech and is receptive to criticisms." Xue Xiuzhuo raised his cup for a toast, "It's the new year tonight. Why not offer a toast to this sacred scene?"

The group of officials lifted their cups and said their greetings in unison.

Li Jianheng felt a little appeased amidst the sounds of greetings and wishes. On seeing a still kneeling Hai Liangyi, he could not refrain from letting loose a sigh. "Secretariat Elder, please rise."

With the crisis averted, the Empress Dowager looked at Xiao Chiye for a moment before she prompted, "It's said that a man's lifelong wish to start a family and establish one's career. Does Ce' an have a betrothal candidate in mind?"

There was a flash in Shen Zechuan's eyes as he looked towards Xiao Chiye too.

Xiao Chiye smiled without the slightest scruple and answered, “To reply Your Majesty, which of the noble ladies in Qudu would be willing to marry down to me the way I am now? Besides, it’s not my aspiration to settle down.”

The Empress Dowager said, “The Viceroy is too humble. Up-and-coming upstarts in the capital are few and far between nowadays. With your appearance, there will be beauties beckoning to you even when you cross the bridge on the eastern street. Hereditary Prince, if you don’t urge him, it may then be too late.”

Xiao Jiming smiled too and replied, “My dear Father at home thinks his temperament is still volatile. He’s afraid he would hold up the marriage and life of a maiden from some family.”

The Empress Dowager turned her head aside once again and looked at Li Jianheng with a smile. “Look at how not a single one of them is in a hurry. When the Prince of Libei was at this age, he was already married for three to four years.”

Li Jianheng had not come around from the previous situation, and he was feeling a little lackadaisical at the moment. Not daring to leave the Empress Dowager hanging, he glanced at Xiao Chiye and replied, “Mother may not be aware, Ce’ an is reckless in nature. The common noble lady from Qudu will not be able to hold their own against him.”

“You can’t put it this way and delay his marriage for no good reason.” The Empress Dowager continued, “It doesn’t have to be a noble lady from Qudu. I’m aware that Marquis Helian’s daughter, Commandery Princess<sup>13</sup> Zhaoyue, is of similar age with Ce’ an. It’s a good match.”

Marquis Helian was the Marquis of Chuancheng. He was a member of the Fei Clan, which was one of the Eight Great Clans. The Empress Dowager had indeed appointed a marriage<sup>14</sup> well-matched in status.

Marquis Helian, Fei Kun, promptly gave a toast and looked in Xiao Jiming’s direction.

Xiao Chiye thought that the Empress Dowager would talk about Hua Xiangyi’s marriage at the banquet. He did not expect the discussion this time to come directly for him instead. Outright rejection was not an option, but neither could he marry straight off in a muddle.

Li Jianheng was caught off guard too. Dazed for a moment, he looked at Xiao Chiye and stuttered, “I... Commandery Princess Zhaoyue...” Struck

by a brainwave, he said, "The nation is still in mourning. I'm afraid it's not appropriate to appoint marriage at this time."

"It's one thing to pledge marriage and another to complete the marriage. We have not been having any good times lately. We could fix the betrothal first and wait for summertime to seek an auspicious day to hold the rites for the union." The Empress Dowager added affectionately, "Zhaoyue and Xiangyi are bosom friends. It'd be perfect for them to get married at the same time."

She remained tight-lipped about who Hua Xiangyi was going to marry and merely pushed Commandery Princess Zhaoyue to Xiao Chiye. This made it clear that she regarded Xiao Chiye's marriage as a state affair and Hua Xiangyi's marriage as a private matter.

Qi Zhuyin's expression was solemn, but unexpectedly enough, she said nothing.

Seeing this, Lu Guangbai knew that it did not bode well and guessed that Qi Shiyu had already given his approval and told Qi Zhuyin not to say anything. However, getting married to Commandery Princess Zhaoyue was absolutely out of the question. If this marriage was decided and the Empress Dowager lifted Zhaoyue's status to Princess, Xiao Chiye would be marrying a princess. The Consort of Dazhou had no power, with only a title in name. It would strip Xiao Chiye of his military power in Qudu, which he had only just grabbed on to.

The wine in Xiao Chiye's throat burned like a raging fire. He had already risen to his feet, but then he saw the Empress Dowager smiling again.

"The Hereditary Prince is married to the daughter of the Lu Clan's Earl of Biansha from the Bianjun Commandery. Your little son is now around four to five years old, right?"

Xiao Jiming replied, "He is now four years old."

"The Grandson-Heir is already four years old, yet General Lu still does not have a wife." The Empress Dowager looked towards Lu Guangbai and added, "Bianjun is a desert land. It's not easy for the General to guard and defend it. Starting a family early will reduce one of the Earl of Biansha's concerns. General Lu seems to me to be of similar age to the Hereditary Prince. Why? Is it also not the General's aspiration to start a family?"

Lu Guangbai was momentarily at a loss for words. "To reply Your Majesty——"



The Empress Dowager continued, “Zhaoyue’s disposition is lively and playful. Frankly speaking, Ce’ an is indeed quite reckless. The General seems a lot more reliable instead. Ce’ an, what do you think about it?”

If Xiao Chiye did not marry Commandery Princess Zhaoyue, it would fall upon Lu Guangbai to marry her. This headache laid out in the banquet was precisely meant to put him in a dilemma.

Xiao Chiye had already sent Zhao Hui to bribe someone from the Ministry of Rites. Once Her Majesty opened her mouth tonight, he would testify to the fact that Hua Xiangyi was Qi Shiyu’s distant relative related by blood. With the law of propriety in the way and a wide gap in seniority, this marriage would fall apart. But the Empress Dowager would not give him the chance to counter at all. Who would have guessed that it would be his marriage that would be handed over tonight?

It was at this moment Xiao Chiye saw the look in Shen Zechuan’s eyes. As both men stood under the watchful gaze of everyone present with this thorny issue pressing down upon them, their eyes met for the briefest flicker of an instant.

Xiao Chiye strode a step forward and said, “To reply Your Majesty.”

The Imperial Food Service eunuch was transferring dishes on behalf of the Imperial Bakery. He submissively divided out the portion he was to sample and picked up the chopsticks before looking at Li Jianheng who was about an arm away from him.

Li Jianheng was still undecided as he listened to their confrontation with a frown. Sensing the lack of movement from the eunuch near him, he cast a sidelong glance over and asked, “Why are you standing—”

In the twinkling of an eye, the eunuch clenched the gold-clad chopsticks and, with a lightning move of his hand, stabbed it right towards Li Jianheng’s neck!

It happened so abruptly that Li Jianheng did not even have the time to react. All he could do was to watch helplessly as the tip of that chopstick came stabbing towards him. His entire body stiffened as his eyes betrayed the fear in them. He could not even move his fingers.

In the split second the color drained from everyone’s faces, Shen Zechuan had already drawn out Yang Shan Xue. The cold glint of the straight blade flashed past.

Li Jianheng’s throat tightened as he yelled as loud as he could. As soon as he did so, hot, fresh blood splattered onto the front and hem of his robe.

Li Jianheng shouted at the top of his voice, “PROTECT ME—”

The eunuch’s head rolled forward and fell onto Li Jianheng’s body. Li Jianheng held on tightly to both sides of the dragon throne for support. Under this heavy stench of blood, he watched as someone caught hold of that headless body which was toppling over towards him.

Shen Zechuan cast aside the body and turned around indifferently to command, “Protect His Majesty!”

Ge Qingqing immediately drew his sword. Snow-white glint cut through the air with a “swish” as the Imperial Bodyguards stood before the Imperial Army like a fortified, impregnable city, becoming Li Jianheng’s primary shield.

With the Imperial Bodyguards between them, Xiao Chiye had to look up before he could see Shen Zechuan’s face.

The balanced status quo they had always maintained was finally shattered right this very moment. Shen Zechuan looked down at him from high above and threw him a meaningful smile. That expression in his eyes was as concrete as it could be as it trampled down upon Xiao Chiye’s chest.



**Special Thanks to:** [Eggy](#), [Yunyun](#), [Lin](#), [Rie](#), [Lam](#)

#### Footnotes

1. 元春 Yuanchun, also known as 元旦 Yuandan, i.e., the lunar new year’s day.
2. 秋风 literally autumn wind, but it also refers to a powerful force that quickly and easily sweeps away all things rotten or on the decline. (秋风扫落叶)
3. 万事妥当 , 只欠东风, i.e., everything all is ready except what is crucial
4. 祭祀 offering of sacrifices to the gods or ancestors



- 5.
6. Putting this image because he's handsome (See example of coronation attire [historical portrait](#))
7. 冕服 Mianfu, literally means coronation attire, is the highest level of formal dress worn by Emperors and the royal family in special ceremonial events such as coronation, morning audience, ancestral rites, worship, new year's audience, and other ceremonial activities.
8. “肩戴(挑)日月，背负星辰” Literally “wearing the sun and moon on the shoulders and carrying the stars on the back.” The sun, moon, and constellations are part of the Twelve Symbols of Sovereignty on the Emperor's ceremonial robe, with sun and moon on each shoulder, and stars on the back or around the neck, which later came to be the established style of the Emperors' coronation robe.
9. Also refers to someone impartial and insightful
10. 亚父 term of respect for a man that's second only to father, i.e., like a father.

11. 项王 Xiang Wang, or King Xiang, refers to Xiang Yu, one of the rebels causing the downfall of the Qin dynasty who became the most powerful warlord, but was finally defeated by Liu Bang.
12. 范增 Fan Zeng, originally an advisor to Xiang Yu's uncle, Xiang Liang, and later became Xiang Yu's advisor. Xiang Yu respectfully addressed Fan Zeng as his "Second Father", or Yafu.
13. Refers to Xiang Yu
14. 骑虎难下, lit. he who rides a tiger finds it difficult to dismount, i.e., to have no way to back down (or find it hard to stop what one is doing).
15. 郡主 Commandery Princess; daughter of a crown prince or a first-rank prince.
16. 指婚 A marriage (typically of a royal descendant) which is decided by the Emperor. (i.e., when the Emperor plays matchmaker).

# QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 47 : POWER STRUGGLE

Translated with: [Eggy](#) & [Yunyun](#)<3

Terrified, Li Jianheng kicked that human head away with his leg shaking. He no longer cared about keeping up appearances. Right this moment, he wanted so much to shrink into the Dragon Throne. There was a roaring in his ears as he watched the fresh blood soak through his robe. It felt as though someone was strangling him by the throat; for a long time, he could not utter a single word.

Shen Zechuan knelt on one knee and said with a severe countenance, “Don’t be afraid, Your Majesty. The assassin has already been executed. This humble subject was late in coming to your protection. For this sin, I deserve death!”

Li Jianheng’s limbs seemed to be paralyzed as he struggled with the effort to grasp hold of the armrests of the throne and shift his gaze from the corpse to Shen Zechuan’s face. He almost choked with sobs as he grabbed Shen Zechuan’s sleeve and said, “Not late... not late at all! You... Lanzhou, you’ve done well! I, I almost...”

“Summon the Imperial Physician!” Ignoring the bloody corpse, the Empress Dowager hurried over. She held Li Jianheng’s hand and called out softly to him, “Your Majesty, Your Majesty?”

Li Jianheng was still in a panic from the fear. He swallowed his saliva with some difficulty and hastily pulled out his hand from the Empress Dowager’s palms to grasp Shen Zechuan’s sleeve tightly. He pleaded, “Stay here. Lead the Imperial Bodyguards and remain here to protect me!”

“The Imperial Bodyguards *are* His Majesty’s guards.” Shen Zechuan said without blinking an eye. “For His Majesty, the Imperial Bodyguards will willingly brave through fire and water. This humble subject will immediately escort Your Majesty back to Mingli Hall.”

Everyone at the banquet was still badly shaken. Xue Xiuzhuo took a few steps forward and said sharply, “Arrest and detain everyone from the Imperial Food Service, Court of Imperial Entertainments, Imperial Bakery,

and Imperial Winery. To think there is an assassin hiding among the Son of Heaven's personal attendants. All those involved in the arrangements of the inner palace eunuchs and guards' defenses must be held accountable!"

"Who is in charge of patrols tonight?" The Empress Dowager asked.

The banquet hall fell silent. Xiao Chiye bowed and said, "To reply Your Majesty, it's this subject."

The Empress Dowager did not pursue further. Instead, she looked at Li Jianheng, as did the other officials.

For this eunuch to be someone from the Imperial Food Service, he first had to have a clean family background and a clean history. The time he entered the palace, the services and offices among the Twenty-four Yamens he had worked in, and even which inner palace eunuchs he had been on good terms with in the past, all had to be investigated. Not only that, even the people he came into contact with had to be checked and recorded in the official files. Xiao Chiye was responsible for the guards' defenses. He was supposed to vet all these matters thoroughly before the Feast of A Hundred Officials. The assassin had walked in through his layers of defenses. There was no way he could escape responsibility.

With his lips pale as he dripped cold sweat, Li Jianheng said, "Take the eunuchs of the various services into custody first. I..."

Before he could finish his words, he fainted.



Tonight was destined to be a sleepless one. Li Jianheng was lying unconscious in the inner room. The Imperial Physicians gathered in a group, while the Empress Dowager listened to their diagnosis behind the hanging curtain once more. Hai Liangyi waited on the side, as instructed explicitly by the Empress Dowager.

Han Cheng led the Imperial Bodyguards to stand guard with their swords under the eaves, while the court officials kneeled outside. The night of Yuanchun<sup>1</sup> was incredibly cold. Many elderly officials were already shivering from the freezing cold, hanging on with their sheer will alone.

The whole palace, shrouded in a particularly chilling atmosphere, was dead silent.

Xiao Chiye was not among them. He needed to arrest the inner palace eunuchs with the relevant personnel from the Ministry of Justice and the Chief Surveillance Bureau. Furthermore, the Imperial Army also had to be detained. The Imperial Army's Assistant Commander responsible for

screening the manpower tonight had his authority token suspended. Together with the eunuchs, he was thrown into prison.

There was no fire brazier set up inside the hall. Only the lanterns were lit.

Xiao Chiye was sitting on the lower right of the Minister of Justice, Kong Qiu. On the left was the Chief Surveillance Bureau's Left Censor-in-chief, Cen Yu, and Right Censor-in-chief, Fu Linye.

If this had proceeded like before, Xiao Chiye would have held the same authority as the Minister of Justice to conduct trials, which would have placed him on equal footing and seating as the latter. But this time, to avoid arousing suspicion, he could only make do with the lower right seating and hand the authority of supervision over to the two head officials from the Chief Surveillance Bureau.

This year was a period of troubled times, where a fresh wave of problems rose before the former had subsided. The Three Judicial Offices had never judged cases consecutively like this; what's more, all the cases were major ones that concerned the Emperor's life.

Kong Qiu finished the tea that had cooled and said nothing as they waited for the prisoner to be summoned. In fact, from the moment they had sat here, no one had dared to make small talk. Everyone knew that it was not the time to jest and joke around. All of them wore solemn expressions on their faces.

Xiao Chiye sat in his seat and rotated his thumb ring in silence as he lost himself in contemplation.

They had come prepared for this case, just like Xiaofuzi's case back then. It became all the more convoluted in the instant it had occurred. If one could look beyond the facade the moment it happened, it would look like countless strings being pulled behind the scenes, concealing a deep-seated motive.

The inner eunuchs from the Imperial Food Service had to test the dishes for the Son of Heaven. As such, each one from top to bottom had been thoroughly vetted for all three generations. To use this kind of person and turn him into an assassin would be extremely difficult. Yet, it was also very easy.

First of all, it must be someone who could come into contact with the inner palace eunuchs, or a eunuch who was hiding in the palace but working

for powers on the outside. Only these two kinds of people could coerce or entice the eunuch into assassinating the Emperor.

Xiao Chiye suddenly remembered something at this point and stopped turning his thumb ring. Right at this time, the summoned prisoner was brought over. It was the Imperial Army's Assistant Commander.

Kong Qiu cut the crap and went straight to the point. "As the Imperial Army's Assistant Commander, you are the one responsible for examining the armed staff of the Imperial Army who would stand before the Emperor tonight, as well as the eunuch the Imperial Food Service arranged to taste-test the dishes. How much do you know about this eunuch?"

The name of the Assistant Commander was Meng Rui, a man from a military household<sup>2</sup> Xiao Chiye had promoted in the sixth year of Xiande.<sup>3</sup> He was a very prudent man who originally served as the Office Manager<sup>4</sup> in the Imperial Army. With a gaze that never wavered, he answered in a steady voice, "The eunuch assassin went by the name Guisheng. He was twenty-six and a native of the City of Chuncheng. His father, a resident of Baishui Street in Chuncheng, passed away from illness in the sixth year of Xiande. As the only child in the family, Guisheng entered the palace in the year of Yongyi and had been here for twelve years since. He joined the Imperial Food Service in the first year of Xiande and started to taste dishes for the former Emperor from the fourth year of Xiande onwards. He had no special hobbies, and there is hardly anyone he associated with."

Kong Qiu thought for a moment and asked, "Who was the one who arranged for him to taste the dishes tonight?"

Meng Rui answered, "The Female Official of the Imperial Food Service, Fuling."

Kong Qiu first looked at the men from the Chief Surveillance Bureau, then at Xiao Chiye before he nodded and said, "The weapon used for the assassination was the golden chopsticks used by the Emperor. The Imperial Army could do nothing about it even if they did a body search or a background check on him. How about this? Assistant Commander Meng, please wait for a moment. Summon Fuling of the Imperial Food Service."

Meng Rui retreated to the side. From start to end, he never made eye contact with Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye was actually not as nervous as the others expected him to be. He knew fully well that this assassination could not strip him of his military power. Perhaps he would be punished and have his salary reduced



after this incident, but these would not have any significant impact on him. When the incident happened, he was too far away. There was no way he could beat Shen Zechuan to it and save the Emperor. Plus, the seating arrangement was planned according to the customs, so no one could criticize it either. And there was one more thing. That is, the speed at which Shen Zechuan had drawn his sword back then was simply too fast. In almost the blink of an eye, his blade had already returned to its sheath, and the assassin's head had toppled to the ground. This differed completely from the speed he had exhibited last time on that rainy night. Even if Xiao Chiye had been standing beside him at the time of incident, he might not have necessarily been faster than him. But it was what was going to transpire after the assassination that bothered Xiao Chiye the most. He had to plan ahead and save for a rainy day. He needed to curb the possibility of this matter burning its way to him.

Xiao Chiye thought again of that final expression in Shen Zechuan's eyes.

The Imperial Bodyguards' usual practice was to have a period of promotion once every eight years. The subordinates would first be assigned to one of the twelve offices according to their household register classification,<sup>5</sup> then promoted according to their on-the-job performance. There were just too few opportunities for an exception to be made. Shen Zechuan's family background was unusual. Although he was now absolved from sin and exempted from punishment, he still could not be considered to have military status. If he wanted to lead and command the Imperial Bodyguards, then he had to find a way to get promoted.

The reasons Xiao Chiye had been suppressing the Imperial Bodyguards these few months were to consolidate the Imperial Army's influence and clout, and to guard against Shen Zechuan's advancements through the ranks. The situation in Qudu was chaotic, yet it was also as distinct as the waters of the Jing and Wei Rivers.<sup>6</sup> Everyone was already familiar with one another. All of them collaborated with one another for their own interests, then fought with each other for their own interests. Only Shen Zechuan was an unpredictable variable. Xiao Chiye had tried every possible way to sound and feel him out, but he never found out what Shen Zechuan's actual intent was.

If he could not figure out his motive, then he could not cooperate with him with peace of mind.

Xiao Chiye had hoped that Shen Zechuan could stay quietly at the bottom rank. But the assassination case this time was Shen Zechuan's answer.

Impossible.

He was his own blade. He would kill out a path for his own. He would not deign to be at the beck and call of others. He wanted to tear others apart, not to obey.

What could a night of bedroom pleasure change?

That was the howls of their resentment being vented in the pitch-dark night, a panting which stemmed from the entanglement of both men's desires. It was amidst the collision of bodies and pounding of flesh that gave rise to the feeling of fellow sufferers commiserating with one another. But this was still not enough to hamper both men from making the choices they did.

Xiao Chiye would never give up the power in his hands. This was the blade on which his survival depended. If he could not return to Libei, then he must grasp tightly onto this blade. Likewise, Shen Zechuan would not tolerate himself being subservient to others. He would not let others decide the course of his fate. He needed to rise through the ranks. He *had* to.

Xiao Chiye suddenly clenched his fist.

Seeing that Shen Zechuan was involved in the plotting of this case, then who were his accomplices?



Li Jianheng had yet to regain consciousness. Shen Zechuan was switched off duties so he could get a little rest. As he wiped his hands in the office, he heard the door behind him open, followed by someone entering.

"According to the plan you spoke of, Han Cheng should be the one stepping forward to save the Emperor." Xue Xiuzhuo rolled up his sleeves a little and washed his hands in the cold water basin. He smiled and said, "The few of us brothers have been played for fools by Your Excellency Shen."

"The situation was critical." Shen Zechuan did not look back. "If Han Cheng has that ability, then it wouldn't matter to have him do the saving. But he just had to be slow. What can I do?"

"This matter won't take Xiao'Er down. At most, he will just be impeached for governance negligence. You, however, showed your true

colors before him this time. Even if you move up the ladder, you will not have an easy time in the future.”

“I’m in the same boat with Your Excellency, the Assistant Minister of the Court of Judicial Review. If I’m having a hard time...” Shen Zechuan looked back and said with a smile, “... then do you think you can rest easy?”

“I heard that there is a kind of mad dog ruthless enough to bite one of its own.” Xue Xiuzhuo dried his palms in the air and looked at Shen Zechuan. “Being on the same boat with someone who uses others as stepping stones this unreservedly will, instead, strike fear in one’s heart.”

“How can you say that?” Shen Zechuan said, “The ones who gain the upper hand tonight are all my brothers. Am I not the scapegoat before Xiao’Er who takes the fall for everyone? I’ll be a thorn in Xiao’Er’s flesh in the future. He ought to hate me to death right now.”

“The friendship between His Majesty and Xiao’Er runs deep. His act of saving His Majesty’s life at the Nanlin Hunting Grounds is the hardest to forget. Even if you stand out this time, you might not necessarily be able to top and replace Xiao’Er.”

“The first step is always the hardest.” Shen Zechuan smiled. “If His Majesty truly is grateful to Xiao’Er for saving his life, then he wouldn’t continue to keep him trapped in Qudu. The so-called gratitude of man is only worth so much.”

Xue Xiuzhuo wiped his hands and laughed for a moment before he said, “Although there was a slight deviation in our plan tonight, it was, nevertheless, still a success. Your Honor the Judge,<sup>7</sup> please be sure to look out for me in the future.”

The Judge of the Imperial Bodyguards was a fifth-grade<sup>8</sup> official post. By this, Xue Xiuzhuo was telling Shen Zechuan how much he could get during the conferment of reward in the days to come.

Shen Zechuan was not surprised. He said, “The people from the Imperial Food Service are going to stand trial. The Minister of Justice, Kong Qiu, is an impartial and incorruptible official. All of you better not buckle under his interrogations.”

“Since we dared to do it, then we aren’t afraid of them investigating.” Xue Xiuzhuo tidied up his sleeves and said courteously, “I hope we can continue to work together in the new year. May we soon get what our hearts desire.”

“I’m indebted to Your Excellency the Assistant Minister for looking after me.” Shen Zechuan stared at him and said genially, “No doubt I will fulfill this long-cherished wish.”



#### Footnotes

1. 元春 Yuanchun, also known as 元旦 Yuandan, i.e., the lunar new year’s day.
2. 军户 One of the three households sorted according to their occupation: civilian (民户), military (军户), and craftsman.
3. This is the name of an era during which a specific Emperor (Emperor Xiande, in this case) reigned.
4. 都事 The sources legit said “office manager” lmfao
5. 户籍 Household registers. In the Ming Dynasty, the central register was also known as the Yellow Register, where households were classified according to their occupation to provide basic taxation and recruitment data. It was mainly divided into three categories: civilian (民户), military (军户), and craftsman.



- 6.
7. 泾渭分明 as different as the waters of the Jing River (clear) and the Wei River (muddy), i.e., poles apart from one another
8. 镇抚 Judge of the Imperial Prison, which specialized in using torture to suppress corrupt officials. During the Ming Dynasty, there was a Southern and Northern Prison (镇抚司) subordinated to the Imperial Bodyguards. The Southern Prison was in charge of interpreting military laws and managing military craftsmen while the Northern Prison was responsible for cases entrusted by the Emperor.

9. 品 Officials were classified in nine hierarchic grades, with grade one being the highest rank. Their salaries ranged according to their rank.

# QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 48 : BEATING THEM AT THEIR OWN GAME

Translated with: [Eggy](#) & [Yunyun](#)<3

Li Jianheng had a nightmare.

He dreamed of that rainy night at the Nanlin Hunting Grounds, where the branches slapped at his face harshly as he covered his head and dodged frantically.

The horse he rode galloped wildly onward. Li Jianheng wanted to clutch the reins in fear, but Xiao Chiye suddenly turned around and grabbed him by the collar to toss him off the horse.

“Ce’an, save me!” Li Jianheng pleaded on his knees after falling to the ground. “Ce’an, Ce’an! We are brothers! Don’t leave me here!”

Xiao Chiye’s expression was grave amidst the flashes of lightning and claps of thunder. He faced him and said callously, “Knock him out and hoist him away!”

Li Jianheng watched with his snot and tears flowing as Chen Yang approached him. He could not help but feel so frightened that he moved backward and brandished his arms as he bellowed, “I ... I’m the Emperor! How can you treat me this way?”

Li Jianheng’s back bumped into someone. He turned his head and looked back to see Emperor Xiande stooping over to grab hold of his wrist. He immediately called out, “Imperial Brother, Imperial Brother, save me!”

Emperor Xiande tightened his grip, his fingers digging into Li Jianheng’s flesh. He coughed blood and said in a frosty voice, “He who saves you today can kill you tomorrow! Do you understand?”

Li Jianheng struggled painfully, but he could not free his arm no matter what he did. The rain from the above suddenly turned into drops of something sticky. Li Jianheng touched it. His palm came away full of blood. He looked up, and a head tumbled down from the darkness with a “thud”.

With an inscrutable burst of strength, Li Jianheng pushed and kicked himself free from Emperor Xiande’s hand. Gasping, he crawled up from the mud and trembled as he kicked the human head aside before crying and

shouting at the black shadows around him, "I'm the Emperor. I—I'm the Son of Heaven! Who wants to kill me? Who?!"

"Your Majesty." Someone called him softly. "Your Majesty."

Li Jianheng abruptly opened his eyes. He stared at the golden roof absent-mindedly and murmured, "Who wants to kill me... Who wants to kill me..."

The Empress Dowager wiped away the sweat for Li Jianheng with a handkerchief and bent over to say, "Jianheng, Imperial Mother is here!"

Jianheng!

Sorrow overcame Li Jianheng. His mother had died early, and Emperor Guangcheng had never once looked at him in the eyes. In all the years he had indulged in carnal pleasures, no one had ever called him Jianheng.

"Imperial Mother..." Li Jianheng choked with sobs and cried out, "Mother!"

The Empress Dowager turned her head slightly, as though she was wiping away her tears, and said, "You've been out for the entire night. I was truly afraid. If you're still in pain somewhere, you must tell me."

Li Jianheng looked at the Empress Dowager and noticed that she was still wearing the ceremonial robe from last night. She must have been here watching over him the entire night. Li Jianheng immediately propped himself up and saw the gray hair on the Empress Dowager's temples. Both her eyes were slightly red, and she looked so much more haggard.

Li Jianheng felt warm inside. He wiped his eyes, held the Empress Dowager's arms, and said, "I'm sorry to have worried Mother. I'm fine."

Hai Liangyi was kneeling outside, where he had also been keeping watch for the entire night. He knew that Li Jianheng had already woken up when he heard sounds of speaking inside and could not help but feel relieved.

A moment later, the palace maids entered with light movements to wait on Li Jianheng and help him wash up. The Empress Dowager personally held the medicine bowl and tasted it herself before feeding it to Li Jianheng.

Li Jianheng finished up the medicine. He still did not look too good, but his complexion was much better than last night. He put on his boots and walked out, where he saw a still kneeling Hai Liangyi. Greatly touched, he stepped forward to help Hai Liangyi up and said, "Secretariat Elder, I'm fine!"

Hai Liangyi almost could not stand up. Li Jianheng did not want him to continue keeping watch and consequently dismissed him along with all the major officials kneeling outside, leaving only Kong Qiu, Cen Yu, and Fu Linye, who had been investigating all night.

“What have you found out?” Li Jianheng asked impatiently, “Minister Kong, tell me quickly.”

Kong Qiu kowtowed and said, “The Ministry of Justice has been investigating through the night. Our investigations show that the eunuch assassin was named Guisheng. He was assigned by Fuling, a female official of the Imperial Food Service, to assume the duty of tasting the dishes at the Feast of A Hundred Officials.”

“Female official?” Li Jianheng wondered in astonishment. “Why is this female official trying to harm me?”

Kong Qiu replied, “The reason is unknown.”

Li Jianheng said anxiously, “You didn’t find out after investigating for the whole night?”

Kong Qiu exchanged glances with the other two men. After a moment of silence, he said, “Your Majesty is unaware, but Fuling, knowing that she can’t escape the long arm of the law, has already consumed poison to mute herself. She’s now awaiting her punishment.”

Understanding suddenly dawned on Li Jianheng. He said, “She’s a female official in the palace. Why would she do such a thing? She must be afraid of letting something slip under heavy torture, so she consumed poison first to make herself a mute! There must be an instigator behind this!”

Kong Qiu said again, “Your Majesty is wise. My two colleagues from the Chief Surveillance Bureau and I think so too. Hence, we dug deep into this woman and discovered that she still has an aged mother who resides in a remote corner alley on Donglong Street. Although her dwelling is small, it’s not something a mere female official of the Imperial Palace can afford. This humble subject continued investigating and discovered that she was indeed not the one who bought the house herself. Instead, it was a human broker of Donglong Street who let her stay there on credit.”

Li Jianheng was intimately acquainted with Donglong Street, and Kong Qiu’s words immediately roused his doubts. He said, “Since it’s only her and her widowed mother in the family, then, in all likelihood, there’ll be nothing of value she can put up as collateral for a house.”



Kong Qiu said, “Exactly. I find there to be many questionable doubts in this case, so I summoned the human broker over to question him and learned that it was on account of the Imperial Army that the human broker let her have the house on credit.”

Li Jianheng’s heart skipped a beat. He was on tenterhooks as he paused for a moment before asking, “What does this have to do with the Imperial Army?”

Kong Qiu said, “This was what Yuan Liu, a sixth-grade Judge<sup>1</sup> of the Imperial Army’s Judicial Office, specifically told the human broker. Although Yuan Liu and Fuling aren’t betrothed, there’re long-standing rumors of an illicit affair between them.”

Li Jianheng suddenly rose and asked, “Does Viceroy Xiao know?”

Kong Qiu knew that he was on good terms with Xiao Chiye. For a moment, he could not tell if he intended to protect Xiao Chiye or was planning something else, so he could only answer truthfully, “The Viceroy pleaded to be unaware of this matter.”

Li Jianheng remained rooted in place. His expression underwent a few changes before he eventually said, “... There are many people in the Imperial Army. It stands to reason that he’s not in the know about this. Don’t disclose or make this matter known first. You may withdraw for now. Summon Han Cheng and Shen Zechuan in. I want to reward them!”



Standing on the hardened snow, Xiao Chiye kicked the door to the torture prison open. The prison guard within had already gotten news of his arrival, so he hurriedly led Xiao Chiye inside.

Fuling, only twenty-three years of age, was locked up within. Because of the torture she received, she was now sitting motionlessly on the hay with her bun all disheveled.

Xiao Chiye stepped through the cell door. Chen Yang took off his cloak for him. He was so tall and imposing that the sight of him caused Fuling to tremble out of fear the moment he strode through the door.

Xiao Chiye was actually very dashing. He gave off a complicated vibe that was a blend of frivolousness and ferocity. As a result, he could be either a frivolous young master or a glacial lord of the Asura.<sup>2</sup> He changed his mask freely, and once swapped, even his bearing would change to befit the occasion.

Right now, he was a noble young master who was just passing by this place.

Xiao Chiye first sized up the cell. He bent over slightly to look through that narrow window and saw that it was still the prison's high walls outside. He could not help but lose interest. Retracting his gaze, he straightened up again, then turned his head and lowered his eyes to look at Fuling, who was on the ground.

Fuling clung to the wall, feeling as if those eyes were filled with innate contempt.

"Female official of the Imperial Food Service." Xiao Chiye said.

Fuling did not raise her head and merely stared at his boots.

Chen Yang carried over a chair for Xiao Chiye to sit. He propped a knee and looked at the top of Fuling's head. "Yuan Liu has a wife and concubines, yet he still risked the suspension of his authority token to arrange a residence for you. How gorgeous are you that he could even be coaxed into abandoning his own life? Raise your head. Let me see."

Fuling shrank into herself and did not respond.

Xiao Chiye leaned back and said, "He's old enough to be your father, and you're still willing? Becoming a female official is different from becoming a palace maid. When you are released, you could at least be married to a descendant from a proper background. Yuan Liu is a sixth-grade official of insignificance, and a military ruffian to boot. He has neither affluence nor influence. Are you too blind or too infatuated to be choosing him?"

The prison cell was quiet.

"Let's not talk about Yuan Liu for now. What could you possibly have used to coerce Guisheng into assassination? You don't have money either, so the instigator must have been someone else. You're now a mute, a scapegoat whose fate has been decided early on. Your master is a brilliant manipulator to use the likes of you all he can and kick you aside after. Whether you live or die has nothing to do with me. But since you implicated me, Xiao Ce'an, in this mess, then do you think you can just die easily like this?" Xiao Chiye chuckled. "I don't think so, lady."

Chen Yang turned around and nodded to the prison guard behind him. The clanking sounds of chains and shackles rang out as Yuan Liu, who was filthy all over, was dragged out.

Yuan Liu stumbled towards Fuling and snapped, “You bitch! To think you’d bring me down this way!”

Fuling trembled and crawled along the wall towards the other side. Yuan Liu grabbed hold of her ankle and said dismally, “What am I to you? I treated you so well, and this is how you repay me!”

Fuling’s tears would not stop as she was pulled back. She kicked Yuan Liu and let out a raspy, glottal scream.

Yuan Liu tugged at her and said, “When your elderly mother was critically sick, I carried her on my back to see the physician! I gave you whatever you wanted. You not only deceived me; you even want to drag my whole family to die with you! You despicable woman!”

The shackles made a sound as Yuan Liu, who had lost control of himself, was pulled back by Chen Yang. His arms were still outstretched as he said with a ferocious expression, “I will not let you off! I will never let you off, even when I become a ghost!”

Xiao Chiye looked again through the small window where he sat and saw a piece of the sky the size of a *square cun*<sup>3</sup> outside. There was no snow today, only pale clouds piling up in the sky. He was indifferent to the drama of grudges being played out before him.

Yuan Liu sat on his heels on the ground as he bawled inconsolably. He then crawled towards Xiao Chiye and kowtowed to him while begging, “Viceroy, Viceroy! Forgive me this once! I’m begging you. I was bewitched and blinded by lust! I’m willing to slave it out for you like an ox or a horse as repayment for this favor!”

Xiao Chiye looked at him, “I’m not the one who holds your life in my hands. Spare me your begging and go beg her instead. Kowtow to her for the sake of all the young and old in your family. Consider it a repayment of the debt you owe your wives and sons for seeking the momentary pleasure of an affair behind their backs.”

Yuan Liu then turned to Fuling, begging and kowtowing, “Let me off! Can’t you just let me off? I have nothing to do with this matter! I’m begging you! I’m begging you! My whole family of eight—I don’t want them all to die here!”

Fuling shed tears but did not look at him.

Yuan Liu’s tears poured in torrents. Genuinely afraid now, he kowtowed until his forehead bled. He said, “Fuling... One night of husband and wife is worth a hundred days of gratitude... Even though we have yet to

be married, the sentiments of these past years are still here! I'm begging you, please don't pin this on me! I'll be your son, your grandson in my next life! Please let me off! I wanted to give that residence to your elderly mother as a show of filial respect. How could you..." He was sobbing so hard that he almost choked as he struggled to continue, "How could you take it and... threaten my entire family's lives with it? Do you not have a heart?"

Fuling hoarsely uttered something with a pained expression as she kowtowed to Yuan Liu too. Her mouth opened and shut as she mouthed words that were clearly "sorry".

Yuan Liu moved forward on his knees and held Fuling by the arms. The blood streamed down his forehead as he cried sorrowfully, "I don't want your kowtows! I want you to explain this clearly! I don't want to die... Fuling! Don't ruin me..."

On seeing this, Xiao Chiye commented, "Plotting an assassination will not land you a sentence of execution by decapitation. It's fine if you want to die. But it's such a pity for your mother to be this old and still have to endure the tortures. Do you not know the kind of place the Imperial Prison is? Being skinned and flayed are all possible outcomes if she were to fall into the Imperial Bodyguards' hands."

Fuling looked up and wept.

Xiao Chiye said, "Did your master not communicate this to you? I'll make sure this case doesn't end quickly. Another day of delay is another day of punishment, for you, for him, and for your mother. You can keep taking the tortures until I'm satisfied, then we can say our goodbyes."

Fuling sobbed hatefully at him.

Xiao Chiye remained still and merely looked at her as he said, "Isn't it said that you should look who the owner is before you beat up a dog? Now that you've bitten me, Xiao Ce' an, then we shall all suffer together. I'll whip you until your skin flays and your flesh is torn, until you'd rather die than live. Let's see who will succumb first. Chen Yang, drag her elderly mother over."

Chen Yang answered and exited the prison door.

Fuling suddenly screamed, but her throat was already damaged, and the scream sounded like the cry of a beast at the brink of desperation. She charged towards Xiao Chiye and pounced onto the ground, using her fingers to scrawl out characters.

Xiao Chiye leaned over and watched for a while before saying, "Give her paper and a brush. I want this to be written down in black and white."



Fuling was taken away by Chen Yang to sign her confession, leaving only Xiao Chiye and Yuan Liu in the prison cell. Seeing that Xiao Chiye was about to leave, Yuan Liu immediately grabbed hold of the corner of Xiao Chiye's robe.

"V-Viceroy!" said Yuan Liu, "It's all good now... Does that mean I can..."

Putting on his cloak, Xiao Chiye turned his head back and said, "When did you take up the post as a Judge at the Judicial Office?"

Yuan Liu hurriedly gestured with his fingers and answered, "The third year after the Viceroy was appointed."

Xiao Chiye said, "If so, then you're with me."

Yuan Liu nodded his head in a panic and said, "I'm Viceroy's man!"

Xiao Chiye was now feeling somewhat vexed after having stayed up all night. He held onto his blade and used the sheath to push away Yuan Liu's hand. He said, "My men don't have this much clout to get Donglong Street's human brokers to sell to them on credit. All the newly bought estates by the Imperial Army need to be reported, but you didn't. Apart from this residence, you also have farmlands outside the city. You're faring pretty well for a sixth-grade Judge. Do you really not know who's feeding you?"

Tears and snot flowed as Yuan Liu burst into tears. "I've been deceived. I shouldn't have coveted those bits of things! Viceroy, Viceroy! But I didn't betray the Imperial Army...."

Xiao Chiye slightly stretched his neck that was becoming sore. Without sparing him another look, he said, "How old is your son?"

"Four... four years old."

"I'll take care of him for you." Xiao Chiye said expressionlessly, "End yourself after this case concludes."

The moment the prison cell door slammed shut, Yuan Liu collapsed limply to the ground.

Xiao Chiye stepped into the dark and damp prison hallway. As he listened to the wails behind him, he received the confession statement from Chen Yang. He had only just strode out of the prison's main gate when he saw Gu Jin rushing over.

“Young Master.” Gu Jin said, “Fuling’s mother is dead.”

Chen Yang furrowed his brows. “Fortunately, Master didn’t enter the palace this morning. Otherwise, Fuling would be left without misgivings, and we wouldn’t have gotten our hands on this confession.”

“A stack of papers.” Xiao Chiye flipped through the confession statement under the light. “Fuling didn’t even see the other person’s face. We can’t snare anyone with this alone.”

Chen Yang said, “At least the Imperial Army is in the clear. Master, will you go into the palace and present this to his Majesty?”

Xiao Chiye looked at him and asked, “Why must the Imperial Army be in the clear?”

Chen Yang and Gu Jin were both dumbfounded.

Xiao Chiye sneered, “If I’m to be the caged beast, I should act the part of being besieged by others. They’re in such a hurry to splash dirty water<sup>4</sup> on me. It’s not enough. I’ll not only take this dirty water right to the face, I’ll even roll in the mud. The filthier, the better. Let them vilify me so that they can pull off their unified front and be the accomplished ones pulling the wool over the public. If they can even trample upon the Imperial Army Viceroy this easily, then His Majesty ought to be suspicious and afraid once he returns to his senses. It’s only recently that the Hua Clan is done for. Whoever wants to be the new faction will be just asking for death.”



### **Author’s Words:**

I always thought that Lanzhou’s goal was very clear orz.

It’s in the dialogue. Maybe it’ll be clearer once more chapters are released.

This novel will be divided into two books. It should be about the same length as Nan Chan, or maybe a little longer.

Muacks, thank you for reading!

### **Footnotes**

1. This is a different Judge (断事) from the Imperial Bodyguards’ Judge (镇抚). i.e., Judge of the Imperial Army’s Judicial Office vs. Judge of the Imperial Bodyguards’ (Military) Prison.

2. 修罗 Asura are powerful but often amoral beings (or demigods) in Buddhism, since they are primarily driven by envy and greed for power.
3. 方寸 square cun (Chinese unit of area: 1cun  $\times$  1cun, or  $3\frac{1}{3}$ cm  $\times$   $3\frac{1}{3}$ cm)
4. 泼脏水 literally splash dirty water; to sling mud or defame and slander someone.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 49 : COLD GLINT



Translated with: [Eggy](#) & [Yunyun](#)<3



Before Xiao Chiye entered the palace, Shen Zechuan already had an audience with Li Jianheng at Mingli Hall and was conferred the title of a fifth-grade<sup>1</sup> Judge<sup>2</sup> of the Imperial Bodyguards. As such, his authority token was replaced to a gold-plated bronze token embossed with a *Xiezhi*<sup>3</sup> amidst patterns of clouds, and with the words “Guard” on one side and “Emperor’s Entourage” on the other.

Having only received some rewards this time, Han Cheng was inwardly unhappy. He knew that he had been used by Shen Zechuan as a stepping stone. But he also knew that Shen Zechuan was now in the Emperor’s good graces, so he must not let ill will form between them.

Back at the office hall, Shen Zechuan’s comrades all came forth to congratulate him. Shen Zechuan responded to them one by one. When Han Cheng saw that the men had more or less dispersed, he said, “This is the first time you’re wearing a gold token. There are matters that you’re still unsure of, right?”

Shen Zechuan humbled himself and said, “I’ll still need Your Excellency the Commander-in-chief to guide me.”

Feeling flattered, Han Cheng said, “This gold token for guards must be worn at the waist when you are on duty, and should not be shown externally when you are on break. Those who are part of the Emperor’s entourage usually still hold a post in the Twelve Offices. You can’t behave like you used to; you have to be more prudent with your words. Although you have carried out missions in the past, it’s different now. For future missions, if it’s an ‘arrest warrant’, don’t be in such a hurry to initiate the arrest. You have to head to the Office of Scrutiny for Justice and let the Supervising Secretary there affix his signature. If it is a ‘local order’, then you will have to leave Qudu for said place to investigate the case. Before you leave, you have to make a trip to the Ministry of Justice and Chief Surveillance Bureau to sign off on it.”



With modesty, Shen Zechuan listened to his teachings.

When Han Cheng saw that his attitude was respectful and was no different from how he was before his promotion, he could not help but to feel an urge to foster this talent. He continued, “In the past, the Eastern Depot lorded it over us. Each time we see the Eastern Depot eunuchs when we head out, we have to bow down to them and fawn on them. But now the Twenty-four Yamen is vacant and unattended, and the Eastern Depot is all but dismissed from office. They are the ones who should bow on seeing us now. There’s no need to play nice to the eunuchs. However, there is one thing you must remember—that is, although the Imperial Bodyguards take orders from the Emperor, we still need to have dealings with the Three Judicial Offices. Most of the time, when we go elsewhere for fieldwork, it’s with the Censor from the Chief Surveillance Bureau. Everyone’s functions and authority seem detached from one another, but in fact, they still need each other. So when you are out on missions, you must maintain a good relationship with the officials from the Three Judicial Offices. Never lose your temper at them. If you unwittingly leave behind pent-up animosity, you will have a hard time with your future assignments.”

Shen Zechuan already knew these matters by heart, but he listened intently as if this were his first time hearing of them.

Lastly, Han Cheng gave him a favor and told him, “If you need a new batch of manpower, go to the Duty Records Room and choose from the book register.”

After thanking him, Shen Zechuan stepped out of the door and walked along the corridor to make his way outside. He was not in a rush to head to the Duty Records Room to choose his men. When he walked out of the palace gates, Xiao Chiye was sitting in the horse carriage waiting for him.

Shen Zechuan paused in his tracks and was about to turn around.

Xiao Chiye partially lifted the curtain and said unhurriedly, “Now that you’ve gotten a promotion and a raise, you wouldn’t be too stingy to treat me to a drink, would you?”

Shen Zechuan saw Ding Tao and Gu Jin standing on either side of Xiao Chiye, glaring at him like tigers watching their prey. So he scoffed a breath of cold air and answered calmly, “I wouldn’t. I was just looking for you.”

Both men went to the courtyard that Xiao Chiye had used to invite both of their shifu for a meal. The inside of the house had been cleared of tables and chairs. Small screens<sup>4</sup> were used to partition out seats on all four sides,

and there was a simple but exquisite table with curved ends<sup>5</sup> in the middle. It was a very suitable place to have a drink and a chat.

It was hot in the room. Both men both took off their coats.

Xiao Chiye sat cross-legged in a casual pose, whereas Shen Zechuan sat on his heels in a dignified fashion. Xiao Chiye laughed and said, "When it comes to our bearings, you look more like the gentleman of noble birth. Did Ji Gang-shifu also teach you all these?"

This had all been beaten into him by Grand Mentor Qi's ruler.<sup>6</sup> Instead of answering, Shen Zechuan asked, "So why were you waiting for me by the palace gates today?"

Xiao Chiye looked on as the maidservant served the wine dishes and waited until she closed the door before saying, "Weren't you looking for me? You first."

"I noticed that you didn't enter the palace to seek an audience with the Emperor. You were busy working the entire night last night. I presumed you were at the torture prison." Shen Zechuan took a few sips of tea first to warm his body, then continued, "Fuling was an easy one to investigate, wasn't she?"

"Indeed." Xiao Chiye poured wine for himself. "She was such a breeze to investigate that she doesn't seem like the kind of person you should use."

"Not only does she have an elderly mother, but she is also soft-hearted. Someone like her with so many weaknesses to exploit is the easiest to manipulate, but also the most likely to change her tune." Shen Zechuan smiled and said, "You're right. If it were me, I'd surely not use someone like her."

"But Shen Lanzhou." Xiao Chiye stared at him as he drank, taking a moment to moisten his throat before saying, "Even if you did use this kind of person, I wouldn't be surprised."

"I'm human too." Shen Zechuan took the wine jar from Xiao Chiye's side. "I still have some feelings."

"But you've reserved none of those feelings for me," Xiao Chiye lamented.

Shen Zechuan poured wine slowly and said, "Same goes for you."

"I reached out to you repeatedly." Xiao Chiye said with a genial expression. "But you turned a blind eye to my efforts, and even hardened your heart to fight it out with me, no?"

“Even if you reach out, but only give me useless information,” Shen Zechuan set down the wine jar before looking at him and continuing, “then wouldn’t this alliance be too cheap of a deal?”

“So you turned around and allied with Xi Hongxuan.” Xiao Chiye scoffed, “What is he that he’s even better than your Second Young Master?”

“Second Young Master was more impressive when he beat me down.” Shen Zechuan said, “You can’t blame a capable man for taking up the top position.”

“How could I bear to blame you?” Xiao Chiye asked through the steam from the pot, “Are you annoyed that you couldn’t trample over me last night?”

“No.” Shen Zechuan answered with a smile.

“Sometimes your gaze is truly very ruthless.” Before Shen Zechuan could reply, Xiao Chiye continued, “But of course, a little ruthlessness gives you flavor.”

Shen Zechuan restrained himself for a moment before retorting, “Then you have very special tastes.”

“You’re not lacking either.” Xiao Chiye made a double entendre. “This is the first time I’ve met someone who likes getting bitten.”

“Back to the topic.” Shen Zechuan diverted the course of conversation. “Why were you looking for me?”

“To have a drink.” Xiao Chiye downed the wine in his cup. “And to have a little chat while we’re at it. The human broker on Donglong Street has a backer. However, we each minded our own business, so everyone has lived in harmony in the past. But now that they are framing this on me, I’d naturally have to investigate the one backing them.”

Shen Zechuan scooped a portion of the dish from the pot.

Xiao Chiye said, “How strange that my investigation only led me to Xi Hongxuan. When we were here the last time, you even went out of your way to tell me that the Eight Great Clans would ally together to deal with me. But then you turned around and trampled on me together with the Eight Great Clans. After thinking it over for a long time, I still couldn’t figure out what your motives were. But as soon as I reversed the course of events, I understood.”

Shen Zechuan ate the fish like a cat did—neatly and beautifully. Without raising his head, he merely mumbled an “uh-huh” to indicate that he was listening.

Xiao Chiye twirled the wine cup on the table and continued, "I should have rearranged and put your scheme to 'trample me' before 'alliance with the Eight Great Clans'. That way, everything would make sense. Your aim was not to bring me down at all. You incited Xi Hongxuan and urged him to ally with the other clans, but you also leaked news of it to me. You wanted me to react and use my authority of office over the Eight Great Training Divisions to convince the other clans not to ally with Xi Hongxuan. What do they call it? The art of political maneuvering?<sup>7</sup> Using words alone to sow discord within and to sabotage the potential alliance of the Eight Great Clans is but a trivial issue. Leaving bad blood between them from the subsequent fallout is the real prelude to the great task that you truly intend to undertake."

Shen Zechuan glanced at him and asked, "Did you come up with this just from finding out that Xi Hongxuan was one of the backers of the human broker on Donglong Street?"

"Some clues are like spider webs and horse tracks." Xiao Chiye said. "You can't wipe them clean. When Xi Gu'an was held in the Imperial Prison, Xi Hongxuan sold out the former's life in exchange for an official position. Now that I think of it, that should have been your suggestion too. Otherwise, Xi Hongxuan wouldn't heed your advice so readily."

Shen Zechuan wiped his fingers with a handkerchief and thought for a moment before saying, "The one who can make him listen to advice readily isn't me."

"I initially thought that you were in a hurry to be promoted so that it'd be easier for you to investigate the case of Zhongbo troops' defeat." Xiao Chiye poured wine once more and continued, "Who knew your appetite would be so great? What good would it do you to divide the Eight Great Clans? You are well aware that Qudu is surrounded by the Eight Great Cities and that they have far outlasted the Li Clan. You've seen Hua Siqian's rebellion at the hunting grounds and how big of a case it was, yet the Emperor Dowager has still emerged unscathed. How can you harbor the delusion of using the power of one man to break them up and oust them from power? Pry apart this mist of Qudu and take a good look underneath. You will see that they have already been standing tall for several hundred years with their roots deeply entrenched underground."

Shen Zechuan's chopsticks came to a complete stop. When he sat upright, it felt as though he was about to launch into light intellectual

conversations. He was not angry. In fact, he was very composed as he said, "I'll only ask you one question."

Xiao Chiye paused for a moment before saying, "Go ahead."

Shen Zechuan spoke, "All along, the Xiao Clan and Hua Clan have been holding each other back. Owing to the Nanlin Hunting grounds incident, the Hua Clan started to show signs of decline, while the Xiao Clan got the upper hand. But, did you win?"

Xiao Chiye gripped his wine cup tightly.

It was already dusk outside, but the lamps in the room were still not lit. Shen Zechuan's seated shadow before the window appeared frail. He said, "You've quickly come to the realization that it's not just the Hua Clan you are facing. Perhaps in the beginning, you could still console yourself that they only want the Eight Great Training Divisions. But you only have to think of the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo to understand that what they want is far more than this."

"There isn't a decisive ruling on the defeat of Zhongbo yet." Concealed in the dark, Xiao Chiye stayed silent for a brief while. "And yet you're so sure that they are the ones who did it?"

"This is a bad debt." Shen Zechuan said, "We've gone through the case regarding the defeat of Zhongbo again and again with the intent to ascertain whose fault it was. But in fact, this was never a matter that a single person could control. Furthermore, there was one thing in the defeat that no one could quite figure out even to this date."

Xiao Chiye stated, "Why?"

"That's right. Why?" Shen Zechuan affirmed his words. "Biansha defeated the frontier and entered our territory, and everyone's morale and spirit took a beating. The tens of thousands of lives lost in Zhongbo was only a temporary issue. The dilemmas that followed also include the loss of years of taxes from the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo, the resettlement of the population, the redistribution of the farmlands, and the rebuilding of the massacred cities and towns. The State Treasury could not bear this burden, and so Zhongbo became the national debt. The most difficult part was the restructuring of the Garrison Troops. Without sufficient manpower, Zhongbo will be defeated once more. How much longer can the reinforcements from Libei and Qidong last? This directly concerns the safety of Qudu. Did all these questions not pass through anyone's minds before the Zhongbo's troops defeat, or was it done precisely because these

were expected? Perhaps the Eight Great Clans were not the main instigators, but without their power and influence, this sort of thing could not have been done either.”

“They are always involved each time there’s political unrest in Dazhou. The turning point for Hua Clan’s rise to power began twenty-five years ago while Emperor Guangcheng was on the throne. To fortify her power, the Empress Dowager killed the Crown Prince, a virtuous talent who observed propriety. But eighty years ago, during Emperor Yong’an’s time, the clan who held sway over the Imperial Court was the Yao, a prestigious clan that produced three talents. Even the Grand Secretariat was known as the ‘Hall of Yao’. Then, there was the Xi Clan who became the key to Dazhou’s granaries when Juexi opened up Yongyi Harbor a hundred years ago. Making use of this opportunity to claim the gulf saltern of the Xu Sea to the west, they became the head of all the tycoons in the world. Even the Li Clan has to borrow money from them for the matrimony of their nobles. None of these happened because of personal scores. Rather, they were taking turns to be the leading powerhouse of the clans while Emperors came and went. Since the beginning, none of these clans have truly been on the decline.”

“Poor households do not produce noble sons. Very few of Dazhou’s significant officials who could influence the political situation of the imperial court were born from a poor family. How many years did it take for a Qi Huilian to surface? And how many years did it take for a Hai Liangyi to appear? They are just like a sloppy stroke of the brush that, despite having endured and making it this far, was also hastily brushed off as a mere mention in history.”

“If we must mention someone who is able to stand tall amidst the iron web of the Eight Great Clans, then this man is someone you are most familiar with.”

Shen Zechuan watched Xiao Chiye as he enunciated each word.

“The Prince of Libei had a humble beginning and was born at the foot of the Hongyan Mountains. At the age of fifteen, he was drafted into the army at the Luoxia Pass, where he was promoted to the Luoxia Pass Garrison by age twenty. The Garrison Troops was defeated at the foot of the Hongyan Mountains when he was twenty-three. He went on to build the horse range of Luoxia at twenty-six and established the cavalry of Luoxia at twenty-eight. When he was thirty, he battled against the Biansha Hanshe tribe once more. He crossed the Hongyan Mountains by thirty-two and set

foot all over the eastern Hongyan mountain range by thirty-five. From here onwards, the Luoxia Cavalry was disbanded and took on the name of Libei Armored Cavalry. No longer part of the Luoxia Pass Garrison, he was thrice bestowed and conferred the title of the different-surnamed Prince<sup>8</sup> of Libei in Dazhou. The scale of Libei's Great Commandery was then determined, and Dazhou thus occupied the entire range of the Hongyan Mountains."

"The war between the Xiao Clan and the Eight Great Clans is not only a power struggle, but also a battle between nobility and the common people. The man who had broken through the barrier to reach the peak was Xiao Fangxu. From a very long time ago, you and the Eight Great Clans were already at the stage of irreconcilable antagonism."

Shen Zechuan lowered his gaze slightly and arranged the bowl and chopsticks in front of him neatly. He said, "To ally with me, you have to bring forth a sincerity like mine at the very least, and not just a word or two about the Imperial Army's accounts. Those are worthless to me."

The small screens isolated the sound of wind from them as both men sat each in their own posture opposite one another. The window lit up slightly, and the indistinct glow of snow gleamed upon both men's side profiles, reflecting the chills of the pitch-black night. Placed in opposition with one another, Langli Blade and Yang Shan Xue were sheathed; yet the room still flashed with cold glints from the cutting edges of both blades.



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#### Footnotes

1. 品 Officials were classified in nine hierarchic grades, with grade one being the highest rank. Their salaries ranged according to their rank.
2. 镇抚 Judge of the Imperial Prison, which specialized in using torture to suppress corrupt officials. During the Ming Dynasty, there was a Southern and Northern Prison (镇抚司) subordinated to the Imperial Bodyguards. The Southern Prison was in charge of interpreting military laws and managing military craftsmen while the Northern Prison was responsible for cases entrusted by the Emperor.
3. 獬豸 Xiezhì, a lion-like mythological creature with a single horn and a spiky back, was a symbol of justice and law and the insignia of

the censors who sought out corruption and maintained discipline among other court officials.

4. 小插屏 something like



5.

6. Variations: images [one](#) | [two](#)

7. (龙牙)翘头案 something like



8.

9. 戒尺 a teacher's ruler in the old days for punishing errant pupils (typically by hitting them on the palms)

10. 纵横捭阖(之术) from Strategies/Intrigues of the Warring States (战国策); a maneuver among various political groupings, i.e., the use of political and diplomatic means either to unite the small states against a dominant, powerful state or to undermine the solidarity of the small, weak states and bring them under the rule of a strong one



11. 王 Princes, or lords, during the Ming dynasty were titled and salaried members of the imperial bureaucracy with nominal lordship over various fiefs throughout China. Conferred princes are those who were bestowed the title by the Emperor and typically had different surnames (i.e., not blood-related to the royal family). We have used a different naming system for both kinds of princes to make it easier to distinguish between real princes (Prince Chu) and conferred princes (Prince of Libei).

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 50 : IN THE SAME BOAT



Translated with: [Eggy](#), [Yunyun](#), [Lin](#) & [Rie](#)<3



“Sounding somebody out is merely to test the waters.” Xiao Chiye’s eyes were cold. “Honest sincerity is like the process of undressing. It’s only by proceeding in a proper sequence that we can come to have a heart-to-heart talk today. You are right. After the incident at the Nanlin Hunting Grounds, I thought that there would be changes to the Grand Secretariat led by Hai Liangyi. However, he still reused Xue Xiuzhuo of the Eight Great Clans, putting him in an important post. This shows that even when he reached the position where he could overhaul the system, he still had to bow to the noble clans’ power and influence. Under such circumstances, the Xiao Clan alone cannot do anything, much like one log alone cannot prop up an entire building.”

“Then how should one describe them?” Shen Zechuan pondered over it a little. “When there is no common enemy, they are their own enemies. Keeping the balance and not letting the bowl of water overturn due to inherent bias is far more difficult than dealing with someone else. Before the Xiao Clan’s appearance, the Eight Great Clans merely underwent internal change following the rise of one clan and the fall of another. But after the Xiao Clan surfaced, they began to separate the wheat from the chaff. The defeat of the Hua Clan is just temporary. The Imperial Court purged itself of the Hua Clan’s remnants, but no one, not even Hai Liangyi, proposed to hold the Empress Dowager accountable. The current marriage alliance between the Hua and Qi Clans is to preserve the Hua Clan’s usefulness and to whittle away external help that the Xiao Clan can seek. Some things, when seen on its own, might not necessarily tell you anything. It’s only when the dots are connected that they will give you the shivers.”

“Are you talking about the defeat of the Zhongbo troops and the Hua-Qi marriage alliance?” Xiao Chiye asked.

“The strategy of befriending a distant state while attacking one nearby.”<sup>1</sup> Shen Zechuan extended a finger and drew a circle on the table.

“After taking down the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo, a void will open up in Libei’s defense on the southwest side. Cizhou lies close to the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path, which is the lifeblood of Libei. With no one from Zhongbo to defend it now, it becomes the territory of the Eight Great Clans of Qudu. Bring the marriage alliance with the Qi Clan of Qidong into play, and you will be left high and dry with your back to Hongyan Mountains, the Biansha Tribes to the east, and double enemies to the south.”

“There’s a five-year gap between both events. Who could have guaranteed that Hua Siqian would definitely rebel? And who could have ensured that I’d surely come to the Emperor’s rescue?” Xiao Chiye slowly furrowed his eyebrows.

“There must be a purpose for the defeat of Zhongbo’s troops.” Shen Zechuan said after a moment of silence. “It’s not hard to control the situation. The difficulty lies in controlling the direction in which the situation progresses. If my guess is right, then there is someone hidden among the Eight Great Clans who can control the way the wind blows.”

“If there’s really such a person,” Xiao Chiye said, “then it means that everyone is on the chessboard, and every step is within his anticipation. He is no longer a genius, but a ‘God’ who has Dazhou in his control. How are you going to fight him? The strategy of driving a wedge between the Eight Great Clans can’t overcome the relationship forged through decades of marriage alliances between clans. They are inseparable in the face of public enemies.”

“The unpredictability of the turbulent tempest is better than the tranquility of the calm sea. It’s only when the water is muddied that they won’t be able to distinguish between friend or foe. In actuality, they are not invulnerable to attacks.” Shen Zechuan retracted his finger and continued, “How is it that Xiao Fangxu was able to break through the noble clans’ defenses? If this web is really tight enough, then how could significant ministers like Qi Huilian and Hai Liangyi rise in spite of their humble backgrounds? Your father was able to establish the Libei Armored Cavalry’s predecessor, Luoxia Cavalry, because the officials of the Eastern Palace headed by the Crown Prince implemented the Yellow Register system<sup>2</sup> to keep records of households. This enabled the frontiers to conscript soldiers for its troops. At the same time, it allowed the soldiers to have a hereditary household register<sup>3</sup> so that they could belong under the jurisdiction of the commandery city’s military. This separated it from the

command of the Qudu noble clans' younger generation who have been appointed a post outside the capital, thereby allowing the Prince of Libei to unify military power so that he would no longer be subjected to the control and surveillance of the local civil officials. Not only that, the current well-trained and powerful army of Libei also has Dazhou's implementation of the state farm system<sup>4</sup> to thank. You know better than I how important these military troops who carry out both garrison and farming duties<sup>5</sup> are."

Why was Lu Guangbai having a harder time than Xiao Jiming?

Because the Bianjun Commandery had no way of putting the policy of army farming into practice. The desert wastelands could not be cultivated to produce food, so Lu Guangbai could only rely on the subsidy of Qudu's military funds and provisions. Deploying "70% of the military troops for farming and 30% for military affairs and defense" might not allow the frontier troops to achieve full self-sufficiency. But it still greatly reduced the pressure for provisions on the frontier troops. And this was of vital importance to the frontier troops.

Grand Mentor Qi would rather pretend to be a lunatic if it allowed him to drag out an ignoble existence. Other than his unappeasable hatred, he was also loath to abandon the wounds that had been torn open. The Eastern Palace had dozens of subordinates, all of whom were officials from humble families the Crown Prince had personally hand-picked himself. To assist the Crown Prince, Qi Huilian forked out all that he had learned in his lifetime and invested it in him. Each word of "the die is cast" he shouted with his hands raised five years ago was tears of blood that represented his inability to simply resign himself to it.

"You encroach into my territory one step at a time, and indulge me again and again as I test your limit, all just for tonight—to get me into the same boat as you." Xiao Chiye leaned forward slowly, his eyes cold. "But if I had not followed the trail to Xi Hongxuan tonight or figured out your purpose, would you really trample down on me and use me as a stepping board?"

"You are a wolf with a keen sense of smell." Shen Zechuan said, "Why do you make yourself out to be so pitiful? If I weren't me, you wouldn't give me a chance to step in at all. We wouldn't even be having a conversation. You and I are such a breed of people. Instead of asking me, why don't you ask yourself first?"

Xiao Chiye said, "You are an asshole."

Shen Zechuan said, "It isn't easy to find like-minded assholes."

Xiao Chiye stopped contending with him and went straight to the point. He said, "You are now the one who wants to borrow and make use of my power. But one needs a little bargaining chip before a treaty of alliance can be established."

"We share weal and woe." Shen Zechuan said. "Your Yao Clan is about to be kicked out of the game soon. Doesn't that make you anxious, Second Young Master?"

"I can't use Yao Wenyu." Xiao Chiye said, "You don't understand. The reason why the Yao Clan is on friendly terms with me is really not to vie for power. It's purely because Yao Wenyu is... Well, if you get to meet him, you'll understand. The reason he didn't enter the ranks of officials is not because Hai Liangyi couldn't bear to let him, but because he himself was unwilling. The members of the Yao Clan all used to be some important ministers in the past. It was only until his father's time that they started to fall into decline. But the remaining prestige of his grandfather is still present. They are a major clan highly respected among the literati, and their reputation among the civil officials is by no means something people like Hua Siqian could ever compare to. It's not difficult if he wants to make a comeback, but he's willing to be free and unrestrained like a wild crane rising above the drifting clouds. If Xi Hongxuan can really kick the Yao Clan out, then he will be all the more carefree and unfettered by worldly concerns."

"Seeing as the Yao Clan is already linked to the Fei Clan through a marriage alliance, then he is Commandery Princess Zhaoyue's elder cousin brother?" Shen Zechuan asked suddenly.

"That's right," Xiao Chiye picked up his chopsticks and confirmed. "Zhaoyue most likely wants to marry him, but Marquis Helian is so cowardly that he dances to the Empress Dowager's tune."

"Then perhaps both of you can become relatives."

"The marriage fell through, didn't it?" Xiao Chiye said, "You sabotaged my marriage and cost me a beauty. Shouldn't you compensate me?"

Shen Zechuan raised his eyebrows slightly.

Xiao Chiye rinsed his chopsticks in the cold tea and lifted his eyes to look at him. He asked, "Do you know that there is only a two-word difference between 'sharing a boat on the same river' and 'sharing a pillow

on the same bed'? If you ask me, there's no harm in mixing up these sayings, or even these actions, in the future."

The heat in the room smothered Shen Zechuan and made him slightly dizzy. Without replying, he turned to open the window.

Xiao Chiye did not touch any of the dishes. Instead, he said, "I brought you here, let you eat my dishes, drink my wine, and you aren't even the least suspicious?"

Shen Zechuan looked at Xiao Chiye. The caress of the cool wind finally made him feel a little parched and hot. Thin sweat materialized. His fair neck lay within that tightly fastened collar of his, and the red plums leaning down from the window complimented his black hair, making him look all the more indescribably ravishing.

Salt-like snow drifted outside the window, and some fell along the window onto the back of Shen Zechuan's hand, where they quickly melted into a splotch of water. This bit of coolness made the heat in his body even more distinct. In his trance, Shen Zechuan really had some other thoughts—he wanted to undo his clasps.

"This clause is not part of the alliance treaty." Shen Zechuan said, "And I've no shortage of people to warm my bed of late."

Xiao Chiye put up his long legs and said, "Right now, you don't look like the kind of person who has no shortage of people to warm your bed. Work and personal affairs are separate matters. Now that we're done talking about work, we can slowly straighten out our personal affairs. Was the one from Ouhua Pavillion last time given to you by Xi Hongxuan? I heard he only likes ladies. Since when has he changed his taste too?"

"Homosexual relationships between men are no longer uncommon." Shen Zechuan replied, "I don't know if his taste has changed. Why? Has the Second Young Master's taste changed?"

"I don't have a fixed taste." Xiao Chiye picked up the hair hanging down before Shen Zechuan's knees. "It always depends on my mood."

Shen Zechuan lifted a finger to pull back his hair that was already matted with sweat. He said, "Some people make themselves out to be romantic and charming. They look like they can conduct themselves in an orderly manner when, in fact, they only know how to gorge themselves ravenously. They must have been out of practice."

Xiao Chiye pushed aside the small table and grasped the wrist Shen Zechuan was about to pull back. He said, "... And some people look so

pitiful when they are drenched in sweat.”

The heat in Shen Zechuan persisted, and the spot that Xiao Chiye was holding onto scalded him intensely. Propping himself up with an arm on his knee, Shen Zechuan demanded, “What drug did you add?”

“Make a guess.” Xiao Chiye tugged Shen Zechuan on the wrist. Changing the topic, he said, “Ji Gang isn’t up to teaching you such stuff, so who is your shifu... or should I say, teacher?”

The corners of Shen Zechuan’s eyes reddened as he replied softly, “I’m not telling you.”

Xiao Chiye took a light sniff from a short distance away and suddenly said, “You smell so good.”

Shen Zechuan’s breathing quickened as he countered, “Have you reached the stage where you’d use your beauty to ensnare a man?”<sup>6</sup>

“I’m far from being a ‘beauty’. Why? Just a little chat, and you’re getting impatient?”

Sweat soaked through Shen Zechuan’s inner garment. His heat, tempted by this ambiguous atmosphere that had taken shape for no rhyme or reason, turned even more sticky and damp. He wanted to wipe his sweat. Frowning, he asked, “What exactly did you add?”

Xiao Chiye laughed aloud and said flirtatiously, “Just fooling around with you. It’s just medicinal wine.”

Shen Zechuan found his gaze extremely dangerous. He could not help but close his eyes and force himself to stay calm. He said, “Xiao’Er—”

Xiao Chiye raised his cup and downed the cold wine. At Shen Zechuan’s words, he suddenly bent his head down and covered his lips. Shen Zechuan was pushed back towards the window, and the plum blossom branch shook on contact. He leaned back slightly, feeling like his waist was going to break under the tight hold. Some snow fell on Xiao Chiye’s nape, but he ignored it. Half of his body was almost pressing down on Shen Zechuan. His fingers pushed their way through the gaps between Shen Zechuan’s fingers, forcibly interlocking them together.

Ever since that glance at the Feast of A Hundred Officials, Xiao Chiye had already wanted to kiss him! He wanted to even more so during their night talk today; he had already been enduring and restraining himself for an entire night. Xiao Chiye saw how ruthless and merciless he was, and how he could retreat and advance as he pleased. He could not get a feel of

him among the myriad sensations, and so he only wanted to pin him down and kiss him until he was flushed all over with desire brimming in his eyes.

Shen Zechuan's chest heaved. The wind had blown through his entire body of sweat, chilling him so much that he shuddered. His teeth could not stop the wine that Xiao Chiye was feeding him. As it slid to his throat, he started to choke. But Xiao Chiye was biting the tip of his tongue, preventing him from coughing it out. So all he could do was to endure it until his eyes watered. Even if the sky were to fall right at this moment, Xiao Chiye would not release him.

A sudden "thud" rang out above, and someone tumbled down immediately after. Ding Tao plunged headlong into the pile of snow, then abruptly popped out his head. It was so freezing cold that he rubbed his arms hard. About to give someone a piece of his mind, he raised his head and came face-to-face with the window. He could not help but gape in shock, frightened out of his soul.

Shen Zechuan instantly kicked Xiao Chiye away and held on to the window, coughing. The back of his ears were all flushed, and his mouth was saturated with the fragrance of wine. Xiao Chiye's breathing was a little urgent as he looked darkly out of the window.

Ding Tao's teeth chattered as they fought against each other. Trembling, he stretched out his forefinger slowly to point up and whispered, "So-so-sorry, Young Master..."

Above them, Qiao Tianya and Gu Jin held their breaths and looked on with rapt attention as they wisely pretended not to be there. Without waiting for Xiao Chiye to say a word, Ding Tao sprang up and fled. He climbed the tree with swift movements, then made his way back to the roof with a "swoosh".



#### Author's Words:

For relevant information on the military troops with military and farming duties, refer to the "Treatises on military affairs in the History of the Ming dynasty".<sup>7</sup> The military troops for military and farming duties system should be interdependent with the military garrison system,<sup>8</sup> but many of the actual contents here have been simplified and are not rigorous enough. Just read it for fun, everyone.

Thank you for reading.



## Footnotes

1. 远交近攻 “Befriend a distant state; attack one nearby” from the Thirty-Six Stratagems (三十六计)
2. 黄册 *Huangce* or yellow registers/yellow book served during the Ming Dynasty to provide basic data for taxation and recruitment based on the household’s classification according to their occupation. It was mainly divided into three categories: civilian, military, and craftsman.
3. 户籍 Household registers. In the Ming Dynasty, the central register was also known as the Yellow Register.
4. 屯田制 state farm system, literally “scion fields”, were agro-colonies, mostly in border regions, that served to supply the inhabitants and military units with agricultural products.
5. 军屯 military troops (mostly in border regions) who carry out garrison duties as well as farm crops to supply the border garrisons with grains.
6. 美人计 honey traps
7. 明史·兵志 “Treatises on military affairs in the History of the Ming dynasty”, or *Mingshi Bingzhi*, is one of the important documents often consulted by people while studying the military system of the Ming Dynasty
8. 卫所制度, Weisuo, or the Military Garrison (Guards) System was a military establishment during the Ming Dynasty. It was a system where the troops of each garrison were fed by agro-colonies belonging to the garrison and worked by soldiers, while their salary came from the central government.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 51 : COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF

Translated with: Yunyun<3

In the darkness, Xiao Chiye used his thumb to wipe the corner of his mouth, where there was still residual wine. He said, “One kick for one kiss. Neither of us loses out.”

Shen Zechuan turned back to look at him.

Xiao Chiye smiled at him. “Each is a horse of a different color; let’s not confuse them. Aren’t you still going to trample on me in public in the future? Go ahead and step on me, Lanzhou. I’ll pay each debt back in full plus interest.”

Shen Zechuan used his tongue to wet the spot he had been bitten and told him, “You won’t have this kind of opportunity every single time.”

Xiao Chiye took a step closer, completely shrouding him under his own shadow. He replied, “And you won’t be able to run away every single time.”

Having said that, Xiao Chiye extended his hand to pluck the red plum beside Shen Zechuan. He rubbed the petals into mush and sent that redness into his mouth. Under his gaze, Shen Zechuan had the illusion that he himself was that red plum. In his evaluation of Xiao Chiye, he quietly added “having the determination to win” in addition to having a “keen sense of smell”.

Shen Zechuan once thought that desire would overcome Xiao Chiye and make him retreat from the setback. But Xiao Chiye’s behavior was beyond Shen Zechuan’s expectation. That arrogant character of his meant that he only knew how to march forward bravely. Any retreat or concession was only in preparation for the next time he made a better-planned attack.

He was an overwhelmingly dangerous threat.

“Light the lamps.” Xiao Chiye turned his head to shout out.

After a short moment, the maidservants pushed the door open and entered. They moved out a small screen, cleared away the leftovers, spread a mat over the rug, and swapped to a big, square tea table with girdled waist

and horse hooves' legs.<sup>1</sup> Chen Yang changed his shoes and entered. He placed the Imperial Army's military affairs and name register of personnel on the tea table, then took over the teapot from the maidservant's hands and kneeled at the side to steep tea for both men.

With someone else present, both men resumed the roles of upright gentlemen when they took their seats again.

Shen Zechuan had partially sobered up. Bathing in the wind had helped him break free of his earlier hot flushes and tipsiness. Only the scarlet on his face remained, further accentuated by the dim light of the lamp that enveloped him. Even Chen Yang did not dare to look straight up at him, for fear that his gaze would be an affront to both Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye, making them displeased.

Chen Yang brewed the tea and thought, no wonder Tantai Hu is worried. Shen Lanzhou is clearly born with the looks of one capable of bringing ruin to the nation and misfortune upon the commoners. What's more, he has such a temperament. Anyone who is on familiar terms with Master, even a little, should be afraid.

What was Xiao Chiye most fond of?

Taming horses and tormenting eagles!<sup>2</sup> During the tormenting process, Xiao Chiye would not sleep when the eagle wasn't sleeping. The harder it was to tame, the more attention he would pay it. The harder it was to domesticate, the more he would favor it. Back then, while they were fighting the Biansha Cavalry, Xiao Chiye could lay in wait for so long simply because he adored the process of domestication and torture. He inherited from Xiao Fangxu the desire to conquer and subjugate, far surpassing that of the common man. This was the most different trait between him and Xiao Jiming.

Chen Yang presented the tea to both of them, made a slight bow, and said, "If Master has any instructions, please call for me." Then he rose and retreated to change back into his boots and stand guard outside the door.

Gu Jin hung his head down from the rooftop, tossed a wine bag to Chen Yang, and cast him an inquiring gaze to ask about the inside situation.

Chen Yang slowly exhaled and said, "... It's all fine. Master has a measure of propriety."

Ding Tao was still hugging his head and murmuring, "Am I going to die, die, die..."

“Hard to say.” Qiao Tianya nudged against the snow to pull out his pipe and laughed out loud. “On this day next year, gege will remember to burn paper offerings for you.”

Ding Tao’s tears were about to fall. Grabbing his hair, he glared at them in anger and complained, “It’s all you two’s fault! If you didn’t fight, I wouldn’t have tried to break up the fight. If I didn’t intervene, then I wouldn’t have tumbled off. If I didn’t fall, then I wouldn’t die! I hate you both!”

Qiao Tianya concentrated wholeheartedly on starting a fire with the flint, while Gu Jin folded his arm and dozed off.

Ding Tao hated them so much that he fished out his book and jotted at high speed to vent all his fury within, cussing them both as the world’s greatest bastards. Once done, he wiped the tears at the corners of his eyes, then turned around to continue venting his thoughts as they gushed forth like spring water.

Having had a change of tea, the men in the room continued their discussion.

Xiao Chiye said, “Returning to the topic, you said that there is someone hiding in Qudu who is able to manipulate the Eight Great Clans. I thought about it and found it highly unlikely.”

That medicinal wine burned up Shen Zechuan’s throat so much that it was billowing smoke. He drank several cups of tea before saying, “You think it is not possible because it is too difficult to do such a thing effectively.”

Xiao Chiye said, “That’s right. Let’s leave the others aside for now. Even the Empress Dowager herself would not deign to listen to the directions of another.”

“What if she wasn’t aware of it herself?” Shen Zechuan asked, “Sometimes, you don’t need to command others in order to manipulate the situation. With just one finger, you can nudge the ‘powers’ into action and change a lot of things from there.”

“You have to prove the existence of this person first.” Xiao Chiye looked at him and said, “... You look like you’re feeling quite warm.”

Shen Zechuan lifted his fingers to undo his clasp. That clasp gently broke free of its fastener to gradually reveal his smooth neck between his fingers before coming to a stop at the top of his collarbone. Tiny beads of

sweats slid along the contour of his neck into that depression, wetting his fingertips.

“Although Xi Hongxuan is a chess piece in the open, he’s very important. Xi Hongxuan is needed to confirm whether this person exists or not, so you can’t take him off the game this time.” Shen Zechuan paused for a moment. “You can’t take him down, anyway. He never once showed himself during this assassination case. Fuling’s confession can only prove that she was coerced. And the most likely suspect is now you.”

“It was your idea to frame it on me.” Xiao Chiye looked at that disappearing bead of sweat.

“You are now an official in the Son of Heaven’s inner ministerial circle, one deeply favored by the Emperor. If this incident can remove you from position and put you off duty, Xi Hongxuan will not pass up the chance. He will definitely try to seize an opportunity to seek the Eight Great Training Divisions’ authority of office. It’s only by luring them out of their lairs that we can get a clearer look at whom to attack. Besides, His Majesty trusts you. Even if he demotes you, he will not immediately and easily put his trust in others. After a period of time, he will see the blazing rise of the Eight Great Clans’ power and arrogance, and he will realize that he had been played for a fool. He will instead harbor guilt towards the innocent ones who have been implicated, and then he will try ways to make it up to you.” Shen Zechuan’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he drank the tea. He said, “My guess is that you had already thought of a countermeasure before you came to me.”

“Sure, let’s play.” Xiao Chiye poured tea for him. “I’ll merely be beating you at your own game and letting you guys trample on me.”

“This is much wiser than fighting back at this point.” Shen Zechuan said. “The more anxious you are at this time to clear your name and involvement in this matter, the more suspicious His Majesty will be.”

“I know His Majesty.” Xiao Chiye said, “He is a credulous man and easily susceptible to persuasion. He cannot stand being instigated,<sup>3</sup> but he cannot stand being humiliated either. I’m his buddy, and the first person he promoted to his side after he ascended to the throne. I’m kind of a symbol for the way he faces his court officials. Trapped both on the inside and the outside, I’ve become livestock in his hands—one that he penned in and raised. To him, I’ve no one to rely on, and it’s only with his backing that I can secure this position of mine. If someone were to scheme against me,

thereby kicking me down, then he will definitely have the feeling of sharing the same fate, just like how teeth feel cold when the lips are gone.<sup>4</sup> The Hua Faction is his sore point and the source of his anxiety. The reason he feels reassured in getting Hai Liangyi to make decisions regarding government affairs is because he knows that Hai Liangyi will not form cliques or join political factions.”

“We mustn’t let such a golden opportunity slip.” Shen Zechuan held his teacup and considered it for a moment before saying, “This time, we must make Xi Hongxuan take action.”

“I have to remind you of one thing.” Xiao Chiye propped up his elbow on the table and beckoned to Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan put down his teacup and leaned over.

Xiao Chiye whispered, “If you can’t hold your liquor, then don’t go drinking with others. Not every bastard has Second Young Master’s level of willpower to remain unswayed by distracting thoughts<sup>5</sup> and remain an honorable, well-behaved gentleman before you.”

Shen Zechuan looked askance at him and emphasized his words, “But this honorable gentleman has harbored quite the thoughts too, hasn’t he?”

Xiao Chiye gazed at him and said, “Once we step out of this door tomorrow morning, you and I will be mortal enemies. Since enemies know best how to hold each other in high regard, then isn’t it only fitting for me to think of you?”

Shen Zechuan said, “I don’t think of you.”

Xiao Chiye said, “Every plan you make these days can’t escape me. I’m afraid it’s not that you don’t think of me, but that you think of me day and night.”

“How did that kick from the Feast of A Hundred Officials not get to you?” Shen Zechuan raised his hand to block Xiao Chiye’s breath on him and said, “It could have sobered up the Second Young Master.”

The tip of Xiao Chiye’s nose was pressing against Shen Zechuan’s palm. He stared at Shen Zechuan and said wickedly, “How callous, Lanzhou. You tease me in all ways possible before bedding me. And now that you’ve bedded me, you set up defenses in every way possible to guard against me. You heartless cad, fickle man.”

His gaze made Shen Zechuan slightly averted his eyes. Shen Zechuan said, “... Xiao’Er, you sure are drunk tonight, aren’t you?”

Xiao Chiye suddenly retreated and said, "During the court session tomorrow morning, someone will surely raise questions and apportion blame. Kong Qiu will present Fuling's previous confession statement as it is. When the time comes, the Chief Surveillance Bureau will have to hold me accountable for my negligence in supervision."

With his palm now empty, Shen Zechuan said, "Even if you wish to take a step back, you can't make it too obvious."

"Once I'm caught in a vicious siege of verbal and written condemnation, it'll be up to His Majesty to decide on my punishment." Xiao Chiye said.

"At best, your salary will be halted for a few months. At worst, your tablet will be suspended and you will have to reflect on your mistake. The Hereditary Prince is still in Qudu. Everyone still has to give him face, so they won't overdo their criticism of you."

"Dage's time in Qudu is very short." Xiao Chiye stopped. "Once I'm punished, there'll be no one else to stop the marriage between Hua Xiangyi and Qi Shiyu."

"It'll take time for the union between Qi and Hua to happen." Shen Zechuan thought for a moment. "The current Commander-in-chief of Qidong Five Commandery military troops is Qi Zhuyin. Perhaps we can start with her."

Xiao Chiye thought of something and said, "I have an idea."

Shen Zechuan asked, "What?"

"The Ministry of Rites has past marriage records of the Hua Clan. I'll get someone to polish it up a little, then give this transcribed copy to Qi Zhuyin. She will not accept Hua Xiangyi easily."

"It's not taboo for distant relatives to marry in Dazhou; even marriage between cousins is fine." Shen Zechuan said, "Or is Commander-in-Chief Qi bothered by it?"

"She is." Xiao Chiye explained. "As we all know, Qi Shiyu is a lecher, and he has taken many beautiful women all over Qidong Five Commandery into his residence as his women. One of them is his niece. A few years back, this madam gave birth to a baby, who was born with a defect and was abnormally sick and weak. The baby lasted for only a few days before it was buried. From then on, each time Qi Shiyu takes in a concubine, Qi Zhuyin would be particularly wary of breaking this taboo. As long as there

were some blood relations between them, even if she was a distant relative, Qi Zhuyin would not allow the woman to marry into the family.”

“But Hua Xiangyi’s marriage to Qi Shiyu was specifically dictated by the Empress Dowager herself.” Shen Zechuan said. “I doubt the Commander-in-Chief can stop it even if she wants to.”

“Since there’s already no way she can stop it, then she can only take a step back to make a concession and let Hua the Third marry.” Xiao Chiye’s eyes were cold. “But she can’t let her give birth to a child. Hua Xiangyi is marrying Qi Shiyu as his second wife, which means she will be the legitimate and rightful madam of Qidong. The child she gives birth to will be a child of lawful birth<sup>6</sup> who can claim to be of the same direct line of descent as Qi Zhuyin. Qi Zhuyin is a woman. It’s indeed not easy for her to subdue and bring Qidong Five Commandery military forces under her control for all these years. She is a great general who has truly shed blood. But who can guarantee that no one will have something else in mind? If Hua Xiangyi were to give birth to a son, Qi Zhuyin would have no choice but to be caught up in an internal struggle for military power. She is in need of a reason to suppress Hua Xiangyi.”

“I heard that there are male sons in the Qi Clan. But Qi Shiyu was hell-bent on having his own way to give to Qi Zhuyin the Commander-in-Chief position of the military forces.” Shen Zechuan said, “Wasn’t this out of an appreciation for talents?”

“That’s right.” Xiao Chiye said, “Qi Zhuyin was born by his first legitimate wife, and she is also a talented field commander he personally taught. When he still had no sons, he treated and raised Qi Zhuyin as one. He came to have sons later on, but none of them could be compared to her. At that time, Qidong was still at war with Biansha. Qi Shiyu was seriously injured and was unable to lead the troops. They were trapped at the east side of Biansha linked camps, and none of the Qi Clan sons dared to step up to take up the mantle. It was Qi Zhuyin who carried a blade on her back and rode a horse through the night to go canvassing for reinforcements from the Chijun Commandery, Bianjun Commandery, and Suotian Pass Garrison Troops and got them to follow her into battle. Then, with the help of the wind, she set fire to the Biansha linked camps and burned them all down. This was the battle that made her famous. She’s now called ‘Wind Guiding the Scorching Plains’ precisely because of how she led the soldiers that battle to draw their swords while braving the fire to carry out Qi Shiyu on



her back. Qi Shiyu was originally hesitant and undecided. But after that time, he immediately handed over the commander seal and gave the Five Commandery military troops all to Qi Zhuyin.”

“The conferment of the Commander-in-Chief title requires the approval of Qudu.” Shen Zechuan said, “It’s not an easy feat to achieve.”

Xiao Chiye smiled. He touched the thumb ring on his thumb and said, “You would have never imagined that Emperor Guangcheng was not the one who conferred the title on her.”

Shen Zechuan tilted his head slightly.

“Back then, when news of it spread back to Qudu, the various parties all denounced it. Because Qi Zhuyin is a woman, the Ministry of War questioned whether her military exploits were fabricated. Thus, they submitted a petition to the Grand Secretariat requesting them to dispatch the Chief Surveillance Bureau Censor and Imperial Bodyguards to Qidong to carry out a thorough investigation. Seeing how worked up the crowd was, Emperor Guancheng delayed Qidong’s request and did not approve it. Her meritorious military service was later verified, and the Ministry of Rites submitted a memorial allowing her conferment. However, she was not allowed up Yulong Terrace,<sup>7</sup> which is used by military officers and generals, to receive her conferment. She could only kneel and kowtow before the stairs of Mingli Hall.”

Xiao Chiye paused for a long time.

“It was the Empress Dowager who stood her ground against the objections and obstacles and allowed her to step onto Yulong Terrace so that she could be conferred, in an open and aboveboard manner, the title Commander-in-Chief of Qidong’s military forces.”





- 1.
2. 束腰, 马蹄足 A table with specific designs as described. Kind of like the above.
3. 熬鹰 literally torturing falcons, it's one of the ways to train them by not allowing it to sleep and torture it to exhaustion to wear down its wild nature.
4. 最受不得教唆 this line could also be read as he cannot hold up to instigation.
5. 唇亡齿寒, when the lips are gone the teeth will be exposed to the cold; if one of two interdependent things falls, the other is in danger and will most likely share the same fate.
6. 定力 Specifically in Buddhism, this refers to the ability to free one's mind of distracting thoughts and the willpower to remain unswayed by them or temptations.
7. To recap, children in those days were classified according to whether they were a lawful or common child. A di child (嫡子) was born by the legal wife (this was the wife who had been officially married into the family, also known as a zhengshi (正室)). Those of lawful birth were considered legitimate (direct line of descendants) and they had higher social status and often received better treatment compared to the shu children (庶子) born by concubines.
8. 玉龙 Yulong, literally translated as Jade Dragon

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 52 : DENOUNCEMENT

Translated with: [Eggy](#)<3

White snow fell in a flurry. The night was coming to an end.

Shen Zechuan could not stay any longer. Just as he was leaving, Xiao Chiye rose to his feet, took down the overcoat from the rack, and handed it to him.

“This blade of yours looks unfamiliar.” Xiao Chiye bent over to pick up Yang Shan Xue. It felt light and handy in his hands. “New?”

Shen Zechuan nodded and faced the door as he put on the overcoat.

Xiao Chiye pressed the sword slightly out of its sheath with his thumb to reveal a cold glint. He said, “Excellent blade. What’s its name?”

Shen Zechuan answered, “Yang Shan Xue.”

“A lift of its head, and three mountains worth of snow it spouts; a spread of its mouth, and a hundred rivers it devours.”<sup>1</sup> Xiao Chiye returned the blade to its sheath and took a step forward and stuck to Shen Zechuan from behind. With practiced fingers, he put back Yang Shan Xue to the side of Shen Zechuan’s waist. He lowered his head slightly and said, “It’s not only pretty; even the name is pretty.”

Shen Zechuan abruptly looked back, but Xiao Chiye beat him to it and grasped him by the waist to take him into his arms.

“How are you going to look at me after leaving here today?”

“However I ought to be looking at you.” Shen Zechuan hurriedly turned his head back. It looked as if he was intimately rubbing their faces together.

“If you can’t handle it, you can always ask your Second Young Master for help.” Xiao Chiye’s fingers roughly obtained a measurement as he smiled and said.

“The Second Young Master can barely fend for himself.” Shen Zechuan said. “Seems more likely for you to ask me for help.”

Xiao Chiye released him and said, “You are much thinner than the last time. If my guess is right, you are still taking medicine that can conceal your figure.”

Shen Zechuan fastened his overcoat and said nothing.

“Let me offer you a word of advice,” Xiao Chiye said, “That medicine hurts the body the more you take it. In a few years, it’ll be your own body that will be wrecked.”

Shen Zechuan sighed softly as he stopped by the door. “Your shifu has sharp eyes. He met me only once, and he could tell just by looking.”

Xiao Chiye said, “You’re willing to go to such an extent just for these matters?”

“My life and death hang in the balance at the mere whim of another, so naturally, I’d have to exercise caution in everything I do and pay due diligence everywhere I go.” Shen Zechuan’s hands were ice cold. He said, “I’ve practiced the Ji Clan boxing style for a long time. I wouldn’t be able to deceive Ji Lei unless I resort to this.”

Xiao Chiye said, “Ji Lei is already dead.”

Shen Zechuan still smelled a little of wine. He said, “I’ve stopped taking the medicine.”

After Shen Zechuan had left, Xiao Chiye stood in the blizzard as he recalled Zuo Qianqiu’s words.

“This medicine comes from the East. Once taken, a person can fake illness to pull the wool over the eyes of others. It’s not a problem if it’s taken once or twice, but it could cause serious consequences if consumed for a long time. The damage is negligible if the toxin remains in the body for a short while, but it’ll eventually act up in the future.”

“Act up?”

Zuo Qianqiu fixed his gaze on the teacup in his hand and said, “Toxin accumulates to become a malady that harms. If he doesn’t take good care of it, he might be rendered invalid when the time comes.”

Xiao Chiye raised his hand and let the windstorm blow away the lingering warmth on his palm. He reminisced back to that night when he thought he had almost melted Shen Zechuan with his caresses, but it seemed that the warmth he gave Shen Zechuan was merely fleeting.

A beauty always gives off the illusion of fragility.



With a bamboo hat on his head, Qiao Tianya drove the horse carriage and rushed towards Shen Zechuan’s old house on Donglong Street. Shen Zechuan leaned against the interior wall of the carriage and closed his eyes to take a nap.

Upon reaching the entrance, Qiao Tianya commanded the horses to stop and lifted the curtain open for Shen Zechuan. Shen Zechuan bent over to get off the carriage and returned to his room to take a bath and have a change of clothes.

According to the memorial, Shen Zechuan had enjoyed a meteoric rise this time to become a fifth-grade Judge of the Imperial Bodyguards in just one leap. But this position was split into two—the south and north. The Southern Judge was in charge of the affairs of the Imperial Bodyguards' military craftsmen, while the Northern Judge was in charge of the Imperial Bodyguards' Imperial Prison. Li Jianheng put him in an important position with the intent to use him. But the civil officials of the Grand Secretariat all had their own misgivings and considerations. Because of Shen Zechuan's background, they were not willing to let him take charge of the Imperial Prison. Therefore, after everyone deliberated over it, they rejected Shen Zechuan's appointment as the Northern Judge and had it changed to the Southern Judge.

For this reason, the Grand Secretariat raised Shen Zechuan's military appointment to one of a fifth-grade Imperial Bodyguards' Battalion Commander. This was already a great honor, especially when coupled with the additional embroidered python robe<sup>2</sup> and phoenix-tail belt<sup>3</sup> that Li Jianheng had bestowed upon him.

Shen Zechuan had long anticipated the Grand Secretariat's rebuttal.

This time, he had made his way up by using Han Cheng as a stepping stone. As per their agreement, Xue Xiuzhuo let him have his promotion, yet he gave him a kick at the most crucial part. This was to make him understand that even if he had the merit that came with going to the Emperor's rescue, he was still far from being able to cross swords with them.

When Shen Zechuan emerged all neatly dressed, Qiao Tianya was holding up an umbrella. The latter said, "With Master's promotion, this house is already considered simple and shabby. It would not be able to accommodate all the coming and going visitors in the future."

"There's no hurry." Shen Zechuan lifted his robe to get on the carriage. As he dropped the curtain, he said, "It's still not too late to change it after I'm promoted to Commander-in-Chief."

With that, the curtain drooped, and he continued to rest.

The weather was bad today. The officials waiting outside the palace all had snow on their shoulders. They could not walk around as they please, nor could they move at will. They could not make a racket either, or even cough.

Shen Zechuan followed Han Cheng to stand at attention while bearing his blade. His skin was like icy snow set against the contrast of his crimson python robe. He was shockingly gorgeous whenever there was a smile in the corners of his eyes. Yet, amidst that affability, he gave off an air of malice that spoke of danger.

Xiao Chiye was donning a red robe too. The second-grade lion on his body<sup>4</sup> made him stand out even more from the crowd, like a crane among a flock of fowls. He looked to be in low spirits and merely glanced askance at Shen Zechuan.

Both men were standing apart from one another, yet they gave others the sense that they were facing off each other in a confrontation. Even Hai Liangyi turned his head aside to take a few looks.

The civil officials made eye contact with one another, each coming to a mutual, tacit understanding.

A little while later, Han Cheng said in a hushed tone, "Let's go."

When those palace doors opened, the eunuchs from the Directorate of Ceremonial and major ministers of the Grand Secretariat would be the first to enter. But now that the Directorate of Ceremonial had been vacated, only the important ministers of the Grand Secretariat with Hai Liangyi at the head went on ahead. Han Cheng followed behind them, leading Shen Zechuan up the stairs to take up position at the lower left side of the dragon throne.

Li Jianheng sat on the dragon throne with both hands on his knees and said, "It has been two nights since the assassination case. Has there been any new progress from the Ministry of Justice?"

The Minister of Justice, Kong Qiu, stepped out and said after paying his obeisances, "To reply Your Majesty, the evidence against Fuling, the female official of the Imperial Food Service, in instigating Guisheng to carry out the assassination is conclusive. This subject will hand her over to the Court of Judicial Review for a retrial today."

For some reason, Li Jianheng cast a glance at Xiao Chiye and turned back to continue asking, "Have you gotten to the bottom of why she did this?"

Kong Qiu said, “Our checks show that Fuling once broke the imperial plate of the Court of Imperial Entertainments in the palace. Consequently, this left a record in her file, and, to work it off, the day she could leave the palace was put off to the indefinite future. She often told the others that her mother was already advanced in age, and she wanted to leave the palace to wait upon the latter, but owing to the palace rules, she was unable to do so. She repeatedly bribed the former Brush-holding Director of the Directorate of Ceremonial, but it was a wasted effort, and she was cheated out of her entire life savings. And so she lost it and began to harbor the intent to exact revenge.”

“This subject has a memorial to present.” The Vice Minister of the Court of Judicial Review, Wei Huaixing, was the second son of lawful birth of the Eight Great Clans’ Wei Clan. He was also the elder brother of Imperial Concubine Wei during Emperor Xiande’s time. He stepped out and paid his obeisances.

Li Jianheng said, “Your Excellency Wei, please speak.”

“This subject has ascertained that the female official of the Imperial Food Service, Fuling, had a power-for-sex transaction with Yuan Liu from the Imperial Army’s Judicial Office. It was Yuan Liu who personally stepped forward to negotiate credit for the house where her mother lived.” Without looking at anyone, Wei Huaixing continued, “This case is presided over by the Ministry of Justice, and this matter concerns Your Majesty’s safety; It cannot be said to be unimportant. Yet, Minister Kong mentioned only half of the confession before Your Majesty. Is there something that cannot be said, or someone who cannot be incriminated?”

Kong Qiu turned his head to the side and said, “... This matter is mentioned all in my memorial, so what deception is there to speak of?”

“The morning court is an important venue for the discussion of governmental affairs. His Majesty asked if you have gotten to the bottom of it. Yet you were evasive before all the officials, focusing on what’s favorable while skipping the damning statements.” Wei Huaixing raised his head. “Officials, on entering service, should diligently and earnestly serve with utmost loyalty.<sup>5</sup> The imperial court hall is by no means a place to condone corruption and abet corrupted officials. What are you afraid of? If you don’t dare to voice it in the person’s presence, then I’ll say it. Your Majesty, this matter concerns not only the various twenty-four yamen in the Imperial Palace, but also the Imperial Army!”

Xiao Chiye looked displeased, as if he were sneering.

Li Jianheng had initially meant to keep it under wraps. But now, it would not do for him to continue fooling the others. After hesitating for a long time, he said, "... Ce' an, what do you have to say to this?"

Xiao Chiye said, "The Imperial Army has 20,000 men on its payroll. This subject can check their household registers one at a time, but not all of their personal affairs one by one. This time, I'm at fault for being negligent in my supervision of my men. Your Majesty may punish me as you deem fit."

Li Jianheng wanted to open his mouth to say a word.

Wei Huaixing kowtowed first and said, "Viceroy Xiao, why aren't you telling the truth before His Majesty either? It's indeed true that it's not easy to probe into the personal affairs of the 20,000 men in the Imperial Army. But that Yuan Liu doesn't have a common relationship with you at all. So how can you feign ignorance too?!"

Shen Zechuan looked over.

"There are too many people who have special relationships with me." Xiao Chiye swept a glance at Shen Zechuan and smiled without a care. "But with a beauty in my arms, I'd be blind to bed an old fellow. That Yuan Liu is old enough to be your father. Your Excellency Wei, never mind if you don't have any proof or evidence, but why go to this extent to bring such a false charge against me, Xiao Ce' an?"

Hai Liangyi gave a slight cough and said, "Please watch your language on the Imperial Court, Viceroy."

"His Majesty is fully aware of the kind of jerk I am. I have never needed to put on false pretenses here." Xiao Chiye was a tyrant when he played the scoundrel. He did not even show any respect to Hai Liangyi. "You want to investigate the Imperial Army, sure thing. To steer clear of suspicion, I'll hand over my authority token and let the various Excellencies investigate. But if you want to pin that groundless, trumped-up charge on me, then sorry, I won't plead guilty."

"Such vulgar language. Acting all rebellious before His Majesty. The Xiao Clan sure has produced a good son!" Wei Huaixing took out a memorial from his sleeve. "The Viceroy says I've no evidence or proof. But as an official of the Court of Judicial Review, how would I dare to say so if that's the case?"



Xiao Jiming, who had been listening without moving all this while, slightly raised his head to look at Wei Huaixing, wanting to see what evidence the latter could have.

Wei Huaixing said, "Yuan Liu was originally a Squad Commander of the Imperial Army. It was the Viceroy who personally promoted him to be a Vice Judge. Not two years later, the Viceroy promoted him again into the position of a Judge. I'd like to ask the Viceroy. These few years, the Imperial Army had no important duties. So on what grounds does he get to be promoted again and again?"

Xiao Chiye sneered and said, "He's already at that age. Although he has no merits to speak of, he has committed no grave errors. The Imperial Army has been mass recruiting rookies in recent years. Yuan Liu isn't the only old-timer I've promoted on account of old ties. Why doesn't Your Excellency Wei list them all out clearly and count them all among my personal affairs?"

"Isn't the Viceroy's words the law in the Imperial Army in recent years?!" Wei Huaixing said unhurriedly. "The one each of them pledged loyalty to is the Xiao Clan, not His Majesty, isn't it?"

His words were laced with double layers of meaning—In itself, it referred to Xiao Chiye, but it also implicated Xiao Jiming.

As expected, Xiao Chiye flipped. He said, "Keep the discussion to the topic at hand. Stop fucking bringing in the Xiao Clan at every mention! I, Xiao Ce'an, followed His Majesty to the position I am at now. I'm not like Your Excellency Wei who is born with a silver spoon in his mouth and with his path to officialdom all smoothly paved out for him."

It was only when Wei Huaixing saw Xiao Chiye losing his temper that he opened the memorial and said, "The Viceroy went drinking with others before the new year. During the feast, Yuan Liu gifted you a large sum of money. Does the Viceroy admit to this?"

Even Li Jianheng was stunned the moment this word was spoken. He clenched his fist and said nothing further.

Xiao Chiye said, "I have never gone drinking with Yuan Liu before."

"The courtesans of Xiangyun Villa on Donglong Street can attest to it. That night, Yuan Liu spent a large sum of money to entertain the Viceroy. The Viceroy got drunk during the feast, and Yuan Liu gifted you a basket of golden peaches." Wei Huaixing said, "Does the Viceroy still not admit it?"

Xiao Chiye said, "I'll just ask you. Yuan Liu is a minor sixth-grade official. Where on earth would he get the golden peaches to gift?"

"That's something we will have to ask the Viceroy." Wei Huaixing finally took out his killing move. He said, "The same time Yuan Liu got the house on credit for Fuling, he also got three street-facing houses on Donglong Street on credit. I have ascertained that he acted upon the Viceroy's written instructions at that time! In recent years, the Imperial Army first carried out repairs on its barracks, then expanded the military drill grounds on Mount Feng. Where did all the money for these come from? Wasn't it the Viceroy who used his position in the Imperial Army to obtain it illegally from the broker? Yuan Liu was the one who handled and completed this matter for you. And now that Yuan Liu has instigated Fuling to assassinate His Majesty, do you dare to say that it has nothing to do with you?"

Xiao Chiye did not answer.

Fu Linye, the Right Censor-in-chief Chief Surveillance Bureau, stepped out and said, "This subject also has a memorial to submit."

For some reason, Li Jianheng's fingertips were trembling violently. He commanded, "Speak!"

Fu Linye said, "This subject wants to bring charges against the Viceroy of the Imperial Army too today. According to the law, before the Joint Trial by the Three Judicial Offices concludes, no irrelevant person is allowed to enter the torture prison to visit major criminals unless he has His Majesty's imperial edict. Yet, the Viceroy acted on his own initiative and went to the torture prison yesterday without an imperial edict and made no report of it afterward."

Xiao Chiye's expression grew more and more somber.

"The moment the Viceroy left the torture prison, Fuling's mother died." Fu Linye kowtowed. "As for what happened in between, I'd like to ask the Viceroy to give a clear account of it in His Majesty's presence."

Xiao Chiye said, "Both of you are really taking action at the same time, huh. Such coincidence!"

"Don't dodge the topic, Viceroy." Wei Huaixing said coldly, "I'd advise you to explain yourself at the earliest opportunity!"

"He who wants to incriminate a man will always trump up a charge against him." As if surrounded in a trap, Xiao Chiye fell silent for a

moment, then said to Li Jianheng, "I've never done any of the stuff they said. I'll let His Majesty make the judgment tonight."

Under such a tense, anxious atmosphere, Li Jianheng clenched his knees until they were soaked with sweat. He looked at Xiao Chiye too, then suddenly asked, "How do you explain those written instructions?"

Xiao Chiye lowered his gaze and said with a spurious smile, "This subject has never written such a thing."

Li Jianheng stood up in an instant. He took a few steps forward impatiently and demanded, "Let me see!"

Wei Huaixing handed over the item. Li Jianheng flipped through it for a moment and suddenly began to tremble. His lips quivered. "Isn't this your handwriting... Ce... Ce' an!"

Xiao Chiye said resolutely, "This subject has never written such a thing!"

Li Jianheng was terrified. He set the document in his hands, then quickly threw it away like a hot potato. Nearly losing control, he asked, "Then, that Yuan Liu—is he your man or not?!"

Xiao Chiye raised his eyes.

Upon seeing this, Li Jianheng clutched onto the armrests. Fear began to rise within him. In this fleeting moment of dread, he recalled the coldness and indifference with which Xiao Chiye had abandoned him in the past. An endless disgust also rose within him. As if he was swatting away something terrifying, he said with all of his might, "Strip him of his authority token first!"

Xiao Chiye said, "This subject——"

Wei Huaixing straightened up and bellowed, "If he dares to disobey, we can detain him right here according to the laws!"

Xiao Chiye stared at Wei Huaixing before he looked at Li Jianheng. He said in an aloof voice, "It is fine to detain me, Xiao Ce' an, but there must be an acceptable allegation."

Li Jianheng felt that he had misplaced his trust. Caught in the crossfire taking place in the imperial court, he was already inclined to believe the others. And now, seeing the way Xiao Chiye was acting caused his fury to momentarily get the better of him. He reprimanded in a stern voice, "Kneel! I will take away your authority token today without fail!"

Xiao Chiye had yet to move.

But Li Jianheng could no longer contain his rage and barked, “I command you to kneel!”



#### Footnotes

1. 仰喷三山雪，横吞百川水 It's part of a poem from 《古风其三十三》 by Li Bai that refers to the mythological creature, *kun peng* (鲲鹏). Shen Zechuan's blade name, Yang Shan Xue (仰山雪) makes up part of the line “仰(喷三)山雪”.
2. 北溟有巨鱼，身长数千里，仰喷三山雪，横吞百川水。
3. (There exists a massive fish in the northern sea; its body, as long as several thousand li. The water spray it spouts with a lift of its head falls like three mountains worth of snow; while its mouth, spread wide open, engulfs the waters of a hundred rivers.)
4. 蟒衣 (or 蟒袍) “python (or *mang*) robes” were embroidered robes bestowed by the Emperor to officials with merits during the Ming Dynasty. It was a sign of honor and favor for officials who were granted the privilege of wearing a “python robe”.
5. 鸾带 a wide phoenix tail (or *luan*) belt. *Luan* is a mythical bird related to phoenix.
6. This refers to the animal on his rank badge (补子), or mandarin square, which is a large embroidered badge sewn onto the surcoat of an official to indicate the rank of the official wearing it. Squares depicting birds were used for civil officials, while animals were used for military officials. So for a second-grade military official like Xiao Chiye, this animal would be a lion.
7. 入则恳恳以尽忠 a line from “Loyal Proclamations on Governance” 《为政忠告》 by a famous Yuan Dynasty poet, Zhang Yanghao (张养浩).

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 53 : COMPOUND SEARCH



The imperial court was so solemn and quiet that one could even hear the drop of a pin.

Xiao Chiye's eyes gradually dimmed as he removed his own authority token.

With his chest heaving violently, Li Jianheng announced, "The Imperial Army Viceroy, Xiao Chiye, is suspended from duties and confined to his residence to await investigation! The internal and external patrols of Qudu shall now be taken over by the Imperial Bodyguards and the Eight Great Training Divisions."

Xi Hongxuan, who was among the crowd, looked stolidly through his *wusha* hat<sup>1</sup> at Xiao Jiming, who had never once uttered a word. Xiao Jiming remained stable and still on his feet, unperturbed by what was happening.

He sure is steady!

Xi Hongxuan cursed inwardly.

As expected, this Xiao Jiming was a tough nut to deal with. To think he could still maintain his composure on seeing Xiao Chiye in such a predicament. He was not in the least flustered; he did not even look like he had the intent to speak up.

After morning court was dismissed, they gathered at Ouhua Pavillion.

After taking his golden token and changing into an elegant pale-blue patterned robe with wide sleeves, Shen Zechuan let the courtesan lead him upstairs. Xi Hongxuan was lying on the *xumi* couch<sup>2</sup> watching someone brew tea.

On seeing him enter, Xi Hongxuan laughed out loud and said, "Lanzhou, that was such a delight today! Ever since the hunting ground incident, Xiao the Second has been one-upping me in every matter. This payback feels so gratifying!"

Shen Zechuan took his seat and said, "Fu Linye was a good move. I never thought you could even take him under you."

"What do you think the Fu Clan was in the past? They were cow dung collectors outside Chuncheng's city gates. If not for our Old Master's appreciation of talent and assistance in helping them to break free of their original registration,<sup>3</sup> their Fu Clan would still be herding cattle today." Xi

Hongxuan accepted the tea the maidservant presented to him and sampled a few mouthfuls before continuing, "But what a waste of the trap Elder Wei set. Xiao Jiming didn't take the bait."

"Suppressing Xiao'Er is already a challenge." Shen Zechuan tasted the tea and said, "I'm afraid the loss will far outweigh the gain if you touch Xiao Jiming now."

"The best policy is to follow up on our victory and press home the attack. If we don't fight now, then when are we going to wait for?" Xi Hongxuan raised his hand to dismiss the maidservant. He straightened up in his seat. "Even if we can only make Xiao Jiming suffer a small loss in Qudu, it'd still be a chink in their armor."

"I thought your intent was Qudu. I didn't think you would already be thinking of eyeing the outskirts for a fight even before your foundation is stable." Shen Zechuan said, "The Eight Great Training Divisions have yet to get a firm grip on power. You'll most likely tumble and suffer a setback if you skip over Xiao'Er now."

Xi Hongxuan set aside the teacup and asked, "Then, in your opinion, what else should we do?"

"You said it earlier." Shen Zechuan smiled. "The best policy is to follow up on victory and press home the attack."

Xi Hongxuan pondered it for a moment and said, "Our move today has already caused Xiao the Second to lose the Emperor's confidence and trust in him. Even his authority token was removed, making it impermissible for him to move about before the start of spring. But he has been buddies with the Emperor for many years after all. It is impossible to take him down with just this incident alone."

"As long as Xiao'Er is still the Imperial Army Viceroy, the authority over Qudu patrols will still fall back into his hands. Did you all go through so much trouble with me just to get temporary authority of the Eight Great Training Divisions to play around with for a month or two, before returning it to him with your thanks?" Shen Zechuan said, "You dealt Xiao'Er a blow this time. But once he bounces back after spring, how are you going to face his counterattack?"

Xi Hongxuan spread his folding fan open and fanned himself with it a few times before saying, "What else can we do? We definitely won't be able to knock him down now."

“You can’t. But you can wear him down.” Shen Zechuan was not fond of drinking strong tea, so he did not touch it again after a taste. He said, “His Majesty is already suspicious of him, and his suspicion in the days to come will not be lower than this. This is the time for you to act.”

“I have neither talent nor merit.” Xi Hongxuan smiled and said, “So how can I be compared to him?”

“There’s no need for you to be humble.” Shen Zechuan tapped on the tabletop. “The tunes in this Ouhua Pavillion are unconventional and original. Even His Majesty, who is used to fooling around red-light districts, would find it a breath of fresh air. Second Young Master Xi, do you still feel that you can’t be compared to Xiao’Er when it comes to playing?”

“Leaving aside Secretariat Elder for now, even if I play, there’s no way for me to play my way up to Xiao the Second’s position.” Xi Hongxuan said, “You must have a trick up your sleeve, don’t you?”

“After Xue Xiuzhuo entered the Court of Judicial Review, all he has been handling one after another are major cases. But he is, after all, just one man. When it comes to talent and fame, he is also outdone by Yao Wenyu, who roams free and unfettered over the lands. If he wants to go further now to prepare for his entry into the Grand Secretariat in advance, then he needs someone to exalt him.” Shen Zechuan drew a small circle on the tabletop with his fingertip. “You stood in the limelight before the students of the Imperial College the last time and left behind a good name. Isn’t this just perfect for you to do him, Xue Xiuzhuo, a favor? Lately, Secretariat Elder Hai has also been thinking of setting up an Imperial College. From here, Xue Xiuzhuo would be able to choose his soldiers and generals.”

“Expand manpower to make waves.” Xi Hongxuan turned it over in his mind and said, “But Yanqing has his own men. Why must he go to the Imperial College?”

“To deal with Xiao’Er, there is a need to bury the hatchet with the other clans and join forces to strike a blow at the enemy. But the Yao Clan isn’t willing. Think about it. The position of the Yao Clan in the hearts of the literati is like a boulder. Never mind if they aren’t willing to work with you. The fear is that they will turn around and act in cahoots with Xiao’Er. If that’s the case, why not kick the Yao Clan out as early as possible and leave the position to someone competent enough to be up to the task?”

Xi Hongxuan unexpectedly laughed and said, “You were born in Zhongbo, so you don’t understand the origins of the Eight Great Clans.

Even if the Yao Clan isn't willing to join in, we absolutely cannot kick them out. Because there's no way to kick them out at all."

"Think back to the heyday of the Yao Clan and survey the Imperial Court. There was no place for the Xi Clan." Shen Zechuan took out his handkerchief to wipe the water droplets. "I know about the noble clans' origin, but I'm asking you to hold down the Yao Clan. The current situation can no longer allow for actions from another party. Second Young Master, he who hesitates is lost."

Xi Hongxuan did not dare to take the decision into his own hands. Thus he said, "We'll discuss this again. Let me think about it."



Xiao Chiye was in the midst of sharpening his blade. He wiped down Langli Blade carefully, leaving not a stain of dust on it.

Zhao Hui handed Lu Guangbai a cup of tea and asked, "Is the Second Young Master wiping the blade over and over again to hack someone?"

Lu Guangbai laughed as he drank his tea. "The way he is today, venturing outdoors with his blade is going to be no piece of cake. Jiming, did you get a clear look? I thought this lad was going to cry when he removed his token earlier."

"It was a rare sight." Xiao Jiming smiled too. "To think there'd be a day where the brat can't vent his anger."

"Who are you disparaging?" Xiao Chiye folded his handkerchief rather unhappily.

"We're praising you." Lu Guangbai sighed and said, "As expected of someone who has stayed too long in Qudu. What an act that was."

"Isn't that all I've learned here?" Xiao Chiye sheathed his blade, then took his seat and propped up his legs. "Old Wei was trying so hard that I really had to think a little more highly of him. Never mind if it was someone else, but why are all my gege happy to see me being pinned down and pummeled by others?"

"That was truly a rare sight," Zhao Hui sighed with emotion.

"I was even worried you'd feel sad." Lu Guangbai said, "Of all people to play with, you just had to play with the Son of Heaven."

"His Majesty ascended to the throne all of a sudden, and was attacked again and again. He isn't a bold man to begin with, so it's only to be expected for him to be afraid now." Xiao Chiye said, "I just never expected Fu Linye to be cut from the same cloth as them."



“Fu Linye has some connections with the Xi Clan. But he’s still not that far gone to be the noble clans’ lackey.” Xiao Jiming said, “He’s most likely thinking of seizing the opportunity to win His Majesty and Wei Huaixing’s favor by impeaching you.”

“You pushed Wei Huaixing pretty hard too, to make him take out his last trump card.” Lu Guangbai said, “Now that he has taken it out, we can fight back.”

“Wei Huaixing has been around for so long, and yet he has never been able to enter the Grand Secretariat. This definitely has to do with this person’s temperament.” Xiao Chiye thought for a moment. “Although Hua Siqian used him when he was still alive, he disdained him a lot. Now that Secretariat Elder Hai is fearful of the noble clans taking over the Grand Secretariat, he’s also holding him back without letting him get promoted. He bears a grudge. If he wants to fight it out with Secretariat Elder Hai, then he has to join forces with Xi Hongxuan and storm through the enemy ranks for them. He wants to cross this threshold that has been holding him back for more than ten years. I only need to flinch back a little this time, and he would definitely keep up his pursuit and take out that last memorial.”

“This is a matter of utmost importance. Even if the evidence was forged, he would still do a pretty realistic job of it.” Xiao Jiming said, “He started from the Imperial Army’s accounts, knowing that Hai Liangyi is so particularly nervous about the disbursement of military funds after the Hua Faction incident that he would not tolerate anything objectionable when it comes to this matter. The Chief Surveillance Bureau will come to investigate you during these few days. They can’t let Fu Linye investigate it alone. They will have to pick someone impartial from the Chief Surveillance Bureau or among officials with the authority to carry out audits to conduct the investigation together.”

“Most likely, someone from the Imperial Bodyguards will coordinate with Fu Linye to investigate.” Zhao Hui paused. “After all, this is an assassination case.”

“Imperial Bodyguards.” Lu Guangbai looked towards Xiao Chiye. “We are not only without a helper in the Imperial Bodyguards; they are even full of our adversaries. A-Ye, you’re going to take a beating for real this time.”

Xiao Chiye gave a somewhat wicked laugh and said, “... Imperial Bodyguards, huh. I’m on familiar terms with one.”



A few days later, the Chief Surveillance Bureau started their investigation of the Imperial Army's accounts. Before Fu Linye set off, he saw Shen Zechuan, who was coordinating with him to audit the accounts. Knowing that the other party was a favorite in the Emperor's employ recently, he did not dare to slight him and thus got someone to serve up excellent tea first.

Shen Zechuan drank a few mouthfuls and said mildly, "It's my first time on the job, so I'll have to trouble Your Excellency Fu to guide me this trip."

Fu Linye regarded him as one of the noble clans, but he still had some fear of him in spite of the sense of closeness. Thus he merely said, "I'm not worthy enough to guide, so I'll have to trouble Your Excellency the Judge to make this trip with me. The Imperial Army is as impenetrable as a metal bucket. I'm afraid there will be many accounts that are both authentic and doctored. When the time comes, I'd like to ask of Your Excellency the Judge to do a thorough search."

As for who and where to search, Fu Linye spoke not a word about it. He did not want to throw in with the noble clans and offend Hai Liangyi, and he had no wish to throw in with Hai Liangyi and step on the noble clans' toes either. He was a fence-sitter who observed the direction of the wind and went whichever way the wind blew. But he knew that he had severely offended Xiao Chiye this time. They were bound to make things hard for him when he went to check the accounts. Who didn't know how much of a jerk Xiao the Second was? Searching his residence would only be adding fuel to the fire. So he was unwilling to steal all the limelight this time round. He shoved Shen Zechuan out and let Shen Zechuan conduct the search, all to let Shen Zechuan be the footsoldier.

Shen Zechuan readily accepted it.

On seeing this, Fu Linye's fear of him receded; instead, he saw him as a greenhorn.

Everyone split up and went about their ways. Fu Linye headed for the Imperial Army's office compound, while Shen Zechuan went to the Prince of Libei's residence.

He was still far from arrival when Ding Tao, who was sprawled on the rooftop, saw him. He sighed and said, "How can he be like this?"

Gu Jin asked, "What do you mean by like this or like that?"

Ding Tao hemmed and hawed.

So Gu Jin said, "You are referring to how he's on good terms with Second Young Master and yet still helps others investigate Second Young Master—like this?"

Ding Tao interrupted. "They aren't on your average good term!"

"Such are men." Gu Jin twisted the wine bag open. "You will understand when you grow up. Everyone is like this. Hugging together is a domestic affair done inside the house, but everything else that happens once you put on your clothes and step out of the door are public affairs that stay out there. You cannot talk about them in the same breath... Don't jot this down!"

Shen Zechuan came to the door, where Zhao Hui and Chen Yang greeted him. With Zhao Hui on military appointment, Shen Zechuan was instead the one who had to pay his obeisances to him.

"The Hereditary Prince's courtyard is in the north." Zhao Hui said to Shen Zechuan. "It mostly houses Libei's military affairs."

Shen Zechuan replied tactfully, "The purpose of this humble servant's trip here today is to investigate the Second Young Master. It has nothing to do with Libei."

Understanding that he did not come here for the specific purpose of creating trouble, Zhao Hui nodded and signaled to Chen Yang with his eyes. Chen Yang stepped forth and said as he led the way, "The Second Young Master's courtyard is in the east. May I trouble Your Excellency the Judge and the various Imperial Bodyguards brothers to follow me."

Shen Zechuan bowed to Zhao Hui and followed after Chen Yang.

Xiao Chiye's courtyard was large. Going by structure size, it surpassed the Hereditary Prince's courtyard, but Xiao Fangxu was already too lazy to change it back then, and the brothers themselves did not mind, so all along, it had been Xiao Chiye who was staying here. After he took up office as the Imperial Army's Viceroy, he hardly returned. Most of the time, he rested in that small residence near the Imperial Army office.

When Shen Zechuan saw him, he was fishing by the pond with a woven raincoat draped over him.

"Your Excellency the Judge is so early." Xiao Chiye held the pole. "Have you taken your breakfast?"

"I've eaten back at the Chief Surveillance Bureau." Shen Zechuan said, "The Viceroy sure has such refined taste for leisure."

“I’m just an idler placed on suspension. How can I be compared with Your Excellency the Judge?” Xiao Chiye shook his pole. “To search my courtyard, you must show me the search warrant first.”

“All of us are old hands who often run assignments in Qudu.” Shen Zechuan said unhurriedly, “It’s pretty silly for the Viceroy to obstruct me in a huff.”

“Let me verify the document.” Xiao Chiye stood up and tossed away the fishing pole. “It doesn’t please me to let you enter my courtyard without showing the warrant.”

On seeing the situation, the Censor from the Chief Surveillance Bureau who was tagging along hurriedly stepped forth to mediate and pacify both sides. “Easy there. Easy does it. Viceroy, please wait a moment. Your Excellency the Judge, please don’t take offense either.”

“The Imperial Bodyguards know better than anyone else when it comes to playing it by the book.” Xiao Chiye moved closer and rebuked him coldly, “Have you still not learned of this after all this time since your release from Zhao Zui temple?”

Shen Zechuan looked at him and said, “The tiger that ends up on the flatlands would be insulted by dogs.<sup>4</sup> Whether a wild dog like me gives you the document today or not, you’d still have to welcome it all with a smile.”

Wiping his sweat, the Censor squeezed his way between both men and cupped his hands repeatedly to plead with them. “Let’s just talk this over. It’s all—”

“That’s quite the mouth you have there.” Xiao Chiye pushed aside the Censor. “Don’t tell me you’d still dare to come to blows with me?”

“No blows. You mustn’t fight!” The Censor craned his neck to shout. “We have the search warrant. Please take a look, Viceroy. We have to search the compound too. Judge, please wait. Let’s just talk this over. Easy there! Why y’all gots to get so anxious fo’?!”

In his moment of anxiety, this Censor had even lapsed back into his local accent!



Special Thanks to: [Eggy](#), [Yunyun](#)

Footnotes

1. 乌纱帽 *wusha* hat, or black gauze hat, is the headwear of Ming dynasty officials, comprising a black hat with two wing-like flaps of thin, oval-shaped boards on each side.
2. *Xumi* couch (须弥榻, ), also known as the *Mile* couch (弥勒榻) or short couch (短榻), is basically a shorter couch.
3. 脱籍 removal or erasure of oneself from the census records (original categorization (civilian, military, and craftsman) in the yellow register.)
4. 虎落平阳被犬欺, i.e., a powerful man who loses position and influence may be subjected to much indignity by those weaker than him.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 54 : OFFENSIVE

Translated with: [Eggy](#)<3

The accompanying Censor was called Yu Xiaozai, a low ranking Investigating Censor of the seventh grade. This position was the same as the Chief Supervising Secretary of the various offices. It was a low-ranking post, but came with great authority. He had the power to inspect and supervise, so it was the most appropriate for him to step forth and mediate between both men.

It was the dead of winter at the moment, but Yu Xiaozai was so anxious that he was sweating buckets. Even though he often ventured out on field works and inspection rounds to run assignments, he had never been put in such a difficult position before. He could not afford to offend both sides! This was just great—at his yells, both men who had been in a heated exchange were now looking at him.

Yu Xiaozai earnestly did his best to persuade them. “T’is early still. I’ll give over the search warrant in a while to the Viceroy to look over slowly. I have it with me.”

As he spoke, he took out the document from his bosom and handed it to Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye flipped through it briefly and looked towards Chen Yang, who immediately said, “This way, Your Excellency the Judge.”

Yu Xiaozai clasped his hands again and continued in his accent, “T’is how it should be done. Should always go by the book. All o’ us are doing official business fo’ His Majesty. Ain’t no need fo’ everyone to get all flustered.”

“It’s cold outside. Gu Jin, please invite this...” Xiao Chiye hesitantly came to a pause.

Yu Xiaozai cleared his throat tactfully and resumed his official speech, “This humble official’s surname is Yu. I’m Yu Xiaozai. My humble courtesy name is Youjing. I thank the Viceroy in advance for your kindness,

but I'll give the tea a miss. There's still official business to be done, so this humble official still has to follow after His Excellency the Judge."

Xiao Chiye did not continue to make things difficult for him and gave a slight nod of his head. Gu Jin stepped forward and bowed in respect to Yu Xiaozai, then led him to the courtyard.



Shen Zechuan ascended the stone steps. Xiao Chiye's study was already open. Attendants, with all their heads bowed, stood on both sides.

Chen Yang said, "This is the Viceroy's study. Your Excellency, please go ahead."

Shen Zechuan raised his hand, and Ge Qingqing turned to the side to nod to the Imperial Bodyguards behind him. Everyone then dispersed and began to look through the books on the open shelves.

Chen Yang motioned to Ding Tao to keep watch here and continued to lead Shen Zechuan further. After turning around the veranda and passing through the gate, they arrived at Xiao Chiye's bedchamber.

Chen Yang said, "This is the Viceroy's bedroom. There are many objects bestowed by the Emperor. Thus, I'd like to ask of His Excellency the Judge to examine them personally."

After thanking him for the trouble, Shen Zechuan strode in.

Xiao Chiye's room was large, but it was surprisingly simple and tidy. A table with horse-hooves legs sat behind the screen, with a few military books set on top of it. There were no floral decorations or antique calligraphy and paintings, only a territory map of the Empire of Dazhou hanging horizontally on the wall.

Shen Zechuan picked up the military book and opened it for a look. It was clean inside, as if no one had ever read it.

After a while, the door closed.

With his eyes never leaving the book, Shen Zechuan said, "Accompanying Censor Yu will be coming here once he has finished checking the study."

Xiao Chiye undid his overcoat and said, "Just checking the study alone will keep him occupied until noon. Fu LinYE sure is something. To dodge me, he shoved you here."

Shen Zechuan gently flipped through the pages and said, "He just wants to complete the investigation quickly and close the case, all without offending anyone."

Xiao Chiye turned his head sideways and looked at Shen Zechuan's silhouette through the screen. He asked, "Why are you hiding in there?"

Shen Zechuan replied, "Checking the accounts."

Xiao Chiye said, "The stuff you want to audit isn't there."

Shen Zechuan closed the book, put it back on the tabletop, and said, "I wouldn't know until I'm done checking."

Xiao Chiye raised a finger to tap on the screen. He said, "Why does it sound like you're checking something else?"

"Treasonable texts, bribery ledgers, military correspondences." Shen Zechuan said to the screen, "I have to check for them all."

"You missed something out, didn't you?" Xiao Chiye said. "Aren't you going to check for lewd poems and erotic arts?"

"I'm here on official business." Shen Zechuan said softly. "Besides, it's broad daylight. I wouldn't dare to be impetuous."

The screen was translucent, so both men's figures were faintly visible. Xiao Chiye's fingers slid along the shadow to the position where Shen Zechuan's neck was. Although there was no physical contact, it still ignited a heat in Shen Zechuan, as if he was being caressed.

"Xi Hongxuan has invited you for a drink." Xiao Chiye said with certainty.

"Hm." Shen Zechuan's response was nonchalant.

The pulps of Xiao Chiye's finger slid to Shen Zechuan's collar. He asked, "Was it good drinking with the courtesans?"

Shen Zechuan replied unhurriedly, "Yes."

Xiao Chiye asked, "Did you drink until you felt hot?"

Shen Zechuan replied, "I did."

Xiao Chiye was hot too. Three of his fingers slid down, seemingly along Shen Zechuan's neck, to pry apart the front flaps of his clothes before slipping further down. Instead of retreating, Shen Zechuan advanced and let Xiao Chiye's fingers slid across his chest through the mist-like ink painting screen.

"Do you wear earrings?" Xiao Chiye suddenly asked.

"Nope." Shen Zechuan tilted his head slightly to expose his ear. "Do you want me to wear?"

"Second Young Master will make a little jasper earring and gift it to you to play with." Xiao Chiye said.

"One?"



“One.” With his eyes closely following Shen Zechuan’s hazy neck and ear, Xiao Chiye said, “Wear it on the right ear.”

Xiao Chiye was used to scoop him up with his right hand. He just had to lower his head slightly when he turned him over, and he would be able to take his earlobe into his mouth. Jasper set against satiny white. His dazed and satiated expression, as his sweat-drenched hair at his ears were brushed aside, would surely be a sight to behold.

Shen Zechuan did not answer, but revealed a meaningful smile through the screen. Xiao Chiye could not see his eyes clearly, but he could see the corners of his lips; he was exuding that kind of subconscious invitation again.

“Hug me.”

“Touch me.”

Xiao Chiye closed his eyes, feeling that Shen Zechuan always left room for more every time. These kind of voiceless lines seemed to urge his surging waves of desire to crash over him even more violently. He swore that he was not originally a man who could be this easily aroused. His desires initially lay in the blue dome of heaven and the grassy wildernesses.

“The wine at Ouhua Pavillion is delicious, as is the wine at Xiangyun Villa.” Shen Zechuan was unaware of the implications of his silence. “But you’ve been hanging out in Xiangyun Villa for years. I supposed you didn’t expect the courtesans of Xiangyun Villa to throw themselves into someone else’s arms too.”

“There’s always a difference between the new lover and the old flames.” Xiao Chiye said, “It’s only natural for them to be jealous now that I’m indulging myself in you.”

“I didn’t know that Xiangyun Villa was under Xi Hongxuan’s control either.” Shen Zechuan said. “What are you to do now that they are unanimously claiming that you took bribes? Are you going to get these old flames to amend their testimonies by melting them with tenderness?”

Xiao Chiye retracted his hand and said, “The owner of Xiangyun Villa is not Xi Hongxuan. At least not while I was still hanging around there. Courtesan Xiangyun of Xiangyun Villa is resourceful. She has a reputation for being talented among the civil officials and even the students of the Imperial College. With that bit of learning Xi Hongxuan has, he would never be able to bring her under his control.”

“You mean?”

“There are only two possibilities that can make Xiangyun commit perjury. One is that she fell in love with some noble young master and was willing to stomp on me for the sake of the other party. The second is that she was coerced by someone and had no other choice but to submit fake testimony.” Xiao Chiye said, “If it’s the latter, we’ll need to investigate it properly.”

“Seems like your old flame still carries some weight in your heart.” Shen Zechuan smiled and said.

Xiao Chiye said, “Xiangyun was the one who leaked news of the surveillance deployment in Qudu every time. Now that she has abruptly switched allegiances... I can’t bear to see her suffer too.”

“What a considerate man.” Shen Zechuan said, “The period after the new year is crucial. Whether or not you can turn the table around and make a comeback at the start of spring depends on how you take a beating now. So don’t you lose your head and go around messing your plan up for the sake of a beauty.”

“I’m idling away at home at present. I can’t get out, so I’ll have to ask you to help me investigate.” Xiao Chiye said, “During your investigation, please pass a message to Xiangyun while you are at it. Tell her that the Second Young Master is still thinking of rekindling old flames with her.”

Shen Zechuan pushed away the screen gently and said, “I’m busy with work these days. I’m afraid I don’t have the time. Why not ask Ding Tao or Gu Jin to make a trip for you?”

Finally able to get a clear look at him, Xiao Chiye said, “Why? Don’t you just happen to be residing on Donglong Street?”

Shen Zechuan was about to answer when he suddenly heard the sounds of footsteps outside. Before he could move, Xiao Chiye suddenly bent over and hoisted him over his shoulder. In a few steps, he leaped over the long table and brought Shen Zechuan into the inner chamber.

Yu Xiaozai lifted the hem of his robe and ascended the stairs. He knocked on the door and called out, “Your Excellency the Judge?”

His Excellency the Judge was pressed up so close against the wall behind the cloth racks that he could not answer. That civilian clothing was covering his body all over. Shen Zechuan backhandedly pressed his palm against Xiao Chiye’s chest and turned his neck to the side, wanting to reply—but Xiao Chiye suddenly held him high. Shen Zechuan bumped into the clothes rack. Seeing that the clothes rack was about to tilt over to the

ground, he immediately raised his leg to stop it in its track. Xiao Chiye exploited the opening and lifted Shen Zechuan's other leg to his waist, thereby trapping the latter before him.

"He has the authority to present the memorial directly to the Emperor for the Emperor's viewing." Xiao Chiye said slowly. "If he were to see you and me together, there'll be no way we can ever explain our way out of this."

Yu Xiaozai knocked on the door again and asked, "Is Your Excellency the Judge here?"

Shen Zechuan grabbed hold of Xiao Chiye's hand and said in a hushed tone, "Taking advantage of someone in a predicament is not what a gentleman should do."

"Me? Taking advantage?" With his hands cupping Shen Zechuan's buttocks, Xiao Chiye pressed his nose in and smiled, "That's right. I'm taking advantage of you while you are in a predicament."

Shen Zechuan locked eyes with him, his chest heaving slightly.

After quite a while of not getting a response, Yu Xiaozai pushed the door open. With the search warrant under his arm, Yu Xiaozai strode in and started to survey the room as he readied himself to search.

Shen Zechuan slowly hooked his long leg back to return the clothes rack into place. His waist and buttocks had to move ever so slightly as he stretched out his leg. But now, they were being cupped in Xiao Chiye's palms. It was only after he broke out in a thin layer of sweat that he steadied the clothes racks.

Once the clothes rack was stabilized, Xiao Chiye pressed in against his ear and whispered very softly, "Actually, it won't topple over."

Shen Zechuan looked at him out of the corners of his eyes and mouthed the words with a smile: *You—Son—Of—A—Bitch*.

Xiao Chiye readily accepted it and said into his ear, "So, wear an earring. Lanzhou."

Yu Xiaozai mumbled something to himself. After looking through the antechamber, he headed for the inner chamber.

Shen Zechuan wanted to move, but Xiao Chiye persisted in pressing against him with the stance of one who would not step aside if he did not nod his head.

"Wear it," Xiao Chiye's breaths moistened Shen Zechuan's ears. The heat was breathed so deep inside that Shen Zechuan's spine tingled with

numbness. Xiao Chiye murmured with a smile, "Wear it for my eyes."

Wear it for my eyes.

What an arrogant and presumptuous request it was. Xiao Chiye no longer avoided his wolfish nature. He pushed and pressed this fervent yet urgent desire towards Shen Zechuan, making sure that Shen Zechuan felt this scalding heat.

The intercourse both men had that night when they plunged into the abyss was one of desperation and despair, where their bloody chests and abdomens clung inseparably close together as their vulnerabilities lay exposed before the other party's eyes. Xiao Chiye did not intend to relive it all alone after daybreak. He wanted to grab hold of Shen Zechuan by the ankle and haul him back little by little to confine him in the sea of desires where there were only the two of them riding its waves.

Yu Xiaozai had already walked to the side of the hanging curtain. Shen Zechuan held on tightly to the fabric on Xiao Chiye's chest and, in this moment of emergency, looked face to face at him in close quarters.

Yu Xiaozai lifted the curtain again and saw no one in the inner chamber. The clothes rack in the corner was cluttered with everyday clothes. It was inconvenient for him to rummage through them, so he could only use his eyes to size up the place.

Shen Zechuan, who was lying under the bed, had difficulty breathing. There was no room under the bed for two people to lay over one another at all. The weight of Xiao Chiye's chest as the latter pressed down on him forced him to open his mouth to breathe slowly. This strong and well-built body was truly too heavy.

Xiao Chiye lowered his head to stare at him.

Shen Zechuan immediately sensed it and said soundlessly: *No way. Nope. No—*

Xiao Chiye kissed him, robbing him of the chance to gasp for breath. Shen Zechuan tightened his grip on his back, gripping him so hard it hurt. But Xiao Chiye still lured him gradually into a state of suffocation. The sensation of being on the verge of fainting rendered Shen Zechuan incapable of warding off Xiao Chiye's offensive.

It was like he was drowning in deep waters, and only Xiao Chiye was the driftwood that could save Shen Zechuan. Yet this driftwood was forcefully staking his claim on his territory like huge swells of raging waves battering away at him, wanting him to remember deeply his ruthlessness

this very moment, along with the trepidation of being progressively invaded by him.



## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 55 : ACCOUNT LEDGERS



With impure intentions, Xiao Chiye raided and seized Shen Zechuan's lips and tongue, throwing Shen Zechuan's mind into chaos as he was kissed until he could not breathe for air. As the time ticked by, his tightly clenched fingers slowly lost their strength.

Being unable to catch his breath caused Shen Zechuan to feel vaguely dizzy. In this murky gray narrowness, he fell prey to the net Xiao Chiye's set as a trap. He seemed to sink deeper into the water in which he was drowning as the sensation of suffocation intensified. Xiao Chiye kept him in captivity in his arms, holding in his struggles, thereby making himself the one and only person Shen Zechuan could rely on at this very moment.

Yu Xiaozai moved to the side of the bed again, his shoes shuffling right beside both men.

The sound of hurried footsteps suddenly rang out outside. Chen Yang said, "So Your Excellency the Censor is here! Please come with this humble servant. Your Excellency is needed to personally look through the documents found in the study."

Thus, Yu Xiaozai followed him out with the document under his arm. He asked, "Where is His Excellency the Judge?"

Chen Yang did not dare to look around the room. He led Yu Xiaozai out and said as he shut the door, "His Excellency the Judge was drinking tea at the duty office room earlier. He should be on the way here right now."

Yu Xiaozai asked, "Didn't His Excellency come over way earlier?"

Chen Yang replied, "It's so freezing cold. He will only feel refreshed and energized if he drinks a cup of tea to warm up..."

They moved farther away into the distance. Only then did Xiao Chiye leave Shen Zechuan's lips a little.

Lying beneath him, Shen Zechuan recovered his breath. His almost blanked-out eyes were lowered. As he swallowed the saliva, his throat bobbed in tandem with the fall and rise of his chest. His lips had been kissed until they had gone bright red and moist. This bout of kiss near about ended him.

Xiao Chiye was gasping for breath too.

Shen Zechuan reached a hand out from under the bed. He made to get out and said, “You—this—”

Xiao Chiye extended a hand to grab his outstretched wrist, pressed the tip of his nose against him, and kissed him once more.

The last time, Shen Zechuan had said that Xiao Chiye was “ravenously gorging himself”. The latter obviously bore a grudge with him for this. This time, Xiao Chiye “took his time savoring and devouring” as he played around with the kiss, cutting off Shen Zechuan’s voice that rang out intermittently and dissolving his words between their intermingling tongues before making him swallow them all back into his tummy.



It was a little less than an hour later when Yu Xiaozai saw Shen Zechuan again. He stepped forth to pay his obeisances and turned pale with alarm. Deeply concerned, he asked, “Your Excellency, this...”

“Got scalded.” Shen Zechuan replied expressionlessly.

The Imperial Bodyguards nearby were still flipping through that extensive library of books. Ge Qingqing came over and shook his head at Shen Zechuan.

They were originally just here to go through the motions. Seeing that it was almost time, Shen Zechuan said to Yu Xiaozai, “The checks here are almost done, so why don’t you and I head for the office compound first to report back to His Excellency Fu.”

Yu Xiaozai concurred and surveyed the place again. He said, “To avoid suspicions, the Viceroy is still sitting outside. Before we leave, we have to notify him.”

Shen Zechuan silently pressed the tip of his tongue against the corner of his lips and nodded his head in response.

Sure enough, when they went out, Xiao Chiye was still sitting by the side of the pond<sup>1</sup> fishing with the same woven raincoat draped over him. It was as if he had been sitting there all day and had gone nowhere else.

“It’s already late. Why don’t both Excellencies have your meal first before you leave?” Xiao Chiye was holding up the fishing rod with his legs propped up. Who knew if he had even caught a fish yet?

Yu Xiaozai declined the offer and excused himself. “Having imposed on Your Excellency for the entire day, I wouldn’t dare to tarry any longer. Next time, I’ll play host and treat both Excellencies to a cup of wine.”

“Sure, if it’s drinking.” Xiao Chiye shook his rod and lifted a small silver crucian carp out of the water. He laughed out loud, tossed the fish into the basket, then set aside the rod, and carried the basket over. Bending over slightly to emerge out of the grove, he tossed the basket to Yu Xiaozai and said, “I owe it to the consideration Your Excellency Yu has shown me today. These fishes are a small thank-you gift from me.”

Some snowy fog fell upon them. Yu Xiaozai was still looking at the fish basket with his head lowered; thus, he was not paying any attention to the two men.

Shen Zechuan looked at Xiao Chiye, who casually rubbed his right ear with his thumb. Shen Zechuan promptly averted his eyes.

Overwhelmed by the favor, Yu Xiaozai said in response, “Oh no, how can I...”

“Why?” Xiao Chiye patted Yu Xiaozai and said, “Don’t tell me the Chief Surveillance Bureau would even consider these few fishes a bribe?”

Yu Xiaozai said hurriedly, “It’s not that...”

“Come over often in the future.” Xiao Chiye moved aside to make way. “Chen Yang, send them off.”

Being inexplicably thanked threw Yu Xiaozai off. He was still unsure what to make of it when he stepped out of the door.

Shen Zechuan was about to get into the carriage when he suddenly touched his right earlobe, feeling as though this spot had been rubbed rotten by that jerk. It was so scalding hot that it made him feel vexed.



Fu Linye was in the Imperial Army’s office compound, sitting in anticipation with his legs raised. Meng Rui attended to him at the side. Seeing him drink cup after cup of tea without even shifting his butt, Meng Rui knew that he would not leave unless he pried something out of them.

Meng Rui was fed up deep down, but he did not dare to let it show even the slightest. He continued to serve him premium tea and said with a smile, “Your Excellency the Censor-in-chief Fu has already looked through the Imperial Army accounts books. The various lords of the Ministry of Revenue have tallied them too. If Your Excellency has something else to check, please feel free to tell this humble servant.”

Fu Linye said unperturbed, “Things like account books have to be carefully audited again and again. There may well be an omission or mistake somewhere. It can’t be rushed. Take another look.”



Wei Huaixing said that Xiao Chiye's repairs of the compound and expansion of the military drill grounds in recent years could not be accounted for. But in truth, it was all detailed in the Imperial Army's account books. Fu LinYE knew that Xiao Chiye was not an easy one to investigate, but he still had to churn out some dirt from this clear water. Otherwise, he could not report favorably back to Wei Huaixing. Moreover, Li Jianheng was always shielding the Imperial Army in the past, so when it came to Xiao Chiye, everyone simply let him be and steered clear of him by default. But this time, Li Jianheng obviously spurned him. The way the wind was blowing now, it was time to make Xiao Chiye suffer a little.

The officials from the Ministry of Revenue who had followed along noisily flicked the beads of the abacus. Lamps had been lit in the hall. Each of them dug into the account books with great focus, loathing their inability to tally each account seven or eight hundred times.

When Shen Zechuan arrived, he even saw Tantai Hu in the corridor. He said nothing, while Qiao Tianya, who was in disguise as an Imperial Bodyguard, followed him from behind and stepped through the door together with him.

The sound of the abacus beads being flicked in the hall rang out endlessly. Fu LinYE set aside the teacup and rose to his feet to greet Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan exchanged greetings with him, after which both men took their seats together.

Fu LinYE asked, "Did the compound search go smoothly?"

Shen Zechuan said, "Xiao'Er delayed us for quite some time."

Fu LinYE inwardly thought to himself, *I knew it*, and said with concern, "Did he make a move? That hoodlum is the most overbearing ever. This trip has been hard on Your Excellency the Judge."

Shen Zechuan thought, *he did make a move, but it has nothing to do with you*. He smiled as well and said, "It doesn't matter. I can still endure this bit of hardship for His Majesty. Xiao'Er initially did not permit me to search his compound. Fortunately, His Excellency Yu was there too and tried his best to persuade him."

As if venting on Shen Zechuan's behalf, Fu LinYE said hatefully, "We are acting on His Majesty's orders. By simply hindering us whenever he wishes to, Second Young Master Xiao not only belittles and disrespects us, but His Majesty too."

Shen Zechuan looked into the interior of the hall and said, “Your Excellency, is the investigation here not done yet?”

Fu LinYE replied, “It’s done. But it needs to be re-audited a few more times. As you know, account books are the easiest to fake.”

Shen Zechuan could tell what he meant from those words. After a moment’s pause, he said, “Your Excellency is the chief official of the search this time, so I’ll do as you say.”

Fu LinYE merely smiled and did not respond. He drank tea with Shen Zechuan until the third quarter of the hour of *zi*,<sup>2</sup> when the newly audited account books were presented before them.

Fu LinYE flipped through them and suddenly asked Meng Rui, “At the start of spring last year, a temple was constructed in the palace on imperial decree. The Ministry of Works entrusted the important task of transportation to the Imperial Army. But then, the construction of the temple fell through. The Viceroy even blocked in the Ministry of Works to demand for money, is that right?”

Meng Rui replied, “That’s right. The money was delayed for several months. It was all the Imperial Army’s hard-earned money. The Viceroy was anxious, so he personally went to ask for it.”

Fu LinYE closed the account books and said with a sneer, “Back then, the state treasury’s expenditure hadn’t been accounted for yet. Even the Directorate of Ceremonial didn’t dare to approve it arbitrarily. How did the Viceroy get the money?”

Meng Rui said, “Our Imperial Army didn’t get the money. It was the Secretary for the Ministry of Revenue, Wang Xian, who made the decision to give a batch of silk from Quancheng to the Imperial Army, and the Imperial Army traded them for money. This account was also recorded in the book, with its coming and going all clearly accounted for.”

Fu LinYE suddenly smacked the tabletop with a force so hard that the teapot clattered. If not for Qiao Tianya’s sharp eyes and swift reaction in catching hold of it, the tea would have poured all over Shen Zechuan’s legs. Shen Zechuan remained smiling in his seat as he waited for Fu LinYE to continue.

This was an account from the start of Spring. At that time, Shen Zechuan was still staying at Zhao Zui Temple, but he knew of this debt. The reason this debt could be eventually resolved was, in truth, not because of Wang Xian, but Xue Xiuzhuo. Xue Xiuzhuo, then the Chief Supervising

Secretary of the Ministry of Revenue, was the one who stepped forth to mediate and settle the debt by offering Xiao Chiye those silk from Quancheng.

Shen Zechuan tapped his fingers on his knee. He thought,  
This account is a loophole.

Sure enough, Fu Linye put on a show of authority and questioned Meng Rui, "This account book indicates that a total of 660 silks were allocated to the Imperial Army. You people recorded it as low-grade silk from Quancheng, but Qudu treasury records state that they were all top-grade silk from Quancheng! It's just a word difference between low-grade and top-grade, but the difference is 4,000 taels! I'm asking you, where did these 4,000 plus taels go?"

Meng Rui's reaction was swift. He answered methodically, "Those allocated to us were indeed low-grade silk from Quancheng. The stuff was dispatched by the Ministry of Revenue themselves, and the handwritten transfer order indicated them to be low-grade silk from Quancheng."

Fu Linye flung down the account book and said, "Of course. Wang Xian, right? He has long been colluding with you people. He wrote low-grade silk from Quancheng on the handwritten transfer order, but the treasury records clearly state that it was top-grade silks from Quancheng that had been taken out. What benefits did Xiao Chiye give Wang Xian that would make Wang Xian forge such a fake order?!"

Shocked, Meng Rui said, "You have no proof! Your Excellency Fu, just —"

"The way I see it, the Imperial Army is a front for harvesting ill-gotten gains. Xiao Chiye has been making a fortune through you people. Anyone with eyes can see it for themselves how he has been fooling around on Donglong Street all these years eating, drinking, and making merry! He has Wang Xian working in cahoots with him prior, and Yuan Liu currying favor and offering him peaches after. All Xiao Chiye does with the backing His Majesty's favor accords him is to engage in shady deals to line his own pockets!" Fu Linye laughed nastily. "Your Excellency the Judge, see this? The number one rising star is the number one thieving traitor! Tonight, you and I shall do another in-depth investigation. There will surely be more of such rotten accounts!"

Shen Zechuan looked at Fu Linye until Fu Linye felt apprehensive. Shen Zechuan said, "This matter has nothing to do with the assassination

case, so it's not within the scope of my duty this time. I'll let Your Excellency decide."

Fu Linye had initially intended to drag Shen Zechuan down with him and make an accomplice out of him, but he wavered a little when he saw that Shen Zechuan did not fall for it. But this matter could be considered a big deal if he reported it to the top. He was not willing to lose the merit for this, and so he steeled himself, slapped the table, and said, "Run another audit! Check all the Imperial Army's account books over the years for hundreds and thousands of times!"

Shen Zechuan suddenly smiled and averted his gaze as he sat on the chair and drank his tea. Although he was smiling on the surface, his heart was gradually sinking. If it were not for Xue Xiuzhuo's involvement in this account, he might not even have noticed it. Most likely, Xiao Chiye himself had forgotten about it too.

Could it be that Xue Xiuzhuo was already on guard against the Imperial Army from that time onwards?

Shen Zechuan blew at the tea foam in silence.



#### Footnotes

1. It actually says 'lake' here, but it was 'pond' in chapter 52.
2. Chinese hours in ancient times came in two-hour blocks. The hour of *zi* (子时) is 11pm-1am. The third quarter (三刻) is at the 45 min mark. So the time is roughly 11.45pm-1.45am.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 56 : BLOWING THE FIRE



The lights of the Imperial Army's office compound remained lit until dawn. The men from the Ministry of Revenue audited until their heads spun. At long last, they sorted out the problematic accounts and handed them over into Fu Linye's hands.

Shen Zechuan reviewed them all. Fu Linye attached the memorial and submitted them together with the progress of the assassination case to Li Jianheng's desk.

The Grand Secretariat then discussed this matter before the Emperor.

Fu Linye said, "Your Majesty, one can know the flavor of the entire pot by sampling a morsel.<sup>1</sup> It can be seen from this case that Xiao Chiye has been taking bribes for a long time. The power and authority of the Imperial Army has been in Xiao Chiye's control over these years. I'm afraid there are still many more falsified accounts like this one. The state treasury is now hard-pressed for money to disburse, and the local tax arrears owed have been piling up one after another. Keeping this kind of people around is like putting a fire under a pile of firewood—a danger whom I fear will jeopardize the state."

Kong Qiu had looked through the books too. But he said, "The assassination case is still pending. It's really not fitting to complicate matters at this time. In this subject's opinion, the investigation for the bribery case can be postponed. At present, we must focus on the assassination case."

"How strange." Wei Huaixing scoffed. "It's all related to him, Xiao Chiye. So why should we investigate the cases separately? We might as well pull out the radish along with the mud<sup>2</sup> and make use of this opportunity to conclude the cases together!"

Kong Qiu remained unwavering and said, "This case has already deviated from the main point. The way I see it, you people do not want to expose the mastermind behind the assassination, but to use this chance to root out dissidents!"

Fu Linye immediately retorted, "The bribery case is the melon we followed the vines to dig out.<sup>3</sup> Why is it that when Minister Kong investigates, he is investigating the case; but when we do it, we are

attacking his faults? The duty of the Chief Surveillance Bureau is to supervise. Was it wrong of me to impeach him for taking bribes?!”

Kong Qiu said, “Wang Xian has not yet been put on trial. If we can pass a judgement on the bribery case just based on your words alone, then what need is there for the Joint Trial by the Three Judicial Offices in the future? We might as well let Your Excellency Fu make the rulings alone! What the Ministry of Justice has to investigate now is to verify the confession statement presented by His Excellency Wei. By the end of the night, I have not even examined the witness testimony and you people are already so anxious to convict him. What’s the hurry? Even if he was at fault that you want to sentence him, you still have to follow the rules and regulations! Otherwise, where does the law stand?!”

The three men began to quarrel before the Emperor. Unable to get a word in, Li Jianheng could only look at Hai Liangyi. Hai Liangyi sat and listened with his head inclined. Once he finished listening to what everyone had to say, he gave a slight nod of his head.

Li Jianheng hurriedly asked, “What does the Secretariat Elder think?”

“What did the Secretariat Elder think?” Shen Zechuan fiddled with the copper coins. “Naturally, he would dismiss the memorial for the bribery case. Hai Liangyi has been stringent for so long that everyone regards him as a straightforward minister who is his own man. But he’s the first one who brought down Hua Siqian and supported Li Jianheng. It’d be strange if he still can’t tell something’s up. Xi Hongxuan and the others want to use him as a shield to make their move this time. Little would they imagine that the Secretariat Elder has long been sitting on the fishing boat<sup>4</sup> keeping a constant eye on the brewing storm.”

“You’ve done well.” Grand Mentor Qi sat at the other end of the small table. “Instead of stopping Fu Linye, you let him make the decision. This credit is all his alone. He is bound to get anxious, and subsequently, he’d be unwilling to wait for a good timing. He’d want to present the memorial right at once in an attempt to earn praises. From that round of denouncement before the Emperor, Hai Liangyi would already have gotten an inkling of what’s happening. By now, he must have already guessed who are the ones who want to take down Xiao Chiye.”

“Just blowing the fire with the wind.<sup>5</sup> This fire isn’t raging hard enough.” Shen Zechuan said, “It can’t even burn Xiao Chiye, let alone Xiao Jiming. The Quancheng silk case, if they were to investigate it seriously, is a

bookkeeping mess that everyone knows all too well. The important thing now is not to reverse the verdict and clear his name, but how to make His Majesty partial to him.”

“That’s right. The reprimand from the suspension of the authority token may seem serious, but in truth, it’s merely a superficial slap on the wrist. His Majesty definitely has yet to harbor the notion of stripping away Xiao Chiye’s military power.” Grand Mentor Qi grasped the chess piece and pondered over it for a while before he said, “You have to let him stay this way. Never let him entertain the intent to take down Xiao the Second. Otherwise, it will be a great disaster in the making even if this is a small victory.”

Shen Zechuan pushed over the copper coins that had been neatly arranged and began to stack them up again, one at a time. Tirelessly enjoying himself, he said, “Hai Liangyi has control of the Grand Secretariat. Although he has placed men of noble birth like Xue Xiuzhuo and the others in important posts to use them, he has also set up an Imperial College and is promoting the minor officials from humble backgrounds. Teacher, he wants to take the progressive approach and confront the noble clans slowly. Just based on this alone, he cannot let Xiao’Er fall.”

“The Xiao Clan is keeping their composure because they understand these all too well. Xiao Jiming is simply sitting and watching without doing a thing because this battlefield is limited to Qudu; it doesn’t extend anywhere near Libei. That makes it easy to resolve, and Xiao the Second would have fewer issues from home to worry about.” Grand Mentor Qi placed the chess piece down and continued, “Everyone is now excitedly kicking a man when he’s down. His Majesty is still angry and so thinks of Xiao the Second as a disloyal, unfilial, and unrighteous person. But once the fire is big enough, it will reverse.<sup>6</sup> Then His Majesty ought to change the status quo and come to pity his buddy who is ‘all by his lonesome self’ instead.”



Li Jianheng had not seen Mu Ru for a few days. After the assassination attempt, he had to sleep with his surroundings brilliantly lit. Not one of the eunuchs were allowed to step into the sleeping chamber, and those attending to him at present were all palace maidservants.

It was snowing heavily again today. Hai Liangyi was sick, so he could not go near the Emperor. Li Jianheng got the Imperial Academy of

Medicine to head to his residence to take a look at him and even bestowed upon him a good deal of tonics. He also assured him repeatedly that he would study hard as usual and not fall behind on his studies.

Ming Li Hall had quietened down. Li Jianheng flipped through a few pages of the book before he felt his back aching. He got up to look out of the window and saw the snow flying all over the sky like cotton. Suddenly in the mood, he summoned the palace maidservants to dress him and drape his cloak over him so he could head out to appreciate the snow.

Li Jianheng roamed the garden with his entourage. When he saw the ice frozen over the lake, he recalled the ice bed he used to play with in the palace.

“It’s just the time to play when winter water freezes into ice.” Li Jianheng asked around him. “Why didn’t anyone bring this up to me this year?”

The moment the words left his mouth, he remembered. Emperor Xiande had just passed this year, and it would not do for him to create a disturbance or cause trouble during the state mourning period. Else, the Chief Surveillance Bureau would scold him. Thinking about this dampened his mood again. No longer wanting to see the snow, he sent someone to call for Mu Ru.

Mu Ru arrived wearing a cape with a hood. Her posture was graceful as she walked among the snow with someone supporting her. On seeing her through the window, Li Jianheng immediately stepped out of the door to meet her.

“My darling.” Li Jianheng said. “The view of you walking in the snow is truly a sight to behold! I have to get someone to draw it down so that I can hang it up in the palace to look at it every day.”

Mu Ru lifted the hood of her cape and said with a smile, “How would that do?” She took the food container from the maidservant’s hands and said, “The weather is cold. I’ve made soup for Liu-lang.”<sup>7</sup>

Li Jianheng’s mood soared when he heard her calling him “Liu-lang”. He led her inside by the hand and dismissed the attendants, then took his seat at the dragon throne, which he used to handle governmental affairs.

Mu Ru ladled out the soup for Li Jianheng, who groused, “The assassination attempt by the castrated traitor the last time scared me so much that I could hardly sleep well these days.”



Mu Ru coaxed him, “There’s only just the two of us here now. So why is Liu-lang using such a formal term<sup>8</sup> again?”

Li Jianheng gave himself a light slap on his own mouth and said, “This husband of yours is so muddle-headed.”

Mu Ru cupped his face in her hands and looked carefully for a moment before saying, “You do indeed look haggard. I’ll keep you company tonight, alright?”

“You’re the only one in the entire world who dotes on me... I originally treated Ce’ an as a brother, but who knew that he would now be implicated in the assassination attempt?” Li Jianheng let out a long sigh. “Just stay with me.”

Mu Ru said, “Her Majesty is very concerned for Liu-lang too. She has been chanting the sutras and going on a vegetarian diet these few days, all to pray for a peaceful new year for Liu-lang.”

Li Jianheng caressed Mu Ru’s hand and said, “I wasn’t close with the Imperial Mother in the past, and I saw her as the villain. Who knew she could still treat me so kindly today? I, I... alas. It’s all the fault of that old dog, Hua Siqian!”

“Who said it isn’t?” Mu Ru looked at him fondly. “Liu-lang has suffered much all because of the trouble that Hua Siqian stirred up. Her Majesty admonished him every way she could back then, but in the end, she’s still a woman whose words hold no weight against a man’s. He brushed off her advice and even blamed her instead.”

“They say what you hear is just hearsay, only seeing is believing.” Li Jianheng said regretfully. “If I could have gotten along with Imperial Mother earlier, there would not have been so many misunderstandings between us.”

“There was an opportunity in the past.” Mu Ru seemed to hesitate. “I heard that many years ago when Liu-lang was still an infant, Her Majesty was already raising the former Crown Prince. But seeing that Liu-lang had no one to rely on, she thought of taking Liu-lang back to her palace to raise as well. Emperor Guangcheng gave his agreement too.”

Li Jianheng had never heard of this and could not refrain from probing further, “Then what happened later? Why didn’t she take me back?”

Mu Ru soothed him for a while before replying, “Later on, the Prince of Libei, Xiao Fangxu, submitted a memorial saying that by adopting the former Crown Prince, Her Majesty had the heavy responsibility of nurturing

the heir apparent to the Eastern Palace. The Crown Prince is all grown. Raising another prince might be just inviting internal strife.”

Li Jianheng said, “Li... so it’s the Prince of Libei!”

The seeds of discord had already been sown between him and Xiao Chiye. All sorts of mixed feelings instantly welled up in him when he heard of this old matter and thought about how Xiao Chiye had never once mentioned it. He felt that Xiao Chiye was too unfathomably shrewd and had never really opened his heart to him as a friend.

“He’s so... When all is said and done,” Li Jianheng said bitterly. “He’s the same as everyone else who treats me as a stepping stone. How pitiable am I to be born a noble, yet not even have a buddy I can rely on!”

Mu Ru hugged him and said, “You aren’t biological brothers after all. Who can compare to the former Emperor when it comes to treating Liu-lang well?”

“A pity... A pity the imperial heirs of our Li Clan are few and far between. There’s only me left now.” At this point, Li Jianheng suddenly asked Mu Ru, “Your younger brother has been hiding at Xue Xiuzhuo’s residence ever since Pan Rugui was beheaded. Is he doing fine now?”

Mu Ru replied, “yes”, then turned around and covered her face to sob.

Li Jianheng hurriedly asked, “My dear Mu Ru, what’s wrong? Why are you crying?”

As Mu Ru wiped her tears with a handkerchief, she looked at him tearfully and said, “He’s doing fine, but he’s not by my side after all, and I can only see him once every few months. He isn’t like any other brother who can still make meritorious contributions to serve the sovereign. All he can do now is to... wait upon others.”

Li Jianheng could not bear to see her cry the most. He immediately said, “All you had to do was to tell me earlier, and it’d all be fine, wouldn’t it? We are husband and wife of the same mind. I’m willing to do anything for you! What’s more, this is human nature. Don’t cry. My heart is going to break from your tears. My dear Mu Ru. I’ll get Xue Xiuzhuo to send him back tomorrow and put him on duty at my side, okay?”

With tears in her eyes, Mu Ru said, “How could that do? How are you going to justify it to the Secretariat Elder? The others won’t agree either. I can’t bear to put you in a difficult spot.”

Li Jianheng held her in his arms and said, “I’m the Emperor. I have the final say when it comes to affairs in the palace! Besides, if we get him to

change his name, who can really insist on digging up his past? Pan Rugui is already dead!”

Mu Ru let him coax her for a while before she broke into a smile and said, “Fengquan would want to kowtow his thanks to you too.”

Li Jianheng said generously, “We are family. By all sentiment and logic, it’s what I ought to do.”



A few days later, the assassination case was still under investigation. Yuan Liu was tortured, and his confession was overturned, yet he insisted that he had never sent golden peaches to Xiao Chiye and did not know a single thing about the shady deal with the Donglong broker. Several times under heavy torture, he thought of giving in and getting it done and over with. But the moment the thought crossed his mind, he would remember that his entire family’s life was still in Xiao Chiye’s hands.

Yuan Liu had been with the Imperial Army for a long time. He knew Xiao Chiye was a different man when it came to treating outsiders versus insiders. The Second Young Master said he would take care of his son on his behalf, and that meant that he would truly look after his son for him. If he so much said a wrong word, his son would be a goner too.

Yuan Liu was caught in the middle of this power struggle, unable to seek life or death. All he could hope was for the case to conclude as soon as possible so that he could be given a quick end.

The opportunity to conclude the case soon came.

The matter kept taking a turn for the worse. Memorials impeaching Xiao Chiye came thick and fast. Strangely enough, after Li Jianheng personally took up his brush to berate Xiao Chiye, the Secretary for the Ministry of Justice submitted a report before the Emperor and said that their investigation had led them to a person.

This person’s name was Yinzhu. He was a eunuch from the Imperial Bakery. According to his oral testimony, he had been distributing fortune candies to the various imperial concubines four hours before the Feast of A Hundred Officials was due to start when he saw someone rebuking Fuling at the side of Caiwei Palace.

And Caiwei Palace just happened to be the place where Mu Ru resided.



Special Thanks to: [Eggy](#)<3

#### Footnotes

1. 尝鼎一臠 i.e., infer the whole from a part
2. 拔萝卜带出泥 i.e., a metaphor in which the investigation of the criminal who was arrested first leads to the exposure of other criminals.
3. 顺藤摸瓜, i.e., track down something by following the clues.
4. 久(稳)坐钓鱼台 i.e., stay calm during tense situations; keeping a cool head in a crisis
5. 因风吹火 i.e., doing something by making use of the opportunity available, or going with the flow
6. 物极必反, i.e., things will develop in the opposite direction when they become extreme or hit their limit.
7. 郎 Lang, young man; a form of address. Also used as a term by a woman to address her lover or husband. The Liu refers to “sixth” here; presumably Li Jianheng is the sixth prince.
8. In this chapter thus far, Li Jianheng has been using “朕” to refer to himself. It’s an imperial term for “I” exclusively used by the Emperor. It differentiates the monarch from all his people and subjects.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 57 : CASE CLOSED



Translated with: [Eggy](#), [Yunyun](#)<3



“It was a cold day that day, thick with dark clouds and strong wind. This slave was distributing fortune candies to the various imperial concubines. When I came out of Caiwei Palace, I happened to encounter Imperial Concubine Mu-niangniang setting out, so I withdrew to the corner of the wall. It was then I heard someone in the midst of reprimanding another. I took a peek and saw the eunuch-in-charge of Caiwei Palace arguing with Aunt Fuling inside.”

“Why did you keep silent on this matter during the first trial?”

It was quiet in the hall, except for the sound of record-taking. A few lamps had been lit. Kong Qiu, who had been investigating for several nights in a row, had already drunk many a pot of strong tea. Right this moment, both of his hands were clasped before him as he asked Yinzhu, who was kneeling in the hall.

Yinzhu’s mouth opened and closed. “To reply Your Excellency, this slave thought this was a trivial matter. And because of the strong wind that day, I really didn’t hear what they were arguing about. So I was afraid I would give the wrong answer.”

“If that’s the case, then why did you suddenly confess?” Fu LinYE questioned.

Yinzhu wrung the corner of his clothes and gulped down his saliva in panic and trepidation. It took him quite some effort before he replied in a small voice, “I was scared to death by the beatings of the prison guard grandpa... Ever since I was thrown into the prison, I’ve been listening to the sound of whipping every night. This slave’s godfather was beaten half to death until he confessed everything regardless of importance. This slave is truly afraid now...”

“You are in the solemn place of interrogation. How dare you ramble on and on?!” Fu LinYE rebuked in a stern voice.

Yinzhu was so frightened by him that he trembled and stammered while kneeling on the ground, "This slave... had no idea that she would commit such a despicable act!"

"It's easy for one to be beaten into a confession under heavy torture. This person's words cannot be trusted." Fu LinYE said to Kong Qiu. "How can such a confession be submitted before the Emperor?"

"The detailed discussions of the third trial are all recorded in writing. Whether it's true or not, His Majesty will naturally make a ruling himself." Kong Qiu said. "Once the statement has been transcribed and copied, the Secretariat Elder will require a copy on their end too."

Fu LinYE had never expected a Cheng Yaojin<sup>1</sup> to come charging out of nowhere when the case had already progressed to this stage. He could stomp on Xiao the Second because he was certain that Xiao the Second could not retaliate this time. A Yuan Liu whose name could not be clear meant that he, Xiao the Second, would not have a clean name too. Who knew that Caiwei Palace would be dragged in as well? This was just great. Everyone was tainted. Could they even continue to investigate this case in-depth?

Fu LinYE could immediately tell that this Yinzhu was not a simple man. He waited until the third trial before he was willing to voice this out. Most likely, someone had planted him here to wait!

Fu LinYE was burning with anxiety. He was different from Wei Huaixing, who had the Wei Clan behind him, while the Wei Clan had ties to the other clans. Even if Wei Huaixing could not explain himself, he would only end up with a punishment based on the outcome of the investigation. But what about him? He had no influential clan to fall back on!

Seeing his expression undergoing several changes, Kong Qiu said, "Caiwei Palace is the imperial harem after all. It's not appropriate for us external ministers to investigate, so we still have to discuss this matter before the Emperor. Your Excellency Fu, go back and get some rest. We'll meet again before the Emperor."

Fu LinYE rose to his feet. Even though he was anxious, he could still plaster a smile on his face as he cupped his hands in respect to Kong Qiu and retreated in a hurry.

At this moment, the sky was still dark and bitterly cold. Fu LinYE urged the groom on. The horse carriage crushed noisily over the snow as it rushed

towards Ouhua Pavilion. Lifting the hem of his robe, he stepped down and hurried on upstairs.

Xi Hongxuan, who was versed in opera tunes, was presently discussing his new work with Shen Zechuan. Shen Zechuan was tired of the Imperial Bodyguards' robe, so he was wearing a wide-sleeved garment as he leaned against the chair and listened, all the while opening and closing the folding fan in his hand.

Fu Linye was not expecting Shen Zechuan's presence when he barged in.

Shen Zechuan closed his fan gently and turned a blind eye to Fu Linye's sorry sight. Without rising to greet him, he merely said with a smile, "Your Excellency the Censor has come a little too late. You've missed the wonderful timing."

Xi Hongxuan was a little displeased. He waved away the procuress who had hurried over and had her close the door. He did not get up either, and simply let Fu Linye take a seat on his own and said, "Linye, why have you come here? You should have sent someone over in advance to give notice! It's just a few steps away. Did you have to hurry over like this and disgrace yourself so?"

Not only was Fu Linye older than Xi Hongxuan, his grade was also higher than Xi Hongxuan. Yet he was now being chastised by Xi Hongxuan like a junior being berated. This made him unhappy. He loathed the way Xi Hongxuan was acting all high and mighty.

"It's extremely urgent!" It was as if Fu Linye did not hear the rebuke. He smiled as he lifted his robe to take his seat. He said, "I rushed here as soon as I left the Ministry of Justice. So you tell me if it's urgent or not."

Only then did Xi Hongxuan ask, "What's the matter?"

Fu Linye looked at Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan lifted his fan and said, "It is I who have been rude."

With that, he was about to get up.

Xi Hongxuan hurriedly said, "Lanzhou, what are you doing? Sit down. We are in the same boat, weathering through thick and thin. What is there that you can't listen to? Linye, go ahead and tell me! Don't you recognize this Shen Lanzhou? He's the great teacher of our Xi Clan!"

Fu Linye initially only saw Shen Zechuan as a lackey who toiled for the Xi Clan in an attempt to survive. Who knew that Xi Hongxuan would value him this much?

But tonight, Fu Linye had indeed come at the wrong time. If he had been a little earlier, or a little later, Xi Hongxuan would not have spoken so highly of Shen Zechuan. But they had only just finalized the follow-up plan to suppress the Yao Clan, closing the loop tight around the latter's neck. Xi Hongxuan just happened to be thinking of showing Shen Zechuan some due respect. Now that he had elevated him, he would no longer be able to call him his buddy as he wished in the future.

Shen Zechuan smiled and looked at Fu Linye. Knowing what was expected of him, Fu Linye immediately said tactfully, "Your Excellency the Judge, please take a seat."

Xi Hongxuan shifted his legs to step on the tiger skin and said, "Go on. What's the urgency?"

Fu Linye said, "I was on jury duty earlier at the Ministry of Justice and heard the news that Fuling, who had instigated Guisheng into carrying out the assassination, was involved with Caiwei Palace. Second Young Master, the one living in Caiwei Palace in Imperial Concubine Mu-niangniang. This matter is going to be presented to the Emperor tomorrow morning. When the time comes, it won't be a matter of investigating just Xiao the Second!"

Xi Hongxuan placed his hand on his leg for support. After a moment of silence, he said to Shen Zechuan, "You don't know it—I forgot to mention it to you earlier, but our man is connected to Mu Ru."

Most likely, Xi Hongxuan did not forget to mention it, but did not want to mention it. All this while, he had been on guard and that he had never uttered a word.

Shen Zechuan knew this all too well and merely said, "Isn't Mu Ru originally Pan Rugui's woman? I remember her younger brother."

"That's right." Xi Hongxuan was unwilling to speak the truth and merely told half of the story. "Pan Rugui is dead. She has nowhere to go, doesn't she? At that time, when his residence was searched and raided, they wanted to release her from Pan Rugui's residence and had her fill in as an official courtesan.<sup>2</sup> But His Majesty could not bear to let her be one, so he asked me to help. I made use of that bit of friendship I had with Yanqing and had her swapped out. Then I found a residence for the two siblings to hide in. Later, His Majesty could endure it no longer and insisted on getting her into the palace. Secretariat Elder Hai even made a scene over it. You know about this too."



Shen Zechuan did not really seem to care. He nodded and said, "I've heard of it. This doesn't bode well then. This case should have concluded already. Why did complications arise again?"

He looked at Fu Linye when he said this. Although he said it with a smile, it sounded a little like he was blaming Fu Linye for not keeping a close watch.

Xi Hongxuan was frowning too. He said, "You are on the jury to supervise. Can't you just think of a way to suppress this matter? It will only stir up trouble if it gets presented to the Emperor."

Fu Linye had plenty of complaints too, but he could only say, "Second Young Master, my words carry little weight. We're talking about Kong Qiu here! He's a stubborn man who doesn't listen to advice. He's Secretariat Elder Hai's man. How would he listen to me? What's of top priority now is to decide what to do next. If Imperial Concubine Mu-niangniang is involved too, then who would still dare to continue investigating? I'm afraid even His Majesty himself would not be willing to!"

Xi Hongxuan pondered over it in irritation, then asked, "Where is that Yinzhu?"

Fu Linye instantly understood his intention and hurriedly waved his hands and said, "We can't kill him! Second Young Master, Secretariat Elder Hai is already on the alert now. If we silence him at this critical juncture, then it'd only prove to him that there's something questionable about us!"

"It was originally going well. How did a Caiwei Palace suddenly pop up out of the blue?!" Xi Hongxuan covered up his teacup with the lid and said, "No. We can't continue to investigate this case any further. Before the Emperor tomorrow morning, we have to think of a way to make His Majesty sever the notion of a further investigation."

Mu Ru was still of great use. They must let no one else take her down right at this moment.

Fu Linye fidgeted in his seat and said, "That's right. It'd be best to pin it all on Fuling! Conclude this case as fast as possible, and everyone can heave a sigh of relief. But from the way Kong Qiu looks to me, he clearly wants to get to the bottom of the matter!"

"The crux still lies with Secretariat Elder Hai." Shen Zechuan pressed his fingers against the teacup for warmth. "Hai Liangyi was the one who reviewed Kong Qiu's papers during the imperial examination back then, so Kong Qiu could be partially considered a student of Hai Liangyi whom Hai

Liangyi selected for promotion. He usually has the most respect for Hai Liangyi.”

“Hai Liangyi wants to send him into the Grand Secretariat. He handles all his cases beautifully. He’s of the right age too, and he comes from a humble family in the Chijun Commandery. He hits all the right notes with Hai Liangyi.” Xi Hongxuan said, “What fucking bad luck! We set up Xiao the Second, and all of them secretly enjoyed the show as they waited to see Xiao the Second suffer in silence. Now that something has happened, they all want to feign ignorance after having benefited from it.”

“Let’s do this.” Shen Zechuan said, “Your Excellency Fu, when the confession is presented before the Emperor tomorrow morning, don’t mention Caiwei Palace. Just say the Imperial Army’s name is not clear yet. Yuan Liu has not admitted his guilt yet, right? This is an opportunity. As long as Yuan Liu is still around, then he, Xiao’Er, has accepted bribes. He won’t be able to clear himself of suspicions.”

Fu Linye rubbed his leg and said, “But even if I don’t mention it, Kong Qiu will still bring it up! We won’t be able to hide it.”

“Mending the fold even after the sheep is lost.” Shen Zechuan nudged the fan open bit by bit, then closed it again and said, “Earlier, Your Excellency’s speech before the Emperor was a righteous one said ‘for the sake of the empire and state’. If you were to change your statement because of a confession that has yet to be verified, then I’m afraid His Majesty will come to question your loyalty too. So why not latch on to Xiao’Er and put on an ‘upright’ appearance instead?”

“That’s right!” Xi Hongxuan said. “We can’t be thrown into confusion now. Since you have already stepped forth to make your stand, it wouldn’t look pretty if you were to pull out now. Let’s just continue with this. As for the rest, I’ll naturally have my own way. It’s almost dawn. You mustn’t stay for long. Head back first for a bath and a change of clothes. Just watch the way the wind blows when you are before the Emperor and improvise as the situation calls for.”

Fu Linye came in a hurry, then left again in a hurry without even taking a sip of tea. As soon as he left, Xi Hongxuan spat behind his back.

“If he hadn’t been so eager for quick success and instant gains and reported Xiao the Second’s Quancheng silk matter to the top without saying a word that day, Hai Liangyi might not have noticed it.” Xi Hongxuan felt fed up and continued, “Those who come from poor and humble households

are the most short-sighted! For that bit of glory, he didn't even dare to give us prior notice. See what happens now? What a waste of the chess piece Yanqing left us! After this, Xiao the Second will keep a tight guard over the account books. It'll be difficult to get at them later."

"Position and wealth are ailments of the rich." Shen Zechuan said. "At present, we need to keep him from interfering in our plans. How is it going with the Eight Great Training Divisions' matter?"

"Han Cheng's younger brother took over the post." Xi Hongxuan said, "Xiao the Second has set up the Eight Great Training Divisions into a heavily fortified network of relationships. We won't be able to lay our hands on it easily. To think he managed to hold all the important posts firmly in his hand in such a short period of time. It's not going to be easy to dismantle it."

"Even so, there are also descendants of the Eight Great Clans among the soldiers he selected for appointment." Shen Zechuan smiled and said, "You'll still get your chance."

When Shen Zechuan emerged and got into the carriage, he saw a *guqin*<sup>3</sup> placed within.

Qiao Tianya lifted the curtain. In disguise with the face of a burly chap, he said, "That *qin* is mine. Master mustn't throw it away. It took me quite a lot of effort to swindle it away."

"It looks valuable." Shen Zechuan did not touch it. "Where did you get the money?"

Qiao Tianya laughed merrily. "A reward from the ladies."

But this *qin* was obviously something that money could not buy. Qiao Tianya had no wish to speak of it because it most likely had something to do with his family. So Shen Zechuan did not probe further.

As usual, the horse carriage sent Shen Zechuan home to tidy up. After changing his robes, he entered the palace.



Li Jianheng dismissed the morning court and told every important official to take a seat in Mingli Hall. He himself read the entire confession statement and stayed silent for a long time.

Hai Liangyi had only just recovered from his illness, so Li Jianheng got someone to serve him a bowl of warm goat's milk. He took a few sips. No one in the hall said a word.

Li Jianheng said, "Why are we back to Caiwei Palace again? Yuan Liu hasn't been fully investigated yet."

Kong Qiu answered, "This matter concerns the imperial harem, so His Majesty should be the one to make a ruling."

Li Jianheng immediately got anxious and said, "What ruling? Even if she went to Caiwei Palace, it can't... have anything to do with Imperial Concubine Mu. Who knows if what he says is true or false?"

Hai Liangyi said in a steady voice, "Of course, it's false."

"Right, it's false!" With Hai Liangyi as his backing, Li Jianheng's voice grew louder and clearer. "The eunuchs are the most treacherous. To survive, what kind of lies can they not fabricate? He thought he could save his own life by getting close to Concubine Mu; I'm going to make that absurd and befuddled head of his roll!"

"Even so," Xiao Jiming, who had not uttered a word regarding this case, raised his eyes. "This concerns the safety of the Son of Heaven. We can't be slipshod when it comes to certain matters."

He hit the nail on the head as soon as he spoke.

Wei Huaixing said, "Of course we can't muddle through this. We have not investigated Yuan Liu yet, have we ....."

"The lead investigator of this case is the Minister of Justice. The Left and Right Censor-in-Chiefs of the Court of Judicial Review, as well as the Imperial Bodyguards, are on the jury. Your Excellency Wei has repeatedly intervened. This is inappropriate." Xiao Jiming said with poise and courtesy, even giving Wei Huaixing time to speak. But Wei Huaixing did not dare to continue. And so Xiao Jiming kept going. "This case concerns the Imperial Army and the imperial harem; a scene should not have been made right out in the open. It's not the reputation of everyone here that is at stake, but the dignity of His Majesty. More than ten days have passed since this case occurred. There is still no proof for one Judge of the Imperial Army, and no clarity on one confession statement from the brothel. Everything has been delayed in the hands of the Investigating Censor of the Chief Surveillance Bureau. From what I can see, neither the lead investigator nor the jury has done their jobs. Let's leave aside the wasting of time and energy for now; it's the overstepping of authority that is the real problem."

Fu Linye thought of the words Xi Hongxuan had said last night. He found himself in a difficult position again when faced up against Xiao

Jiming. But when he saw that Li Jianheng had not said a word, and that Hai Liangyi did not seem to have the intention to help him out of the fix, he could only brace himself to keep his composure. He said, “The Hereditary Prince has lived in Libei for too long; Qudu is not the frontiers, after all. There are many matters that are settled differently based on the difference in relevancy, so naturally .....

“Any abuse of power within the military all falls under the charge of insubordination. Under the military law, the offender would be executed.” Zhao Hui, who held an official appointment in the military, stepped out and continued, “The Hereditary Prince should not be the one to speak on this matter, but it has been so long, and not even one of you has thought to remind His Majesty. Even Their Excellencies Censors-in-Chief seem to be in dreamland the way they handled this case in such a muddled way! The token of the Imperial Army Viceroy has been suspended for over ten days. The Censor has already conducted a search thrice. And what has the investigation thrown up? Ought we not to be given an explanation?”

Fu LinYE said, “Didn’t we find out about the matter of the Quancheng silk?”

“You’re being asked about the assassination case right now!” Li Jianheng threw aside the confession statement. “Why are you dredging up this irrelevant case?”

Fu LinYE answered hastily, “Xiao Chiye is the root of all problems. He can’t clear his involvement in the other cases too. Your Majesty, the assassination case must be investigated. But the bribery case must be diligently followed through as well.”

“What bribe did he take?!” Li Jianheng stood up and pointed at Fu LinYE, “Quancheng silk! Quancheng silk! Did you think I didn’t know of this matter? I was still hanging out with him on the streets back then! I know about this more than you do! The assassin had already killed his way right before me. Yet you aren’t anxious, and you are still fixated on this minor issue. Looks like the safety of the Son of Heaven is of no importance to you!”

Fu LinYE did not expect Li Jianheng to turn around and rebuke himself after fastidiously deliberating over his words to reproach Xiao Chiye a few days back, so he could not help but kneel in fear and said, “Your Majesty! Your Majesty is this subject’s sovereign. It’d devastate me even if a strand of your hair was harmed. Your Majesty!”

“Everything has its own priority in terms of importance and urgency. For this assassination case, Minister Kong had not slept for several nights in a row.” Xiao Jiming said, “Ce’an had handed over his authority token too. To avoid a conflict of interest, he doesn’t even dare to ask about the progress of the case and has been reflecting on his faults the whole day at home. It would be better to clarify everything all at once now—the current progress of the case, the stage the investigation is at, and the future course of investigation. This way, my residence can be better prepared for it.”

The Vice Minister of Rites, Jiang Xu, stepped out and said, “The case is clear as day and involves the Imperial Army. It does not concern the Prince of Libei’s residence. Who went and conducted a search there? This is against decorum. Should the news spread, everyone will think that it’s His Majesty who is investigating the Prince of Libei, and the friendly relations between Qudu and the frontiers will be impacted.”

Li Jianheng knew of the search at the prince’s residence, but he had to feign ignorance. Dumb as he was, he still understood that Xiao Jiming had been observing everything that had happened these few days. There would be trouble if they kept on holding Xiao Chiye responsible.

Li Jianheng immediately kicked Fu LinYE a few times with his foot and scolded him, “How dare you! Who allowed you to investigate the Prince of Libei’s residence? My order was for you to investigate the Imperial Army’s office compound!”

Enduring the kicks, Fu LinYE hurriedly said, “It wasn’t this, this subject who investigated! Judge Shen was the one who went!”

Shen Zechuan was momentarily stunned before he said, perplexed, “I received the imperial edict to assist Your Excellency in the investigation. It was Your Excellency who exhorted me, saying that ‘the Imperial Army is as impenetrable as a metal bucket. I’m afraid there will be many accounts that are both authentic and doctored. When the time comes, Do a thorough search when you’re at the prince’s residence’, and so I went. At that time, there were many people who were serving tea and water at the hall. Just call in one of them for questioning, and they can all tell you that it was Your Excellency who told me that.”

Fu LinYE said through clenched teeth, “I only told you to do a thorough search. I did not mention the words prince’s residence!”

Shen Zechuan said with a severe countenance, “I take orders from the Son of Heaven. I would never speak a word of falsehood before the

Emperor. If I did not have Your Excellency's order and went alone to the prince's residence, then how could there have been an accompanying censor with me?"

Fu Linye saw the malice in Shen Zechuan's eyes and knew that he had incriminated the wrong person in his moment of haste. He looked around and said, "Your Excellency Wei, didn't Your Excellency Wei—"

Wei Huaixing instantly yelled to cut him off, "Shut up! How dare you implicate others before His Majesty for what you've done of your own accord! Do you have no shame? Delaying the case is minor; but ruining the good will between His Majesty and Libei is of grave concern! You really have no sense for the gravity of matters!"

At this point, Fu Linye already knew that he had been kicked forth to be the scapegoat. He had to take the blame for Li Jianheng, for Wei Huaixing, for Xi Hongxuan and company! And these were all people he could not afford to offend. When the higher-ups were in-fighting, it was up to him to clean up the mess.

Fu Linye immediately kowtowed and said, "This subject had a momentary lapse of judgment!"

"And yet you still dare to make excuses!" Li Jianheng pointed at him and admonished, "Ce'an's authority token may have been suspended. But before the case is concluded, he is still the Viceroy of the Imperial Army! Investigate as you will; but how dare you also have an attitude towards the Imperial Army! Seems to me that you aren't investigating the case at all. You are clearly trying to eliminate the dissidents!"

Li Jianheng had not lost his temper ever since he denounced Xiao Chiye that day, and now he was chiding Fu Linye until the latter trembled from head to toe. Fu Linye was sensible too, and knew to shed tears as he kneeled, completely restoring all dignity to Xiao Jiming.

Xiao Jiming waited until Li Jianheng rebuked to his heart's content before saying, "His Excellency is just eager to investigate the case. Since the case has caused a commotion to such extent, why not dismiss Ce'an from his post? The Chief Surveillance Bureau's impeachment memorials these days make reasonable sense, if you ask me, Ce'an cannot be excused for his negligence. He is indeed ill-suited to carry on his duties before His Majesty."

With that, he smiled again.

“All the testimonies are pointing the finger at him. If he really did this kind of disgraceful, treacherous deed, then all nine generations in his clan should be executed. With everyone present here today, then to avoid conflicts of interests and to clear myself of suspicions, strip me of my Libei military forces authority token too. I have already sent a letter to Libei to ask Father to remove his crown and robe, and enter Qudu with my wife and son as commoners without rank<sup>4</sup> to stand trial!”

At the drop of Xiao Jiming’s words, Li Jianheng panicked. It would not do for him to respond or remain silent on the matter, so he could only look toward Hai Liangyi.

Hai Liangyi held gazes with Xiao Jiming for some time. The older man suddenly laughed and said, “The Hereditary Prince jests. Isn’t this case already closed? So why tease this old subject again?”

Kong Qiu composed himself and swiftly followed up, “That’s right, the Secretariat Elder is right. Although Yuan Liu has bought a house on credit from the Donglong broker, that is, after all, a private affair between him and Fuling. It isn’t meant to be made public. The Viceroy oversees twenty thousand men; how would it be possible for him to investigate every single matter personally? As for the bribery case, Yuan Liu had been denying all this while, so we cannot only listen to Xiang Yun’s one-sided statement. This subject has already ascertained that Xiang Yun most likely bore hatred out of love towards the Viceroy, so her excuse doesn’t stand!”

Li Jianheng personally stepped forward and said, “Since the case is closed, then there is no need to mention it again! Hereditary Prince, please rise quickly!”

Li Jianheng did not want to investigate further either. The involvement of Caiwei Palace meant that it would involve Mu Ru too. Fu Linye was already a pawn to be disposed of at one’s convenience. To these people, Mu Ru was an even lesser being. If there were really something between her and these cases, then he, Li Jianheng, would really be all alone by himself <sup>5</sup> from then on.

Li Jianheng watched these people, who were still talking and laughing as usual, but he felt as though they were not human. What stood behind them were monstrosities that far surpassed that of the throne, like the unstoppable floods and hurricanes.

Being a sovereign did not mean that he was free and unstrained. Every single move of his could have repercussions on the situation. Those that he



raged against and delighted in could all become vulnerabilities that proved fatal to him. He was no longer his own master. He was a prisoner chained to the dragon throne.

How terrifying.

Li Jianheng hugged himself somewhere deep in his heart.

It was as if he was standing on thin ice when he stood beside these people. If he were to accidentally fall someday, then he would end up like his Imperial Elder Brother. In the blink of an eye, he would be trampled into a bloody pulp by the contending hooves of the various parties in the tussle for power.

His life and death were not in the least bit important. What's important was merely the fact that he was the only one whose surname happened to be Li.

But, what if there was someone else in this world with the surname Li?

Li Jianheng trembled at the thought and instantly broke out in cold sweat.

Impossible.

He gloomily muttered to himself.

There won't be.



#### Footnotes

1. (半路)杀出个程咬金 Cheng Yaojin ambushes the enemy. Cheng Yaojin (589-665) was a general in the period between Sui and Tang Dynasties, who often ambushed his enemies on the roads. This proverb is used to describe a situation where someone shows up unexpectedly and disrupts a plan. It is also used to describe an unwelcome busybody who shows up where they are not wanted.
2. Official prostitutes that provided entertainment for officials and scholars alike, not just with her body, but with her mind (e.g., they were typically trained in poems, songs, and the likes.).



- 3.
4. (古)琴 (Gu)qin is a plucked seven-string Chinese musical instrument of the zither family. That's the weapon used by Lan Wangji of MDZS is the guqin.
5. 白衣, a man without an official title/post (who in former times was supposed to be dressed in white). i.e., a commoner
6. 唇亡齿寒, when the lips are gone the teeth will be exposed to the cold; if one of two interdependent things falls, the other is in danger and will most likely share the same fate.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 58 : HEAVY SNOW



Note:

The title 大雪 means both heavy snow and also Great Snow, which is the 21st of the 24 solar terms in the lunar calendar. (i.e. Winter).



The snow fell for several days. With the assassination case hastily concluded, the turbulent waves of earlier were swiftly buried under the snowstorm, turning into nothing more than a vast expanse of white. It was at this moment that Li Jianheng heard that Xiao Chiye had fallen ill.

He had reportedly caught a cold, and yet he still faced the wall in self-reflection until he eventually collapsed onto the couch, apparently too ill to even get up. Li Jianheng braved the snow and set out on a carriage with his retinue to the Prince of Libei's residence. He led the various ministers, and once again, became good buddies with Xiao Chiye.

All the others had left the room. Xiao Chiye's complexion was pale as he let Chen Yang help him up to sit face-to-face with Li Jianheng.

Li Jianheng said, "I feel very ashamed for rebuking you that day after believing those slanders."

Xiao Chiye said, "The ruler and his ministers are interdependent on one another. That's the way it should be. Your Majesty needs not take it to heart."

Li Jianheng fell silent, as did Xiao Chiye. In the end, they had both come to the point of addressing themselves as ruler and minister in private.

Li Jianheng forced a laugh and said, "I used to think that you were made of iron and wouldn't get sick. I didn't expect you to be no different from the common man when you fall ill."

Xiao Chiye said, "This subject is merely an ordinary man with a body made of flesh and blood. I'd still bleed if I were to get stabbed."

Li Jianheng recalled the night at the hunting grounds where Xiao Chiye had spurred his horse into the Imperial Bodyguards all alone as the Imperial Bodyguards outflanked them. He had barely come out of it alive, and subsequently, he had put him on to the dragon throne.

Humans were truly strange. When they abhorred a person, they would only remember all that was bad about said person. But once guilt came calling, they would only remember his goodness. It was as if they had taken to heart those words they had used to cuss the other party with others, thereby feeling more and more ashamed.

There were plenty of things Li Jianheng wanted to ask Xiao Chiye. But at this moment, he did not feel like asking anymore. Xiao Chiye said that a body of flesh and blood would bleed. Then, what about the friendship that had grown apart?

So Li Jianheng said, "... Sitting in this position is not a choice I... I<sup>1</sup> willingly make. Ce' an, you've never sat here, so you won't understand how it feels like to be in a precarious position. The others all think that sitting in this position will make them happy and carefree. In the past, I used to think so too. But this isn't the case at all."

Xiao Chiye said nothing.

Li Jianheng's eyes suddenly reddened. He did not know what made him sad either, so he could only say, "I was originally a hopeless case. I'm telling you; I'm very much aware of it. If my brothers hadn't died, this position would not fall into my hands. But what have I done wrong? I have always wanted to be an idle prince. You people shove me up here without even asking... I have done my best, Ce'an. I have really done my best. I'm not capable enough to control this power of the world; I can only let it control me!"

Li Jianheng covered his face in agony and started to choke with sobs.

"Ce'an, it's too high sitting up here that I can't even get a clear look at anything!"

Xiao Chiye's eyes reddened too. He said, "We are brothers. Why would I blame you?"

Li Jianheng forcefully wiped away his tears and said, "But when all is said and done, I have marred our brotherhood."

Xiao Chiye said, "Why blame yourself for something you have no choice over? I'm the one who has been too ostentatious in the way I do things. I deserve to be put in my place by someone else."

Li Jianheng said, "Such is your temper. You can't be faulted for this. They are only egging me on like this for their own sake. I've let you down, Ce'an."

They both seemed to have buried the hatchet and returned to the time they were each other's confidants. But the usual lightheartedness of clowning and jesting around had eventually given way to an awkward atmosphere that was more deference and less closeness.

Li Jianheng did not stay long and left after he was done saying his piece. But before he left, he showered Xiao Chiye with lots of rewards and urged him to rest well.

As soon as the people cleared out, Xiao Chiye tossed away the pillow supporting his back. Rising to his feet, he draped on his clothes and put on his shoes before heading for Xiao Jiming's study.

Xiao Jiming was in the study listening to Zhao Hui speaking on military affairs. When he saw Xiao Chiye coming in, he waved his hand at him and motioned for him to sit before him.

Zhao Hui did not stop and continued to say, "The Ministry of Revenue has already investigated the expenditure of military funds before the new year. The Grand Secretariat is still in discussion regarding the sum after the new year. The snow is heavy this year, and the people of Juexi are happy because the timely snow is an auspicious omen for a prosperous year, and they can look forward to a bumper harvest this year. But in Zhongdu, people are already starting to freeze to death."

"In recent years, the prefectural yamen in Zhongbo has been short of manpower. With this heavy snow, there are few people who will be able to go and repair the collapsed abodes." Xiao Jiming drank his hot tea and thought for a moment. "Tell the Ministry of Revenue to set aside 40,000 silver from Libei's military funds at the start of the year to be used as repair funds for Cizhou of Zhongbo."

Cizhou was right next to the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path. This favor Xiao Jiming did could be said to be the rendering of timely assistance, much like sending charcoal in snowy weather.<sup>2</sup>

Understanding his intent, Zhao Hui lifted his brush to record it in the book.

"The prefectural yamen of Zhongbo lacks manpower, and there aren't many officials in the capital who are willing to go over. But it's indeed not a long-term solution to leave it hanging like this." Xiao Chiye poured tea for Xiao Jiming.

"Hua Siqian was unwilling to take charge of this in the past. This is a hot potato. Taking it means having to fork out your own money." Xiao

Jiming moved his fingers along the teacup and said, "But now, Secretariat Hai is in charge. This year's spring examination<sup>3</sup> should be to seek a suitable candidate for Zhongbo."

"Most of the new officials are inexperienced and have no prestige to speak of. They can be low-ranking officials, but they won't be able to secure their positions if they are to be high-ranking officials of the border-provinces." Xiao Chiye said. "The one going to Zhongbo to run the show still has to be selected from the central administration."

"There is a shortage of talents who can assume responsibility and are up to the task nowadays." Xiao Jiming said, "Zhongbo used to be a vassal state in the past. Thanks to the Shen Clan, there were many deep-rooted and complicated collusions taking place under the table and plenty of matters that couldn't be explained or accounted for. When Shen Wei was still around, it was already a set stage. Five years ago, it was abruptly thrown into anarchy and is now a land of chaos. At that time, the common folks fled away from it because of the Biansha's massacres of the cities. The imperial court was tardy in coming out with a pacification policy. Those who are still in Zhongbo are mostly the remaining military households from the garrison army and the roving bandits. As they say, barren hills and untamed rivers<sup>4</sup> will produce undesirable citizens, and the current situation in Zhongbo is nothing but such. If the typical official were to go, he won't be able to hold the fort. On the contrary, he will be shown who's the boss."

"If the imperial court is willing to send a military general with an army, they will still be able to take charge of the matter on the pretext of suppressing the bandits." Zhao Hui closed the book neatly. "But looking at the situation, I suppose they won't dare to do it."

Of course, they would not dare to. At present, Qudu already had the Libei's Armored Cavalry to the northeast and the Qidong Garrison Troops to the southeast. These were both frontier lands with massive military forces. Holding them in check was already a strain. Taking the risk to send one out again would make it even harder to deal with once conferment was bestowed. But it would not do to leave things as it was in Zhongbo, either. This issue had to be resolved through a compromise.

"This is a headache for the Grand Secretariat to deal with." Xiao Jiming pushed aside the military affairs and looked at Xiao Chiye. "How did it go?"

Xiao Chiye's elbows were propped against the armrests of the chair. He wanted to prop up his legs too, but he could not find a spot to. So he said, "You gave His Majesty such a scare. He's so frightened that he still wants to continue being buddies with me even if it doesn't please him to."

"Both of you are dining and drinking buddies<sup>5</sup> to begin with." Xiao Jiming smiled. "Let him fear. It's better than him not being afraid."

"Fu Linye has made a great effort." Xiao Chiye said. "I'll have to find a chance to thank him sometime."

"You might as well thank the friend who has been helping you in secret." Xiao Jiming said. "Someone on the inside has put in quite the effort for this case to conclude so smoothly. Given Fu Linye's experience, he shouldn't have been so careless as to fall for the trap this easily."

"Uh-huh..." Xiao Chiye merely smiled and changed the subject. "Where's Gu Jin? Call him in. I have orders for him."

"It'd be better to call all of them in. I have orders too." Xiao Jiming turned his head to Zhao Hui and motioned to him.

Zhao Hui headed out to call them over, and Meng flew in immediately right after. It landed on the clothes rack, and the snow it shook off wetted the clothes that had been hung up to dry. Ding Tao took off his shoes before hopping in and rushing over to stand as straight as a ramrod before Xiao Jiming. Behind him, Chen Yang and Gu Jin entered.

"Hereditary Prince!" The person Ding Tao held in esteem the most was Xiao Jiming. Revealing his snowy white teeth, he said, "Hereditary Prince, please go ahead and give your command! I, Ding Tao, will not hesitate to brave fire and water for you!"

"Yo." Xiao Chiye lifted the teacup and said, "Why have you never said that to this Second Young Master?"

Ding Tao said, "You're always throwing me out."

"What wrong have you done to make the Second Young Master throw you out?" Xiao Jiming asked in a mild tone.

Ding Tao immediately replied, "I haven't. It's just that the Second Young Master is always getting me to keep an eye on that—"

Xiao Chiye almost spewed out his tea. He closed the lid with a "clatter" and signaled to Chen Yang with his eyes. Chen Yang promptly rapped Ding Tao on the head. Ding Tao, still not knowing what was happening, covered his head and did not dare to say a word more.

Xiao Chiye's tongue was hurting from being scalded. He said, "Drag him out and bury him on the spot! What's with that complaint? Let Gu Jin explain!"

Ding Tao said in aggrievement, "I'm not—"

Chen Yang covered his mouth and dragged him out. After opening the door, he really buried him in the snow.

Gu Jin thought to himself, what do I say? What the hell can I say?

Standing before Xiao Jiming, he saw that Xiao Jiming was about to put down the teacup, so he immediately kneeled on one knee and respectfully took the teacup before setting it on the table. He said clumsily, "Hereditary Prince, it's hot!"

Xiao Jiming was not in a hurry to ask on seeing this. He looked at each of them in turn until Xiao Chiye felt uncomfortable, as if he was sitting on pins and needles.

Xiao Jiming asked, "What's the matter? Is the Second Young Master hiding someone in the residence?"

Xiao Chiye said, "How is that possible? Dage, I have not even proposed marriage yet. There's no reason for me to tarnish a maiden's reputation."

Xiao Jiming looked at him for a long while. Xiao Chiye did not know if Xiao Jiming had believed him, but Xiao Jiming dismissed the topic and told him to continue.

Xiao Chiye found a comfortable position and said, "I'm thinking of asking Gu Jin to do a check on Xiangyun Villa."

Zhao Hui pondered and said, "Xiangyun Villa is on Donglong Street. It's a mixed bag of crooks and honest folks to begin with. It'll not be easy to investigate in secret. Does the Second Young Master think there's something fishy about Xiangyun?"

"There's definitely something fishy about her." Xiao Chiye said. "Wei Huaixing has her testimony in hand. Why would she offend me for no good cause?"

Zhao Hui said to Xiao Jiming, "Hereditary Prince, I heard someone said it was hatred borne out of love."

Xiao Jiming said to Xiao Chiye at his own pace, "Since she has become an old flame, then you must have a new lover now. It's been a few days since I entered the capital; why haven't I heard you mention it?"



Xiao Chiye said, "I'm just bored with fooling around. There's nothing else to it."

"Why blink your eyes when you are talking?" Xiao Jiming said. "Blinking means you're lying. Which clan is this maiden from? This matter has been on Father's and your sister-in-law's minds. If there's indeed something this time, then what's so hard about telling me? We'll handle it for you immediately."

"There isn't one." Xiao Chiye could not sit still any longer. He wanted to run, but he did not dare to. So he could only say, "There isn't one. Really. What am I getting married for? Isn't that just going to hold up her future?"

"Once you get married, you'll mature a little." Xiao Jiming wanted to pat his head, but he could not do it before his subordinates and diminish his dignity and authority. Thus, he lowered his voice, "How long can your sister-in-law and I keep you company? In this Qudu, there has to be someone who can hold a lantern or light a lamp for you and chat with you. No matter who catches your eyes, Father and I will do our best. As long as you like her, we can settle it for you even if she's a lady of a noble clan."

Xiao Chiye originally thought of bantering his way through it. But on hearing this, he suddenly felt touched and said, "Commander-in-chief Qi... You can do it even if it's someone like Commander-in-chief Qi?"

The expression in Xiao Jiming's eyes underwent a slight change. He did not expect Xiao Chiye to like someone like the Commander-in-chief. After a moment's pause, he said with complicated feelings, "... I'll consent to it if she hasn't hacked you to death by then."

At night, when Xiao Chiye got on the bed, he suddenly stepped on an object. He bent over to pick it up from the woolen rug. It was a pearl that was used as a button.

Xiao Chiye's eyes followed the pearl to the base of the bed.

"Chen Yang." Xiao Chiye suddenly opened the window and shouted.

Chen Yang walked over from the foot of the stairs. Xiao Chiye thought for a moment while looking at him before saying, "Make a trip to the jewelry shop on Shenwu Street tomorrow morning."

Before Chen Yang could reply, Xiao Chiye raised his hand and tossed a box to him.

"Tell them to make these into earrings. Make one of all the designs available." Xiao Chiye thought long and hard before continuing. "Keep it simple. Nothing too fancy."

Chen Yang looked at the box and asked, "... All?"

"All." Xiao Chiye closed the windows. After a moment of silence, he opened them again.

Chen Yang did not dare to move. He held the box with both hands and called out in bewilderment, "Master?"

Xiao Chiye said, "Put it on the account!"



#### Footnotes

1. The first I Li Jianheng uses to refer to himself here is “朕”. It’s an imperial term for “I” exclusively used by the Emperor. Using this term would really differentiate Li Jianheng and Xiao Chiye as a ruler and his subject. The second “I” he uses is the more common “我”, which would be indicative of him seeing himself on the same level as Xiao Chiye (as buddies).
2. 雪中送炭 to provide help in another’s hour of need.
3. 春闱 imperial examination, which usually took place in the spring.
4. 穷山恶水 inhospitable natural environment
5. 酒肉情谊(朋友) also a term for a fair-weathered friend.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 59 : ROMANTIC LIAISONS



Yuan Liu died a sudden death in prison, and Chen Yang was the one who went to collect his body and bury him. As per Xiao Chiye's wish, he settled Yuan Liu's wife and son down in a new house in the City of Dancheng and hired a decent teacher for Yuan Liu's son.

Xiao Chiye's illness lasted until the snow in Qudu melted. By the time he could step out to attend court sessions, Xi Hongxuan had already been promoted to the Secretary of the Bureau of Evaluations.

Shen Zechuan returned the Imperial Army's authority token to Xiao Chiye. In the time Xiao Chiye took the token, he eyed Shen Zechuan all over thoroughly.

"Thanks." Xiao Chiye extracted the authority token from Shen Zechuan's hand. "Your Excellency the Judge."

"I'm not deserving of it." Shen Zechuan's fingers curled slightly, as if he could not bear to let go.

Xiao Chiye swung the authority token and said, "Got attached to it?"

Shen Zechuan laughed and said, "Yeah. Got used to feeling it these days."

Xiao Chiye saw that the people around them had all retreated far away from them, so he said, "It's too pathetic to just feel my authority token alone."

Shen Zechuan clasped his hands behind him and said to him, "You've just recovered from a major illness. Second Young Master, you can dally all you want, but you have to know when to stop."

"I've been pure of heart and free of desires for more than half a month." Xiao Chiye felt sleepy as he basked in the sunlight. He shuffled his feet. "The heartless cad I've been yearning for day and night did not even visit me once. Now that I'm out, I have to find a way to heal my broken heart."

Shen Zechuan bathed in the breeze and said, "It's better to forget that kind of bad egg who often ditches the old for the new and has countless new and old flames before it's too late. Wasting the prime of one's youth for him is so not worth it."

Xiao Chiye said, "Bad what?"

Shen Zechuan said, "Second Young Master."

Xiao Chiye wanted to squeeze his nape. But it was inappropriate to stand here and squeeze him, so he said, "Well said. It's so well-worded that this Second Young Master wants to applaud."

"That's very kind of you." Shen Zechuan said modestly. "It's all good as long as you feel my sincerity."

"So, I see you've made a point of checking out who some of those old flames are." Xiao Chiye said. "You're that bothered, huh."

"Check, I didn't." Shen Zechuan said. "I can pry out all sorts of love affairs just by sitting and drinking wine in Xiangyun Villa. For example, how the Second Young Master is a regular patron and an old hand when it comes to romantic liaisons."

"Admirable, isn't it?" Xiao Chiye asked.

"Indeed, indeed." Shen Zechuan looked at him as he spoke and slowed down. "But hearsay cannot be compared to personal experience. The legendary man himself doesn't seem to be the same person as the one I've encountered."

"To be fair, you didn't get that many opportunities." Xiao Chiye raised his fingers to hang up the authority token. "You will understand it better once you've played with me a few more times. It's not like we haven't tried 'taking the time to savor and devour'. How was the taste of it?"

Shen Zechuan pursed his lips tightly under Xiao Chiye's gaze.

Xiao Chiye smiled and said, "Looks like you still remember it. Then, do you still remember what you have promised me?"

"To pass Xiangyun a message on your behalf." Shen Zechuan said. "Playing the matchmaker for the two of you and earning myself a cup of wine to drink at your wedding feast. Of course, I remember."

"I knew you were reliable." Xiao Chiye said. "How should I thank you if this matter succeeds?"

"Just treat it as gift money for your wedding." Shen Zechuan said absent-mindedly as he lazily looked out along the stone slabs.

Han Cheng just happened to exit the hall. He waved his hand at both of them as the little eunuch beside him came running over.

"This way, my lords. His Majesty is waiting!"

Li Jianheng sat on the dragon throne and listened as the others discussed official matters. It was soon to be the beginning of spring,<sup>1</sup> a time when the planting and cultivating of mulberry and flaxseed were major issues. Cen Yu, the Left Censor-in-chief of the Chief Surveillance Bureau,

submitted a memorial and mentioned that there were signs of public ditches in the various residential areas in Qudu being illegally occupied. At present, the snow was starting to melt. If they could not keep the clogged ditches unobstructed, then the streets would be flooded once the rainy season hit.

This was such a minor issue, at least compared to what was being discussed, that it seemed insignificant in the grand scheme of things. Li Jianheng did not even hear him clearly before letting the matter drop as the loud voice of the Provincial Administration Commissioner from Zhongbo drew away his attention.

Several times, Cen Yu tried to speak again but was interrupted.

When Cen Yu left the palace after court was dismissed, he suddenly heard someone calling him from behind. He looked back and saw that it was Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan paid his obeisances and said, "As presumptuous as it is of me to stop Censor-in-chief Cen, this humble official has an issue to seek your advice on."

Cen Yu said, "Judge Shen, please speak."

Shen Zechuan said, "I heard the Censor-in-chief mentioned the clogged public ditches in your memorial during the court session earlier. Are you referring to the unexpected upsurge of ditch water in the residential area on Donglong Street?"

Cen Yu motioned for Shen Zechuan to talk as they walked. He said, "That's right. Donglong Street's illegal claiming of the public ditches has been ongoing since the reign of Xiande. At the start of spring in previous years, it would flood the residential areas. But since it has not resulted in any deaths or accidents, no one really gives it that much thought."

Shen Zechuan promptly gave a faint, bitter smile and said. "To tell Your Excellency the truth, this humble official is currently living there."

Startled, Cen Yu hurriedly asked, "Has it already been flooded these days?"

Shen Zechuan said, "The place this humble official lives in is on higher grounds. In my immediate neighbors' attempt to lay claim on the public ditch and expand their courtyards, the eaves of their residences are already pressing up against mine. Owing to the obstructed flow of passage, sewage water had already begun to inundate my courtyard. Before this morning's court session, this humble official made a trip to the surrounding residential area. The low-lying civilians' houses are already all underwater."

Cen Yu said worriedly, "It'd be bad if we were to encounter an epidemic. Let's leave aside the matter of the flooding for now. Because everyone wants to snatch those few inches of land, their houses are all built close to one another with no bricks and stones in between; it's all wooden planks. It is a major accident waiting to happen if a fire were to start."

Shen Zechuan thought about it and comforted him, "Your Excellency, don't worry. This humble official will speak to His Excellency the Commander-in-chief to see if he can report to the Emperor and send men to clear out the ditches before it's too late."

"Alright. I'll also talk to the Secretariat Elder again." Cen Yu lifted his foot to leave, then turned his head back and said to Shen Zechuan with a smile, "I appreciate the Judge's thoughtfulness. If we can resolve this matter as soon as possible, then it'd count as one merit."

Shen Zechuan cupped his hands in respect to him and saw him off.



The red plum blossoms in the residence had withered. When Shen Zechuan arrived, Xiao Chiye was standing in his study, looking at the remnants of those plum blossoms.

"It's so terribly damp everywhere with the snow melting these few days." Xiao Chiye plucked a plum blossom branch. "That house of yours is not inhabitable now, is it?"

Shen Zechuan had indeed been fretting about this matter recently. He gently pulled at his collar and said as he changed his shoes, "The courtyard is already flooded."

"When I passed by that place five years ago, Zhao Hui mentioned the issue about the public ditches." Xiao Chiye turned back. "It has been so long. To think no one has gone to fix the problem."

"Anyway, those who soak until they rot in there are all lowly lowlives. What's more, it takes time and effort to fix the issue." Shen Zechuan said with a mocking expression. "Who will be willing to do it?"

"Aren't you going to do it?" Xiao Chiye looked at him and walked over. "This year is the first year of Tianchen. There will be a merit and achievement appraisal by the Censorate. If something were to happen, the entire imperial court of civil and military officials will fight over themselves to do it."

"Doubt it." Shen Zechuan supported himself against the wall and was about to step onto the mat when Xiao Chiye blocked his way. He raised his

eyes and said, “Hm?”

Xiao Chiye bent down to pick up Shen Zechuan’s boots. He pressed a few times on the leather and said, “Is the Imperial Bodyguards so stingy that they can’t even give you a pair of deerskin boots?”

Shen Zechuan’s socks were half wet, so Xiao Chiye asked the servants to fire up the charcoal basin to heat the room. Shen Zechuan did not look too good today, and it turned out that he was freezing.

“Deerskin boots won’t be able to withstand the soaking either.” Shen Zechuan shifted away his foot, refusing to let Xiao Chiye grab it. He lowered his eyes to look at Xiao Chiye and said, “The low-lying areas of Donglong Street are all impoverished brothels. They are all now soaking in filthy waters.”

Xiao Chiye remained squatting the way he was and raised his head to say, “Those brothels normally don’t pick patrons. They accept everyone who has a few copper coins to spare and let them do as they please. They can’t afford to pay taxes at all, and are always in arrears year after year. The lower levels at the Ministry of Revenue who pass their days counting copper coins<sup>2</sup> are a worthless bunch with the specific intent to leave them out to dry in the air.”

“The residential area has also been submerged.” Shen Zechuan said.

“They are all used to waiting; it’ll be fine once spring is over.” Xiao Chiye got up and said, “There are plenty of people available to work on it, but those who are willing to handle work without any merit to earn are few and far between. I have yet to eat after court dismissal today. Let’s have our meal together.”

The maidservant came over to prepare wooden clogs for Shen Zechuan. Even after putting on the wooden clogs, they did not make him taller than Xiao Chiye. Xiao Chiye looked at Shen Zechuan’s slender and pretty ankles in those socks and thought of the medicine the latter had been consuming in the past.

“I don’t see you gaining weight during the new year.” Xiao Chiye pushed the door open and led him outside.

“I’m so busy that I only sleep for four hours a day.” Shen Zechuan pattered on the ground with his clogs. “I initially thought that the Southern Judge was an idle position with little to do. Who knew that the ways of the military craftsmen would be that many?”

“If Xi Hongxuan can’t keep you.” Xiao Chiye turned his head aside. “Switch over to this Second Young Master’s camp while you still can.”

“Then I reckon I won’t even have four hours to sleep.” Shen Zechuan followed after him. “The remaining men from the Imperial Bodyguards are mostly those who inherited the positions and follow in their fathers’ footsteps; they rely on their ancestors for their meals. The benefits that come with the Imperial Army aren’t worth much in their eyes.”

The snow was in the midst of melting these few days, and so the yard was wet as well. Xiao Chiye strode across the water puddle and turned back to look at Shen Zechuan for a moment.

Although Shen Zechuan was wearing the clogs, the hem of his lunar white<sup>3</sup> robe would trail into the water unless he held it up. At present, it was already dark. Their surrounding was bright and clear set against the backdrop of the white, charming moon hanging up high far on the horizon. The contrast also made Shen Zechuan’s reflection in the water puddle thin and pleasing. He was so focused on the road as he spoke that he did not notice when Xiao Chiye had stopped. He lifted his white robe and, like a child, skipped over the water puddle and landed right before Xiao Chiye.

Without even thinking, Xiao Chiye leaned over to hug him around his waist and hoist him over his shoulder. The wooden clogs slipped to the ground, and Xiao Chiye picked them up. With one hand carrying the wooden clogs and one hand around Shen Zechuan, he headed back to the house where they had drunk wine the last time.

Chen Yang retreated several steps back and gestured to the guards at the back, dismissing everyone in the yard with a silent wave of his hand. Ding Tao did not dare to utter a sound on the rooftop and only showed his eyes as he watched the Second Young Master carry Shen Zechuan over his shoulder. Qiao Tianya and Gu Jin each squatted at the projecting tiles of the eaves and took a sip of wine in unison.

“You didn’t look too good this morning.” Xiao Chiye said. “You’re burning up. Have you fallen ill?”

Sprawled over his shoulder, Shen Zechuan watched the moon on the ground and said, “... Perhaps.”

“The grand ambition for supremacy is not something that can be accomplished at a single stroke.” Xiao Chiye ascended the stairs and kicked the door open. “Life is the most precious of all.”



“This wasn’t what you said back then when you hated me.” Shen Zechuan landed on a mass of softness. He gazed at Xiao Chiye. “Just a minor illness. I’ll sleep it off.”

Without looking at him, Xiao Chiye took off his own shoes and removed his outer robe. The maidservants entered in a single, ordered file and set the plates on the small table to serve up the dishes.

Shen Zechuan finished washing his hands and was about to pull at his collar again when Xiao Chiye reached out his hand from the side to pull it for him. He used his fingers to part the collar gently and saw some red rashes.

“It’s been too damp lately.” Shen Zechuan nudged away Xiao Chiye’s hand with the back of his hand. “In order to stake their claims on the site, the eaves of the neighbors’ houses have even blocked out all the light.”

Xiao Chiye seemed to pay it no mind and let the matter drop with an “uh-huh”.

Both men took their seat. As they were eating, Xiao Chiye said, “That residence of yours is no longer befitting of your status. Why haven’t you moved?”

Shen Zechuan replied, “It’s close to Zhao Zui Temple, which makes it convenient for me to see shifu. It’s also on Donglong Street. If there’re any movements from Xi Hongxuan, it’d be easier to look into it.”

Xiao Chiye watched him eat and said, “Ji Gang-shifu can’t keep staying at Zhao Zui Temple as an errand-runner. It’d be more convenient for you to act if you were to relocate and live together.”

Shen Zechuan said, “Let me see if I can find any suitable residences these days.”

As a matter of fact, he still had Grand Mentor Qi’s residence in his hands. But it would not do for him to live in that residence now; it was too ostentatious and would draw too much attention. Moving house was simple; what was hard was that Xi Hongxuan was keeping a close watch on him. He dared not put his shifu and teacher at risk.

It was already very late after their meal, and the weather was still cold. Shen Zechuan stood up and prepared to take his leave, but Xiao Chiye opened the windows and let out a whistle at the rooftop.

Three guards plus one Meng poked their heads out in unison.

Propping himself against the window ledge, Xiao Chiye watched Shen Zechuan pick his coat up and said to them, “Close the doors. His

Excellency the Judge is not leaving tonight.”

Shen Zechuan looked back.

Xiao Chiye did not smile. His flippancy in the morning seemed to have been blown away by the night wind. Concealed in those eyes were the secluded forest and thick fog, made even more hazy and deep under the moonlight.

Perhaps he is really an old hand when it comes to romantic liaisons.

Shen Zechuan thought.

Just the expression in these eyes of his alone was enough.



Special Thanks to: [Eggy](#), [Yunyun](#)

Footnotes

1. 立春 Lichun or Beginning of Spring, i.e., the 1st of the 24 solar terms in the lunar calendar.
2. i.e., staffers who only care about collecting their salary
3. The actual word here used is 月白, which is supposed to be a pale blue shade. But t97 used white later on in the same paragraph. Since Shen Zechuan is frequently portrayed in white, we'll assume she literally means “moon/lunar white”.



4.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 60 : SHACKLES



Translated with: [Eggy](#)<3



“With early spring approaching, many troublesome matters have cropped up. We have yet to discuss a plan today. It wouldn’t be easy to see each other again if you just leave now.” Xiao Chiye said, “So rest up here tonight.”

Shen Zechuan broke into a smile and said, “No hanky-panky.”

The way he enunciated these words were melodious, with a hint of sensual suggestiveness lingering on the tip of his tongue. His eyes were clearly stirring up the waves of lust; even the fingers he had released from his grip at the drop of his words were plucking away at the strings of desires, rousing it.

This despicable man.

Xiao Chiye watched Shen Zechuan intently and thought to himself.

This was the real bad egg. He kept pushing against the boundaries of his diminishing limit every given second and trampled all over his endurance with cunningness and naivety, as if he was leaning next to his ear and calling him to “come mess with me”. The tail of the sinner that was this fox tickled its way to his legs, his eyes full of tease.

“Serious matters.” Xiao Chiye closed the windows. “Must be seriously discussed.”



“Prepare a memorial tomorrow morning regarding the public ditches, and I’ll bring it up to His Majesty.” Xiao Chiye lay on the rattan chair and picked up the robe that had slipped onto the floor. One by one, he set the items in the sleeve pocket onto a cabinet shelf.

“You can’t.” Shen Zechuan soaked in the bathwater and said after giving it some thought, “You’re the Viceroy of the Imperial Army; you are not in charge of the official proceedings of public works, nor the complaints of the commoners. It does not concern you. You will definitely draw suspicion to yourself if you submit a memorial out of the blue.”

“Then you bring it up. You live there, so it is not strange for you to mention it. I’ll make a note to go along as the accompanying supervisor.” Xiao Chiye fished out an ivory folding fan. He asked, “Why are you carrying an ivory one?”

The literati, who kept items of elegance in their sleeves and were particular about portraying themselves as distinguished and sophisticated, viewed the likes of ivory and ebony as the most unbearably vulgar. Therefore, descendants of the noble clans would never bring with them folding fans made of sandalwood or ivory as they went out, regardless of whether they were well-read in the classics or not. Most used folding fans of *moso* bamboo, adorned with calligraphy by famous calligraphers.

Shen Zechuan said, “For fun. Such an uncouth object suits me the best.”

He had stayed in Zhao Zui Temple for five years, so he could not engage in literary pursuits with the noble descendants. He had to be an uncouth commoner who was a culture snob feigning to be refined. Only this would be right, and only this would be fitting. So besides the ivory folding fan that he always carried with him, he had picked the most expensive-looking kind for his jade pendant that he hung by his waist.

Having done groping around Shen Zechuan’s sleeve pocket, Xiao Chiye realized that they were truly polar opposites.

Xiao Chiye’s likes and dislikes seemed to be clearly distinguished on the outside. Yet if one had really dug deeper, they would realize that these distinctions were rather murky. Most of the activities he seemed to indulge in could be forgotten as soon as he closed his eyes; there were none that he truly took to heart. On the contrary, what seemed to be shady deals he engaged in to get by were the results of his own sweat and blood. He did not have a favorite dish, nor did he have a favorite wine. All one could say when the topic was brought up was that “the Second Young Master loves to drink”. But what exactly did the Second Young Master like to drink? No one could really say.

On the other hand, Shen Zechuan looked as though he had no preferences and could go along with anything. But feel him up a little, and one would be able to get a clear grasp on his likes and dislikes. He did not like strong bitter tea; just one sip, and he would never ever touch it a second time. He loved eating fish. As long as the location was right and no one was watching, he could debone the fish just as cleanly and neatly as a cat.

Xiao Chiye found it amusing.

It was as if he had seen Shen Zechuan's soft spots.

Shen Zechuan's waist. Shen Zechuan's back. Shen Zechuan's shoulder blades. He could recognize all these, even with his eyes closed.

A boaster.<sup>1</sup>

Xiao Chiye thought to himself with lowered eyes as he held the robes.

He could intimidate a person with a sudden glance. But after a few embraces, Xiao Chiye could sense the joy and anger behind all those gentle words and flattery of his. He was just like the moon reflected in the water puddle tonight, where one provocation did not seem like it would stir up any great waves. But in fact, he had already put a black mark against you in his book and would find the next opportunity to kick back at you.

Shen Zechuan came out with his robe draped over his shoulders. His hair was still damp. Turning his head, he saw Xiao Chiye seated in the chair, playing with that ivory folding of his. His own clothes were neatly hung at the side.

"We aren't done discussing," Xiao Chiye stood up. "Drink the ginger soup and sit down to talk."

Shen Zechuan stretched out his hand to raise the curtains, but Xiao Chiye beat him to it and raised it with the fan. Both men stepped out. Most of the lights in the inner chamber were already extinguished, leaving only a glazed lamp lit.

Shen Zechuan felt a little hot. After downing a bowl of ginger soup, he felt better. Although he was fine during the day, he was feeling dizzy and heavy-headed now.

"Xi Hongxuan has been transferred to the Ministry of Revenue. The assessment for officials is around the corner, and he's in the Bureau of Evaluations." Xiao Chiye said, "This will interfere with the officials' observational appraisals from the inspections. Did you come up with this idea for him?"

Shen Zechuan shook his head with the ginger soup in his mouth. After swallowing it down, he said, "It should be Xue Xiuzhuo's idea."

"I have men in both the Ministry of Rites and the Ministry of War. If they were to be transferred out because of the assessment this round," Xiao Chiye looked at him, "then our losses will far outweigh the gains."

Shen Zechuan nodded and said, "This isn't something to worry too much about. Other than the connection through marriage between the Vice

Minister of the Ministry of Rites, Jiang Xu, and the Deputy General, Zhao Hui, the others aren't too conspicuous. I can't see how Xue Xiuzhuo would get a thorough read on you either. Just let everyone conduct their businesses as usual. Besides, the inspections and assessments won't be carried out by just one clan. Secretariat Elder Hai will send his men over too. Xi Hongxuan won't dare to act too brazenly."

"The inspection this time concerns Zhongbo. The snowstorm a while back has brought hardships upon Zhongbo; ten or so people in total have died one after another. Hai Liangyi should be sending an official over this year to rectify the problem." Xiao Chiye said.

"Zhongbo." Shen Zechuan seemed to think back on it. "Zhongbo... isn't easy to manage now. Should they send a literary official, he can't be guaranteed to hold up his own against the bandits, nor will he be able to command the newly dispatched garrison troops. There needs to be a proper plan for this place; even Secretariat Elder Hai himself would have to fret over it."

"At present, there is no suitable candidate in Qudu. It's all negotiable as long as the one assigned is not from the noble clan. Cizhou has a bearing on the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path; it'd be inviting trouble if Cizhou were to fall into their hands. There is a need to plan ahead for rainy days... plan ahead for rainy days." Xiao Chiye softened his tone as he looked at Shen Zechuan's weary face.

After Shen Zechuan's promotion, he had been running around on assignments on both ends. At night, he often had to be at Ouhua Pavilion and socialize with Xi Hongxuan, who had fair maidens in his arms and a position with practically no obligations. And because he wrote tunes for Li Jianheng, he did not even have to attend morning court sessions; he had plenty of time to rest. But Shen Zechuan had to stand guard before the Emperor every day with his blade. He did not sleep at night, and in the day, he even had to deal with military craftsmen of all sorts. He was even busier when he was on duty, so much that he might not necessarily get the chance to eat his meals.

He did not even have the time to bother about his residence on Donglong Street, which had been devoid of light due to the blockage of the protruding edges of his neighbors' eaves. It was only yesterday that he realized that his courtyard was already flooded. The bedding in the house was so damp that there was no way he could stay there. He could send Qiao

Tianya over to Zhao Zui Temple to stay with his shifu and teacher. But he himself was not at liberty to.

He looked even thinner now, let alone talk about gaining weight after the new year.

Xiao Chiye watched him for a long time, then reached out his hand across the small table to stroke Shen Zechuan's cheek. That cheek was unbelievably scalding hot; it was far from "a little hot". Medicine had yet to be applied on the rashes on his neck. Xiao Chiye wanted to call out to him, and yet at the same time, he did not feel like doing so.

But his touch woke Shen Zechuan up. Shen Zechuan braced himself to keep his spirits up and said, "... Uh-huh, we do have to plan ahead for rainy days. The Hereditary Prince..."

Before he could finish his words, Xiao Chiye had already leaned over to him. Xiao Chiye's arms were strong and sturdy, and it was effortless for him to pick up Shen Zechuan. The bowl on the table was knocked over, and Xiao Chiye used his leg to kick it away as he said in a leisurely and carefree manner, "This Second Young Master will now take you to the nuptial chamber."

Shen Zechuan wiped the sweat from his forehead and let himself hang over him, saying, "Have we already finished discussing the serious matters tonight?"

"We're done." Xiao Chiye clasped him around his back and said, "And now, it's time to repay your debt."

After saying this, he bent his back to lay Shen Zechuan on the bedding.

Shen Zechuan shielded his face from the light with his hand and said under his breath, "No lights."

"All the clearer to see you with if there's a little light." Xiao Chiye undressed Shen Zechuan in this position.

Shen Zechuan's chest was exposed, and he suddenly felt a coldness on his nape. He looked at Xiao Chiye through the gaps between his fingers. Xiao Chiye dipped his fingers into the ointment and dabbed it on the rashes. This whole process was as if he was oiling a piece of jade. The more he applied, the smoother it felt. It was so smooth Xiao Chiye's heart was wavering out of control. He really did not have the makings of a gentleman.

"I'll have to tie you up in a while, so you don't roll all over the place. Otherwise, this ointment would have been applied in vain." Xiao Chiye

closed the ointment box and took out a handkerchief to wipe his fingers slowly as he sat on the edge of the bed. He said self-mockingly, "You are the only one this Second Young Master has ever served in his life."

Shen Zechuan slipped into the bedding and turned his head aside to sleep.

Xiao Chiye sat for a while before he rose to blow out the last lamp. The bed sank as Xiao Chiye hugged Shen Zechuan around his waist from behind and pulled him over from the edge of the bed to hold him captive in the crooks of his arms.

"Got you bound." Xiao Chiye said, "I'll throw you out right away if you dare to kick me."

With opened eyes, Shen Zechuan looked at the window through which hazy moonlight was shining. His icy hands touched Xiao Chiye's wrists that were restraining him. He said, "You're so hard."

"Uh-huh." After a moment of silence, Xiao Chiye said, "I'd advise you not to venture downwards."

Shen Zechuan endured it for a while before saying, "I'm talking about your authority token."

"Is it the authority token?" Xiao Chiye tilted his head slightly to the side and pressed it down beside Shen Zechuan's ear. He repeated, "Is it the authority token?"

His words scalded Shen Zechuan.

Xiao Chiye said, "You can't take it when I bite your ears, and you start trembling when I just ask a few questions. How dare you laugh at me for being rusty in bed when this is all you've got?"

Shen Zechuan composed himself for a moment before he said, "Then why don't we try switching positions?"

Xiao Chiye actually sat up and helped Shen Zechuan sit on top of him. He released his hands and laughed.

"Undressing the robes or unbuckling the belts." Xiao Chiye said, "Do as you please."

There was no knowing whether Shen Zechuan was too sick or too feverish, but his breathing was in disarray, and he was not as composed as he always was. He said softly, "Tonight—"

Shen Zechuan had yet to finish his words when Xiao Chiye held down the back of his head to kiss him ever so fiercely and guided his hand down



to his sweet spot. Shen Zechuan cowered back. Xiao Chiye laughed at him until Shen Zechuan felt indignant and started to struggle.

Xiao Chiye suddenly turned over and pinned him down once again under his body. The bed let out a creak, and the bedding sank. It was so burning hot that Shen Zechuan's palms were sweating.

Xiao Chiye's temperature was scalding. Shen Zechuan loathed this blazing heat, but he seemed to have nowhere to run; yet at the same time, there seemed to be still room for maneuver. They lurked in this intricate labyrinth-like game of chess, gaining a moment of reprieve from the illusion of mutual dependence they came to possess in the throes of passion and intimacy.

Once they sank deep into indulgence, the feeling of ecstasy urged them onward. Sweet, drunken whispers resonated in their ears. Even though Shen Zechuan loathed that numbing heat, he was pushing Xiao Chiye away, and at the same time, also pulling Xiao Chiye towards himself.

Xiao Chiye tore away those clothes and pushed himself up along Shen Zechuan's back. Just as Xiao Chiye had fantasized when he sat in the rattan chair, he did not miss a single inch of Shen Zechuan. He dominated this man, forcefully using his own scent to overpower the latter.

Shen Zechuan wrapped his arms around Xiao Chiye's neck and bit him. The two nuzzled the tips of their noses together, once again forging an extraordinary closeness in this moment of madness and depravity.

Kissing him, Xiao Chiye said, "You're insane."

Those torrents of bites that fell like a raging storm gradually settled into tender kisses, and the softness of lips and tongues dissolved away all defenses. It was under these intermittent murmurs of words that the insane man fell asleep.

Xiao Chiye caressed Shen Zechuan's cheek with his thumb and propped himself up slightly. Shen Zechuan was still grasping some of Xiao Chiye's hair between his fingers as he slept soundly. Xiao Chiye lowered his head and scrutinized him. In that instant, many thoughts ran through his mind.

Desire is a shackle.

In this moment, Xiao Chiye invited Zuo Qianqiu over to Qudu. Just to ask shifu one question.

Can desire be conquered?

But in the end, he did not voice his question.

Because he already knew that it was a question that Zuo Qianqiu had no answer for; the only one who could answer it was Xiao Chiye himself. Many people had said that he had been born at the wrong time, but he had already come into this world. To be in possession of desire was not a fault of his own making.

He was merely a human.

His name was Xiao Chiye.

He seemed to be the polar opposite of Shen Zechuan, yet he also seemed to be completely similar. The only one in this world who could understand the entirety of Xiao Chiye's pain and suffering without any use of words was Shen Zechuan. And this was something they were perfectly well aware of since their very first kiss.

Xiao Chiye kissed Shen Zechuan between his brows and on the bridge of his nose.

It did not matter by which name this feeling was called. They mutually staked their claims on one another, increasingly growing closer amidst their struggles. The pit of desire was bottomless, and the abyss of misery, unsurmountable. Grinding against each other ear to ear, temple to temple,<sup>2</sup> was a way to wear down their agony. But this way was getting too addictive, as if they could mutually alleviate their own pain by simply being next to each other.

After that bout of insatiable pleasure-making, they tacitly began to shed their shells and reveal their true selves. The ravine of the past had become a puddle; it was as if all it took was a single leap or a single helping hand to stride over it before merging once again into one.

Xiao Chiye kissed Shen Zechuan again, and Shen Zechuan, in his slumber, tightened his grip on Xiao Chiye's little braids.

Ripples washed over the white moon in the water puddle under the abundance of cool breeze, while the Heartbreaker and the Loverboy slept the entire night away nestled under the blanket of the moonlight.



### **Author's Words:**

I hope that everyone won't attack each other when you have a difference in opinions and don't bring any other works into the mix. Except for this, feel free to do as you like in the comment section. I would like to express my sincere thanks to those who have come and gone, as well as to those who

have praised or criticized me. Even if you praise me to the skies, I won't actually treat it as gospel and consider myself god. With this bit I have, I can't even get to the passing line. Likewise, I won't actually consider myself a piece of trash even if there are those who decry me as disgusting. This is all that I am good for. Enjoying what I'm writing is what makes it all worthwhile. If you happen to enjoy yourself while reading, then what a happy coincidence. We are suited for each other, so let's have fun together. If you happen to have a bad time while reading, then no problem; we will just not play together. Downvote me, stomp on me, or call me an asshole—I think that's fine. We'll just wave and kiss each other goodbye and consider it a souvenir of our interactions. Right? I wish for you and for myself to be happy. Living to have fun is the right way of life. It displeases you when I take it personally, and it displeases you when I don't. What good does it do to mutually torment each other and wear each other down for love and hate? For this *chuunibyou* piece of literature, everyone has lost weight from the stress. Thinking back on this in the future is just going to fill you with regret.

So says the author who has been shouting, “stop fighting, stop fighting”.

### **Lianyin's Note:**

I have said it before and I'll say it again. We all have our own views and tastes, and every one of us is perfectly entitled to voice his or her own opinion, but kindly refrain from dragging the author herself into public tirades. Drop the novel and move on if you don't like it. But please respect the author's right to write her story the way she wants. (And I say this not just for t97 but for every other author out there.) Thank you!

This is our combined version of the original uncensored version and new add-on text in the censored version.

Special Thanks to: [Yunyun](#), [Lin](#)

### **Footnotes**

1. Literally fake tiger; a person feigning to be more intimidating and powerful than he really is.
2. 耳鬓厮磨, i.e., very close and intimate relationship

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 61 : COLLAPSE

Translated with: [Lin](#) & [Rie](#)<3

As the hour of *yin*<sup>1</sup> approached, it suddenly rained. Chen Yang washed up in the resting hall. After wiping his face, he looked outside to see a drizzle of misty rain adorned with tiny flakes of snow.

“Have the kitchen heat up the stove.” Chen Yang instructed to his left and right. “Serve up the medicine for colds while it’s hot, then prepare the ginger soup. Has Master and the Judge’s official robes been steamed? Send them over quickly. It’s raining and snowing today, and the ground is slippery. Be careful when you go in and out to serve; don’t fall, lest you make a disgrace of yourself.”

Before the day broke, those who served in the courtyard were already moving. Chen Yang held up an umbrella and made his way to the kitchen to check on the day’s breakfast. When the cook saw him, he hurriedly got the attendant to get the lunchboxes.

“I heard last night that the Judge had fallen ill. So I made fish soup this morning, along with some light side dishes. I’ve also prepared rice porridge and steamed twisted rolls.”<sup>2</sup> The cook personally handed the lunchboxes to Chen Yang. “These are breakfast for you gentlemen. All of you have been on guard the entire night last night. Drink something hot to dispel the chill.”

Chen Yang laughed when he touched the lunchboxes and said, “Alright. You even prepare *shaojiu* wine<sup>3</sup> for Gu Jin. I shall thank you on his behalf! Get someone to serve up Master’s breakfast without delay. I’ll hurry over to wait on him first.”

The cook sent him out, and the attendant wanted to continue sending him on his way. Chen Yang turned the latter down and hurried back to the courtyard with his umbrella up.

The three meals of guards like them cannot be touched by anyone else. They could only take turns to get it themselves. This was a hard and fast rule that had been laid down back in Libei.

Chen Yang arrived at the courtyard and called down the other three men. They opened the lunchboxes and stood together to have their meals.

Biting on the steamed bun, Ding Tao looked at the house and said, "Master is up."

Gu Jin said, "Is the horse carriage ready? He's running a little late today."

Chen Yang nodded and said, "I didn't expect it to rain today. Master still has to soak in the rain later when he arrives at the palace and waits to sign his name. His Excellency the Judge's cold won't go away for quite a while. Does he not plan to take a leave of absence?"

Who's he asking?

Gu Jin and Ding Tao looked at each other, then simultaneously looked at Qiao Tianya, who had come along for the free meal.

Qiao Tianya drank the porridge in one mouthful and held up a finger. Before he could speak, the other three said in unison, "Swallow!"

He swallowed and said, "He won't dare to take even a day off. My master is still considered a newly appointed official. How would he dare to be the first to take leave when the senior above him is still fine? He can't be busier than the Commander-in-chief, can he?"

Ding Tao said, "You Imperial Bodyguards are really no-good. Even when it comes to falling sick, you have to talk about seniority!"

Qiao Tianya said, "It can't be helped. Everyone at the top and bottom is watching."

As the four of them ate and chatted, the door on the other side opened. The maidservants entered and exited with serving trays in hands.

Shen Zechuan was drenched in sweat after being embraced by Xiao Chiye for the entire night. The rashes on his neck had not gone away.

Xiao Chiye had already put on his clothes. Seeing that Shen Zechuan still did not look too good, he set his fingers against Shen Zechuan's forehead and said, "The medicine is on the table. Drink it while it's hot."

Shen Zechuan put on his boots and got off to drink the medicine before he draped his clothes around him to put it on. Both men stood back to back before the mirror amid the rustling sound of clothes scraping across skins and fabrics.

Shen Zechuan fastened his waist belt and pushed the window open to look at the sky. He said, "This rain really comes at a bad time."

“There’s no movement last night. It’s still not too late to unclog the ditches today.”

Xiao Chiye came closer. The maidservant behind him who was trying to put on his crown for him could not reach him, so Shen Zechuan reached out to take it. Xiao Chiye propped himself against the window, and Shen Zechuan put it on for him. Both men locked gazes with one another.

“Smells bitter.” Xiao Chiye said.

“If you come any closer,” Shen Zechuan said, “the smell will be even stronger.”

The maidservants at the sides lowered themselves, not daring to make a sound.

Qiao Tianya was already holding up the umbrella just before they stepped out. Shen Zechuan descended the stairs. He had yet to walk out of the courtyard when he saw Tantai Hu hurrying over. Tantai Hu still did not look too good when he saw Shen Zechuan, but he still bowed to him in greeting before striding up the stairs in a hurry.

“Laohu!” Chen Yang greeted him. “What’s the matter?”

Xiao Chiye had already come out. Gu Jin put on his cloak for him while Xiao Chiye looked at Tantai Hu and said nothing.

Tantai Hu knelt on one knee and reported in an urgent tone. “Viceroy! The Donglong Street patrol squad sent back word earlier that Ouhua Pavilion has collapsed!”

Shen Zechuan halted in his tracks and waited for Tantai Hu to continue.

Tantai Hu wiped away the rainwater on his face and said, “It’s one thing for it to collapse on the Second Young Master of the Xi Clan. But who knew His Majesty was inside too!”

Xiao Chiye’s gaze was cutting cold. As he raised his head, the rain and snow fell even harder.



Shen Zechuan took large strides out of the office. Ge Qingqing was already waiting at the bottom of the stairs. As Shen Zechuan hung up his authority token, he said, “Tell me the details.”

The Imperial Bodyguards swiftly followed him out of the courtyard. With a hand on his blade, Ge Qingqing whispered, “His Majesty sneaked out on the sly. No one knew about this when the building collapsed this morning. When those courtesans were dug out, men from the Eight Great

Training Divisions were still urgently looking for Xi Hongxuan. Who would have expected His Majesty to be missing when the eunuch lifted the curtain for a look once the time came for the palace's morning court session to start? They couldn't find him. At first, they went to Caiwei Palace to check with Imperial Concubine Mu, but Imperial Concubine Mu had no idea either. That was when chaos erupted. It was only when the presences of Empress Dowager and Third Missy Hua were requested and the palace maids serving him were interrogated that we learned that His Majesty had disguised as an eunuch last night and insisted on going with Xi Hongxuan to Ouhua Pavilion for some fun."

Shen Zechuan did not look pleased as he said, "There are patrol checks at all levels in the inner palace. He must have had help; otherwise, he won't even be able to stride out of Mingli Hall."

"That's the odd thing." Ge Qingqing lowered his voice even more. "During my questioning, I heard the guards say that no one came in or out at all last night."

Shen Zechuan's expression remained unchanged as he detachedly watched the Eight Great Training Divisions march past in formation. He walked the entire way in a hurry, braving the rain; no one dared to hold up their umbrellas at this moment. Dark clouds hung over each of the official's faces, their gloomy expressions so somber it was as if their parents died.



Hai Liangyi and Xiao Chiye stood before the collapsed building. The collapse of Ouhua Pavilion had consequently brought down half the street of closely clustered buildings with it. The swill in the gutter had long overflowed, causing the entire Donglong Street to reek to high heaven in this downpour. Everyone had to wade through the water to make their way through.

The Minister of Works, Pan Xiangjie, was the head of the Pan Clan—one of the eight great clans. Although he shared the same surname as Pan Rugui from the reign of Xiande, Pan Rugui was really not in the same league as them. Pan Xiangjie was of the same age as Hai Liangyi, and had never dared to commit any major blunder while he held this position. Knowing that he would never make it into the Grand Secretariat, he had always been careful and prudent with the hope of retiring in peace after a few more days, especially since his son was already the Vice Minister of the

Ministry of Revenue. He had never expected to get himself some sleep, only for the sky to collapse when he woke up!

Pan Xiangjie could not even stand steady on his feet, and he was so anxious his hands trembled. He kept saying, "Quick. Dig quickly. His Majesty is still inside!"

The rainwater had doused Hai Liangyi to the point he was expressionless. He had never thought that Li Jianheng would be so muddle-headed to such an extent just to play! Several times, he wiped away the rainwater, looking as though he was also wiping away his tears. He said to Xiao Chiye, "Dig... Rescue His Majesty first!"

Xiao Chiye took off his cloak and waded his way down through the water to take a look at the situation. The current stand-in for the Eight Great Training Divisions was Han Cheng's younger brother, Han Jin. Han Jin rolled up the legs of his trousers and lifted the hem of his robe to follow Xiao Chiye down.

"Viceroy." Han Jin shouted in the rain. "The bottom is already hollowed out. We dare not dig!"

Not only was the lower area hollowed out, but it was also all set with vats and jars. But no one dared to voice it out. These vats and jars had been smashed when the building collapsed. If Li Jianheng were to be squashed underneath, then he was really a goner! The first emperor in the history of Dazhou who was crushed to death when he sneaked out for a rendezvous—Which historian would dare to write it? No one had ever seen anything so depressing.

"His Majesty rested in the upper area last night." Shen Zechuan removed his blade and got into the water. He said, "The place isn't deep."

"I fear it will collapse further." Xiao Chiye raised his body. "Call the men from the Ministry of Works over."

Cen Yu had just rushed his way over. The moment Shen Zechuan saw him, he immediately said to Hai Liangyi, "Secretariat Elder, the public ditch must be dredged today. If this rain doesn't stop, we won't be able to drain the water."

"And it's near the Kailing River at the back too." Cen Yu said. "I went to take a look earlier. The buildings along the banks have already all collapsed. The foundation at the bottom has long been soaked rotten! How long has it been since the stone bricks on the dam have been repaired? If the water rises later, half of Qudu will be flooded! What has the Ministry of



Works been doing all these years?! Pan Xiangjie, you muddle-headed fool! How many times have I told you about this, huh?!”

Pan Xiangjie fell to his knees with a “thud”. His old mob of hair was already half-white. He burst out wailing, “What can I do?! Can you blame me for this? Those from the Ministry of Revenue are all influential bureaucrats. I’ve already mentioned this to them eight hundred years ago. What can I do if they don’t allocate the funds and transfer manpower?! Cen Xunyi, what can I do?!” He scooped up this swill water, unable to speak as he choked with sobs. Kowtowing on the ground with his head, he cried out, “We are going to have to pay for this with our lives!”

“You are a senior of the present imperial court. Stop disgracing yourself!” Hai Liangyi suddenly cut him off and bellowed. “His Majesty’s fate hangs in the balance; we don’t know if he’s dead or alive. It’s an emergency now. Even if you want to shirk responsibility and shift the blame, at least wait for him to be rescued first! Assign 800 men from the Imperial Army’s current defense and follow the Ministry of Works to unclog the public ditch immediately. Tear down all the houses that have violated the regulations and occupied land illegally. As for the Ministry of Revenue, total up the state treasury money without delay and assemble the victims of those whose houses have collapsed at Zhao Zui Temple to centralize the distribution of aid reliefs. The Eight Great Training Divisions shall patrol the major city gates. All entries and exits must be accompanied by official documents. We are at the critical juncture now. I expect everyone to work as one to stabilize the situation. Don’t lose your composure!”

With that, Hai Liangyi suddenly looked at Shen Zechuan.

“Have the Imperial Bodyguards guard the inner palace. You mustn’t let those who have no business in this matter take advantage of this situation to stir up trouble. If there’s anyone who rebels, then act in accordance with my orders and execute them on the spot!”

Those starting to get restless in this heavy downpour instantly calmed down under this succession of commands teeming with murderous intent. Hai Liangyi walked a few steps and removed his *wusha* hat<sup>4</sup> in the rain.

“His Majesty is the Son of Heaven.” With rainwater sliding down and dripping off his face, Hai Liangyi said with finality, “Our Dazhou has been in power for a century. It’s still not the time for its demise.”



Li Jianheng was stuck underneath broken wood, facing down. The icy cold water pouring on his neck jolted him awake. He found it hard to breathe. His chest was too tightly wedged, and his ribs were hurting terribly.

Li Jianheng coughed and shouted in a raspy voice, “S-save me—”

These sounds were hoarse and powerless, too quiet to be heard in the downpour.

Li Jianheng shifted his gaze to see that the courtesan beside him had already gone cold. Her ghastly white flesh lay squashed between broken walls, and several strands of her hair had been stained red from the dripping blood. Li Jianheng began to tremble; he could no longer recognize this to be the beauty he had been clapping hands and dancing with last night.

“Save me.”

Li Jianheng hung down his head and said with all his effort.

“Save me.”

The coughs of someone choking on water rang out below him. Half of Xi Hongxuan’s body was soaked in the water. He was half on his back, having crashed down right on top of the jars, and his bloodied back was badly mangled. He gasped for air and said, “Your Majesty, stop calling for them. No one can hear you.”

Li Jianheng was beside himself as he pushed at the broken pieces of wood with his elbows, but it was all in vain. One of his shoes had fallen off, and he was so freezing cold that his face had gone pale. He said, “Someone will definitely come to save me...”

“Of course.” Xi Hongxuan began laughing in a muffled voice. “You are the Son of Heaven.”

Li Jianheng said, “What are you laughing at?”

Xi Hongxuan smacked his lips and spat out some sandy mud. He said, “I’m laughing at this thing called fate... Don’t you find it strange how people seem to be repeating the cycle of life on the wheel of reincarnation?”

Li Jianheng lifted his eyelids but could see nothing. He said darkly, “No... There’s no cycle...”

“Your Majesty’s birth mother of the Yue Clan...” Xi Hongxuan shifted his body with some difficulty. “... was drowned in the same way.”

Splash.

The dirty, foul water moved away from his neck and splashed somewhere else. In this minute trickle flow, Li Jianheng swallowed.

Drowned.

With difficulty, Li Jianheng recalled those fleeting and ephemeral childhood memories. He looked at that morbidly white flesh once again, yet it seemed to be his mother he was seeing.

The woman was pressed into the swill bucket, her fingernails raking at the ground until they were bloodied pulps of flesh. As water splashed on her face, Li Jianheng saw her ghastly white neck and arms.

Drowned.

Li Jianheng's tears welled up. He frantically covered his eyes with his hands and yelled resentfully, "Shut up! You shut up!"

Xi Hongxuan fell silent.

But Li Jianheng no longer wanted to stay close to this body any longer. He started to cry and shoot his mouth off, hurling abuses and profanities as he said, "Don't mention her! I am the supreme ruler on the imperial throne! My—"

Li Jianheng rasped for air, his face looking sinister through the gaps of his ten fingers.

"My mother is the current Empress Dowager!"



#### Footnotes

1. 寅时 hour of yin, i.e., 3-5 am, based on the system of two-hour subdivisions used in former times.
2. 金银花卷; Chinese steamed twisted bread roll, typically yellow and white.
3. 烧酒 *shaojiu*, also known as *baijiu* (白酒), is a spirit that is usually distilled from sorghum or maize. Also, the name of a famous Tang dynasty wine.
4. 乌纱帽 *wusha hat*, or black gauze hat, is the headwear of Ming dynasty officials, comprising a black hat with two wing-like flaps of thin, oval-shaped boards on each side.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 62 : FAMILY BACKGROUND



Li Jianheng never spoke of his birth mother to anyone else, because the topic was his sore spot. His birth mother of the Yue Clan did not have an imperial concubine title and was just a lowly palace maid. Official records had her surname shoddily listed as “Yue”, and that was all the information provided on her.

When Li Jianheng was still in swaddles, Emperor Xiande’s birth mother, Lady Lu, brought him back into her palace, but she merely fed and clothed him. His lack of education and skills today was all because no one remembered him when he was supposed to begin schooling. Subsequently, he spent all his time playing with the eunuchs.

He did not have an imperial concubine mother, only a nanny.

His nanny was the lover of the personal eunuch serving Emperor Xiande. She was a snob, and she treated Li Jianheng cruelly. Every day, she dressed him up until he looked all fine and presentable, yet he often woke up hungry in the night. Li Jianheng did tell his older brother about this once, and Emperor Xiande threw a fit at his personal eunuch. The eunuch then went back to cuss and hit the nanny. The next day onwards, the nanny gave Li Jianheng the cold shoulder and served him cold meals. She never hit him, but she had a tongue so sharp and cutting that Li Jianheng never dared to mention it to anyone again. Before he learned how to speak properly, he already knew a whole plethora of vulgar words.

His nanny told him that his birth mother was a cheap whore from the palace. Because of her secret pregnancy that was the result of an illicit relationship, she was kept indoors by the former Lady of the palace to recuperate. Although the word was “recuperate”, she never left the compound for years and was deathly ill. She even kept harboring the wishful thinking of getting the chance to meet her son and speak to him.

When Li Jianheng was five, Emperor Guangcheng came to Lady Lu’s palace to check on Emperor Xiande’s, Li Jianyun, progress with schoolwork. As they were speaking, Li Jianheng, who was playing cricket with others, was seen by Emperor Guangcheng, who called him over. That was his first time meeting his father.

The Guangcheng Emperor asked him about some writings.

Li Jianheng held the cricket tightly in his hands and did not dare to look at Emperor Guangcheng. He was unable to speak eloquently either, often stuttering and ignorant of what was asked of him.

Emperor Guangcheng found him stupid. Li Jianheng was already five, yet he was still unable to articulate himself well, had not an ounce of decorum, and seemed timid. He did not have the aura of a royal scion at all.

Li Jianheng really wanted to talk to Emperor Guangcheng, but he was afraid. He did not think that this person was his father, and he even started crying during the lengthy questioning. This made Emperor Guangcheng disdain him utterly. And this first time was also the last time he saw Emperor Guangcheng. It was only when Emperor Guangcheng left that Li Jianheng realized that he had unknowingly squashed the cricket in his hand to death.

Li Jianyun thought that this younger brother of his was useless. His health was still fine then, and he was the prince after the Crown Prince, who was the most in favor. He pitied Li Jianheng, so he pleaded with Emperor Guangcheng and started to bring Li Jianheng along to classes with him.

Li Jianheng got to know his brothers, but they were all living in the lap of luxury. He slowly came to the realization that they were not his brothers. They ridiculed him; they spoke of protocols and propriety; they made him bow to them. Li Jianheng did not understand. He did not have to kneel and kowtow to his brothers on seeing them, but this was what they taught him. When he did so, not one eunuch or palace maid went forward to help him up.

It was only when the Crown Prince and Li Jianyun were around that everyone acted with brotherly affection like kin brothers. Li Jianheng would not say a word about it, and he had no one to tell either. Gradually, he stopped going to school on time. He started to play the fox with Li Jianyun, feigning illness and sleeping in—he would not go if he could help it. Li Jianyun felt that Li Jianheng was a lost cause who could not be taught and set straight. Subsequently, he came to give up too.

There was a time when Li Jianheng followed a eunuch through a doghole. He squeezed his way through, and the eunuchs covered their mouths to snicker at him. They gave him candies from the Imperial Bakery. He was like a puppy seeking food, one that had been coaxed into wagging his tail by those few melted candies. It was in that doghole he obtained a lot

of food he had never sampled before, and it was also from that doghole he saw his mother.

Li Jianheng did not recognize Lady Yue.

The eunuch egged Li Jianheng on, calling Yue a “feeble invalid”, so Li Jianheng spat at her and called her the same. Lady Yue leaned against the wall, crying as she looked at him. Li Jianheng found this woman eccentric. The way she looked at him gave him the heebie-jeebies, so much that even he himself wanted to cry.

After getting back, his nanny scolded Li Jianheng again. When Li Jianheng wanted to pee in the middle of the night, he heard the nanny having a secret rendezvous with the eunuch who had egged him into cussing. He was caught red-handed by both of them when he accidentally kicked the chamber pot after he was done peeing.

The nanny was afraid that Li Jianheng would tell on them, so after that night, she gave him lots of candies and never scolded him again, instead treating him as though she yearned to hold him in her arms and coax him all day long. There were many kinds of candies, and one of them was called the silk-nested tiger’s eye candy. There was only a little of it every day, which Li Jianheng could not bear to eat; instead, he followed behind Li Jianyun every day and gave it to him to eat. But, from that year onwards, Li Jianyun’s health started to deteriorate to the point he was so sick he could not even attend classes.

Lady Lu checked the food and beverages in the palace, but her investigation threw up nothing. Every night, she wept before Li Jianyun. The imperial physicians came and went, but Li Jianyun never got better.

The nanny stopped giving Li Jianheng candies. Li Jianheng created a din, demanding his candies, so the nanny told him that the feeble invalid in the Eastern Courtyard who had been cussed by Li Jianheng wanted to tell on him to forbid him from eating candies again. Li Jianheng had been thinking of the silk-nested tiger’s eye candy, and thus, he hated that sickly woman. The nanny also said that if Li Jianheng wanted to eat candies again, he had to complain to Lady Lu and tell her that those earlier candies had been given by the sickly woman.

Li Jianheng did not dare to tell Lady Lu, so he secretly told Li Jianyun. Li Jianyun looked at him from where he lay on the couch, and it was in that instant Li Jianheng felt that his elder brother resembled his father.

Li Jianheng was roused awake in the night. The nanny led him out, where he heard splashing sounds from the main hall. From where he was behind the hanging curtain, he saw a blur of human figures. Li Jianyun, who was lying on the couch with an overcoat around him, beckoned to him.

Li Jianheng ran over.

That sickly woman was half-naked, with her head pressed into the bucket of swill. Again and again, her head was forced into it. She choked and coughed out water, and water poured back into her nose and mouth. Her fingernails had been reduced to bloodied pulps from all that clawing.

Li Jianyun held Li Jianheng and said nothing. The sight frightened Li Jianheng, and he looked back many times at Li Jianyun. But there was no smile on Li Jianyun's face, and so Li Jianheng did not dare to smile too.

When the woman was pressed into the bucket, a gurgling sound rang out. She raked her nails on the bucket in agony, her skinny fingers digging into the wood shavings, making the slits in her nails a dirty mess.

Li Jianheng looked at her, but he could not remember her face clearly. But the sloshing sound stayed in his memory. The nanny was a tall and healthy woman. Li Jianheng did not like her. All the women he came to choose in the future were petite or sickly.

Li Jianheng did not like water either; he found it filthy.

After that night, the nanny treated him well. Li Jianyun treated him well, too. It was just that no one mentioned his study anymore, and Li Jianyun no longer kept him to practice calligraphy. Li Jianyun even assigned eunuchs to play with him. Li Jianheng was thoroughly free. He played the whole day until he fell asleep. When he grew to be a teenager and had to move to a separate residence, Li Jianyun sent quite a number of pretty women to his residence. Once Li Jianheng got a taste of them and understood the pleasure of indulging in beautiful women, he spiraled out of control.

Until many years later.

Li Jianheng found out that that sickly woman was Lady Yue.

"My mother is the current Empress Dowager!"

Li Jianheng's fingers trembled. He seemed to be saying it to Xi Hongxuan and, at the same time, directing it at himself as he muttered these words over and over like a man gone mad.

Xi Hongxuan sniffled and listened as Li Jianheng harped on. He could not help but grin and say, "Your Majesty, to let everyone think this, the

honor accorded to the Empress Dowager has to be sufficient. And now, the Empress Dowager... *hisssss*.” He sucked in a breath from the pain and continued, “... happens to lack a son!”

Li Jianheng felt a stabbing pain in his chest as he gasped for breath. He haphazardly wiped away his tears with his fingers and said, “I... I<sup>1</sup> know!”

“I don’t think you know.” Xi Hongxuan said.

Li Jianheng said, “Who gave you the audacity to... speak to me in such a manner here?”

“The words of a man on his deathbed always come from the heart.” Blood oozed from Xi Hongxuan’s mouth. He spat a few more times before saying, “If you and I can’t get out today, then there will be no ruler and his minister; we will be merely rats in a pit waiting to drown in the water! What kind of Emperor are you? When Xiao the Second lifted you onto the dragon throne earlier, you ingratiate yourself with him like you would an ancestor! Have you forgotten? You are his master to begin with. Risking his life to save you is what he should do! What logic is there for parents to be grateful to their sons and grandsons? It’s with the Libei Armored Cavalry that each of the men of the Xiao Clan now enjoy such prestige and power. Such a ridiculous thing would be totally unheard of a few decades back with Emperor Guangcheng at the head! I get truly worried when I look at you! How does it feel to be an Emperor to such an extent? You aren’t even as carefree and happy as I was during the times I was mixing around the salterns being an imperial merchant. If you’re going to remain in this position and suffer such trifle indignities, you might as well drown here with me today.”

Hurting from having spoken such a big chunk, he grimaced in pain and spent a moment to take a breather. As he listened to Li Jianheng’s sobs, he suddenly began to choke with sobs too.

“Your Majesty...” Xi Hongxuan laid bare his feelings and said, “My mother was a woman from Qinzhou. She was of lowly birth. She could win my father’s favor because her mother’s old man earned some money by relying on the pointers given by the preceding Old Madam Yao. Look at me. I am the second son of lawful birth, but instead of living like a man, I lead a dog’s life back at home. Why do you think I dared to head down to the Xu Sea when I was eighteen to beg for a living among the wind and waves there? It’s all because my parents were biased and handed this massive family fortune to my eldest brother! Later, I met with a disaster at



sea. With my constitution wrecked, I had to recuperate in Qinzhou for more than half a year. See how horrifyingly obese I am. It's all from the nourishments I downed back then to preserve my life. Ugly, right? Haha! But before I was injured, I was also a handsome man in Qinzhou. Before I left, I met a woman whom I loved very much. We were engaged to get married before I set out to sea. But when I returned, she had already married someone else—she became my dear sister-in-law. What a great elder brother Xi Gu'an is. He even had to take care of my woman for me when he heard that I had met with difficulty. Where else can I find such a wonderful elder brother? I'll thank him all my life!"

Xi Hongxuan cried and laughed as he spoke in this dimmed, damp, and narrow place.

"I'll freaking thank him all my life! Your Majesty, who in this world isn't pitiful? Are you willing to let me be the Grand Secretary who holds sway over the imperial court and commoners because you pity me? You pity Xiao the Second! And let him become the tremendously popular Viceroy in Qudu for a time. But who will pity you? If Xiao the Second is truly sincere towards you, then would he have let Xiao Jiming say that kind of words before you? Isn't that just abusing his power to bully people around?! Then look again at that Shen the Eighth who has landed himself Shen Wei as his old man. Is the imperial prison such a fun place to be in? He fell into Ji Lei's hand at fifteen years of age and was whipped and flayed so badly it was as if he had taken a tumble in hell itself. He may be out of there now, but look at him, he has clearly grown into a specter. Everyone in the world is pitiful. If you pity each and everyone of them, then how are you going to be an emperor? As the saying goes, every man for himself, and the devil takes the hindmost—one has to look out for their own interests first. Your Majesty, don't listen to all those garrulous people who speak of the lowly origins of their mothers and the likes. Your surname is Li, and mine is Xi. For us, that's enough! Men are born to be distinguished between the superior and the inferior, the lowly and the nobles! All those rhetorical questions insinuating no one is born to be ruling classes<sup>2</sup> are just to goad and egg on fools. If no one goes by the rules, then where would countries and states come from? Your name is Li Jianheng, and therefore you are born superior to him, Xiao Chiye! What are you afraid of even if his Xiao Clan dares to harbor wicked intentions? You're the one who has the hearts and minds of all the commoners in the world. No matter what their maneuver is,

they are all traitors and rebels! Who in the world would dare to disobey if you raise your arms and make the call? This is what the Son of Heaven is!”

This is what the Son of Heaven is!

Li Jianheng found these words so rousing and enlightening that it snapped him to his senses. For the first time in this wet and filthy caved-in pit, he came to understand who he was. At some point, the tears were already streaming down his face. He thought back on everything that had transpired in the past, feeling as if he had lived in vain.

Unwilling to let this opportunity slip, Xi Hongxuan braced himself and continued in a strained voice, “Are they laughing at you for being uneducated and cowardly? Who in this world doesn’t fear death?! They can say anything they want when the blade is not held against their necks. But when it is, nine out of ten will pee in their pants! You are the emperor, not an artisan! When it comes to matters involving learning, the students from the Imperial College will naturally provide the answers. As for governmental affairs, isn’t that what the Grand Secretariat is for? Isn’t it there to deliberate over matters for you and advise you? You are the Emperor. You are *an* emperor!”

“I’m the Emperor...” Li Jianheng was feeling both hot and cold as he trembled and repeated, “You’re right. I’m the Emperor.”

Xi Hongxuan grabbed the moment with finesse. Seeing that he was almost there, he heaved a sigh of relief.

The fucking nerve of whoever it was to tamper with Ouhua Pavilion! With the building collapsed and flooded, all evidence would have been washed away. With no lead in the investigation, the blame would fall squarely on Xi Hongxuan’s head. If he could not hold Li Jianheng in his grasp, then just the impeachment from the Chief Surveillance Bureau alone after he had gotten out of here was enough to skin him. He could kiss goodbye to his newly appointed Secretary for the Bureau of Evaluations of the Ministry of Revenue position. It was even possible that Hai Liangyi would execute him because of this incident.

In this filthy water, Xi Hongxuan carefully ran his hands through his interpersonal network of connections. He did not want to die, nor did he want to be exiled. It had not been easy for him to kick off Xi Gu’an and climb his way to this position, as well as meet such a rare “good master” like Li Jianheng. He had to live.

Hurry up.

With his lips turning pale from the loss of blood, Xi Hongxuan silently said to himself.

Xue Xiuzhuo, Hai Liangyi, Shen Zechuan, and even Xiao Chiye. Whoever it was, hurry up and take him out of here. Li Jianheng must not die here. If he were to die here, all he had done in the past would go down the drain.

Just as Xi Hongxuan was about to close his eyes, a loud rumble suddenly rang out above them. Following right after, the broken wall debris tumbled down noisily. The stinky water also came pouring in as various voices mingled in the heavy rain.

Xi Hongxuan almost wept with joy. He heard Li Jianheng being hoisted up. Then, under the simultaneous shouts of the Imperial Army, the heavy weights pinning him down were lifted off him.

The stinky water was already up to Xi Hongxuan's waist. He shifted his arms and shouted, "Save, Save—"

Xiao Chiye looked down at Xi Hongxuan from above. The heavy rain washed down on him, and Xi Hongxuan suddenly felt a chill rose within him. Even when the water swelled to Xi Hongxuan's chest, Xiao Chiye still did not look as if he had the intention to pull him out.

"Xiao'Er..." Xi Hongxuan enunciated his words with hatred. The water swiftly brimmed over his head. He struggled all he could as he choked on foul water and flailed about for survival.

By the time Xi Hongxuan was dragged up, he had already been submerged until his entire mouth reeked of sewage. As Xiao Chiye lifted him, he dug his fingers hard into Xiao Chiye's arms, cutting a sorry sight as he craned his neck and gasped under his breath, "Screw. Your. Mother!"

Xiao Chiye flipped his hand over to press him down, and Xi Hongxuan clawed at the mud as the sludge filled his mouth and nose. This sense of suffocation made him rake and pull with all his might, but he could not make Xiao Chiye's iron arms budge even the slightest.

Xiao Chiye had the intent to kill, but he could not hold him down to his death for real. The people at the back had yet to withdraw completely, and Li Jianheng had been awake and sober when he was taken out.

Xiao Chiye lifted him by the back of his collar and lowered his head to say sinisterly, "Say that to me again."



#### Footnotes

1. The first I Li Jianheng uses to refer to himself here is the more common “我”, before he corrected it to “朕”, which is an imperial term for “I” exclusively used by the Emperor.
2. 王侯将相，宁有种乎 a rhetorical question; Is there anyone who is born to be a king, a duke, a general, or a minister? Are kings and nobles given their high status by birth? (= Every human, regardless of birth, can become something great if she or he applies himself.)

## **Qiang Jin Jiu – Chapter 63 : Dredge**

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 63 : DREDGE

Translated with: [Eggy](#)<3

Xi Hongxuan trembled as he puked, his face terrifying pale. Han Jin, who was behind them, saw that the situation did not bode well and hurriedly waded over to stop them. Xiao Chiye released his hands and watched as Xi Hongxuan was lifted into the sedan. The rain was still pouring, and all the major and minor officials were crying as they chased after Li Jianheng's sedan and swarmed their way back to the palace gates.

Pan Xiangjie ran until his shoes fell off. The old man lifted the hem of his robe, panting and not forgetting to cry out "Your Majesty". Everyone around them was more or less the same. Only Hai Liangyi was as dignified as ever as he followed the sedan the entire way back to the palace.

The imperial physicians, who have long been waiting, rushed over to meet them in a fluster, and the chaotic procession continued into the inner palace where a plainly dressed Mu Ru came to receive them. The moment she saw Li Jianheng all covered in blood, her tears began to flow.

The Empress Dowager let Hua Xiangyi help her out and said in a hostile tone to Han Cheng, "It's one thing for you to be anxious, but why did you call a bunch of elder excellencies to run along? All of them are advanced in age, and they have all got caught in the rain. Won't it exacerbate the situation further if anything were to happen to them?!"

There was a rustle as the Imperial Bodyguards kneeled. Han Cheng said, "This humble subject deserves death."

"Hurry over and get them to prepare the soup and distribute clothes." The Empress Dowager then said to the ministers. "It touches me to see how sincere and loyal everyone is. Now that His Majesty is already back at the palace, there's no need for any rush at this point in time. The weather is so cold. Everyone, please head to the side hall to seek shelter from the wind and have a bowl of hot soup. Do not fall ill at this juncture."

The various officials kowtowed to say their thanks.

The Empress Dowager said again, "Grand Secretary and the Grand Secretariat, as well as the excellencies of the various bureaus, please come

in for a talk.”



Cen Yu was not around. He remained at Donglong Street to dredge up the public sewers together with Xiao Chiye. Yu Xiaozai, who was of low official grade, followed behind them and helped Cen Yu to carry the straw raincoat.

Xiao Chiye's head and face were thoroughly drenched in water. The chilly wind blew until everyone all around was trembling, yet he was not the least bit affected. While digging up the two men earlier, he had alone lifted up that weight that was near a hundred *jin*.<sup>1</sup> At present, he was wrapping a handkerchief around the area between his thumb and index finger, with an expression that did not look too good.

“It's all poverty-stricken households living in the low-lying area. It isn't easy for them to have a house built out of broken wood to live in. Nine out of ten did not give their agreements when they heard that the houses are going to be demolished.” With his bare feet soaking in the water, Cen Yu lifted the hem of his soaked official robe and tucked it around his waist. He continued, “Only Donglong Street is flooded today because Donglong Street is right next to Kailing River. If this rain doesn't stop, Viceroy, then the water level on the other streets will rise tomorrow too.”

“If the imperial court is willing to give those poverty-stricken households whose houses are demolished a subsidy of five taels of silver, then they will all be willing.” Partially covered in mud, Tantai Hu said, “They just want to have a place to stay. As long as we are willing to subsidize them money, then it won't be a problem. This humble subject feels that those who obstruct the dredging are the big residences. Each of those residences violated the regulations to expand their lands, and there have been many cases where they come to blows with one another in private. Who would be willing to wreck a perfectly good house for just five taels of silvers now that we are telling them to tear down their houses? They won't even respond if we knock on their doors!”

“I'm afraid we can't come to an agreement regarding the subsidy.” Cen Yu, who had run around in official circles for a long time, was very much aware of the ins and outs of it. He said, “It is on account of the Grand Secretary Hai that the Ministry of Revenue is willing to take out the money to offer aid reliefs to the disaster victims. This sum of money still has to be

separately counted when the time comes. They will never agree if they still have to subsidize each household five taels of silver.”

“Your Excellency, don’t hold it against this uncouth fellow for saying something unpleasant, but why are you still thinking about the money at this juncture?!” Tantai Hu’s chest heaved. “An epidemic might break out once this water rises and people die! At that point, it’d be pointless keeping the silver!”

“Brother Hu, don’t get worked up.” Yu Xiaozai raised his hands to soothe everyone. He said, “You don’t have a clear idea of this account. The Ministry of Revenue has their own difficulties. They don’t really begrudge this amount. As it nears the inspection, they will have a peace of mind if they can do a wonderful job on this matter. It will make them look good, so they will only be too happy to do it, won’t they? But why are they unwilling? It’s all because they are embarrassingly short of cash! Let’s say they take this sum of money out now to deal with the emergency at hand. In a few more days, it will be the spring plowing farming season in the various lands. There is not a single harvest in the places affected by disasters last year. Based on the localities’ reports, the Ministry of Revenue has to consider allocating money to the localities so that the affected local prefectural yamen or Provincial Administration Commissioners can use the money to buy seeds from the neighboring provinces with bumper harvests. This is a major issue concerning the meals of hundreds of thousands of people. So how would they dare to act rashly and touch the existing money in the state treasury? Moreover, since these people are expanding their lands against the law, they should be found guilty and punished according to the law if the matter of illegal occupation of the public ditches was to be investigated and pursued. The imperial court has not even punished them, so how can they dig into the coffers to give them money instead? If they don’t run through this matter clearly, then our Chief Surveillance Bureau will have to impeach their Ministry of Revenue in the future. That’s why everyone is in a spot.”

Yu Xiaozai had the ability to calm people down. When those slightly accented words left his mouth, even the most major of issues could wait. What he said was the truth, not because he was taking sides with anyone. The problem was precisely what he had said.

The localities’ plowing and planting season in spring directly concerned Dazhou’s course of action this year. The army provisions of two major

strategic frontier lands depended on the grain harvests of Juexi's thirteen cities and Hezhou's frontline. So no one dared to be slipshod. This was their number one priority.

What could they do?

Forcibly going ahead with the demolition would rouse public wrath. Half of the men from the Imperial Army were currently from military households in Qudu. There weren't many of them who lived in Donglong Street, but there weren't just a few either. When Hai Liangyi entrusted this matter to the Imperial Army, he was, in fact, entrusting it to Xiao Chiye. Because once this matter was handed over to the Eight Great Training Divisions, then there would be no consideration of any compromise. Han Jin would directly call for the place to be leveled outright. But there was no way they could simply overlook the potential danger that could arise as a result of this.

He had meant for Xiao Chiye to think of a way.

Xiao Chiye bandaged the area between his thumb and index finger tightly. Just as he was about to speak, he saw a man walking over in the rain.

Shen Zechuan cupped his hands in greeting to them and said, "Just as I've guessed. All the gentlemen are here. How's the progress for the public ditches?"

"It's a tough one to deal with." Cen Yu let out a long sigh. "We can't very well just tear them down."

"Ultimately, what makes it hard for the Ministry of Revenue is that they can't figure out the expense quota for the upcoming spring plow." Although Shen Zechuan looked calm, his cheeks were tinged with red. He looked at the rain and said, "This account can actually be estimated. This untalented one has seen the Imperial Bodyguards' records archives, so I have some insights regarding it. Would the Viceroy mind hearing what I have to say?"

Xiao Chiye stared at him and said, "Judge, please go ahead and voice it."

Shen Zechuan thought for a moment, then said, "Last year, when the new emperor ascended the throne, there was general amnesty granted to various lands. Consequently, Juexi was exempted from 30% taxes. They had a bumper year last year. Other than Huaizhou and Dunzhou of Zhongbo, both of which reported damages caused by disasters, the others all had no problem. Viceroy, Dunzhou is hard-pressed for food this year.



The prefectural *yamen* will definitely have to buy grains from Cizhou, whose granaries are filled to the brim. There was heavy snow at the start of the year, with the snow in Zhongbo blanketing all the houses. Didn't the Hereditary Prince set aside 40,000 taels from Libei Armored Cavalry's military funds this year for Cizhou so that they would have enough for aid relief? You can get Cizhou to repay this favor now. Ask the Hereditary Prince to send a letter to Cizhou's Prefectural Prefect, Zhou Gui, and get him to give a rebate for the grains he sells to Dunzhou based on that 40,000 taels. That way, the Ministry of Revenue will be able to save on their allocation of funds to Cizhou and use that money for the current house demolition subsidies."

Yu Xiaozai pondered over it again and said, "But the matter of illegally occupying public ditches is still a crime if it were to be pursued further. The Ministry of Revenue can't do it, right?"

"The illegal occupation of public ditches is indeed punishable by the law. But special times require special treatment. We can't just follow the set rules and apply the same old rigid rules to the situation every time." Shen Zechuan paused for a moment. "The imperial court can't meet the disaster victims. So this subsidy is a kindness, an act of imperial magnanimity. It's most appropriate for His Excellency Cen to be the one to step forth and discuss this matter. The Ministry of Revenue is really not that hard-hearted either. As long as it isn't wrong, the account is clear, and the money is sufficient, they are sure to proceed right at once."

The inspection was just around the corner, and the assessments and evaluations were related to the promotion of personnel from the various bureaus. Everyone would be more than willing to get an "outstanding". So, as long as it was reasonable enough, they would certainly be willing to do it.

"Let's talk about Cizhou again." Shen Zechuan looked at Xiao Chiye. "Zhongbo wants to construct the former city this year. Although we still don't know which excellency will be assigned, it is still going to be an expense to deploy manpower when the time comes. The Viceroy is in Cizhou's favor because of the matter this time. When the time to construct the former city, you can tag that manpower expenditure on those whose houses were demolished today, and let the various households allocate manpower to Cizhou for about a month or so to provide manual labor with the Imperial Army escorting them. It can also be considered a punishment

for illegally occupying the public ditches. These five taels of silver won't be delayed or owed; the ones issuing them and the ones receiving them can all do so with a peace of mind."

Not only that, with this matter, Cizhou would also shift from being indebted to Libei to a relationship of mutual help and assistance. As long as Zhou Gui was not a fool, he would understand this to be an opportunity to make friends.

As soon as the words left Shen Zechuan's mouth, Yu Xiaozai shook open the straw raincoat and draped it over Cen Yu.

Cen Yu was going to do it right away. He strode forward and patted Shen Zechuan's shoulder heavily and said, "Your Excellency the Judge, time is pressing, so I won't say more. Once this is over, I, Cen Yu, shall prepare some simple meal with wine in my humble abode and respectfully await your visit!"

He put on his bamboo hat and left with Yu Xiaozai.

"How is it going in the palace?" Xiao Chiye grasped hold of Shen Zechuan's wrists.

Tantai Hu made as if to speak, but stopped and said nothing.

Shen Zechuan backhandedly hooked the authority token on his waist and looked at it for a moment before saying, "The Empress Dowager has summoned the top ministers of the various bureaus, ready to settle accounts with them. It's just as well you aren't among them. The public ditches have to be dredged as soon as possible. There are some remarks made out of courtesy earlier. But you have to understand that if you still don't unclog the ditches these few days, then you will be called to account."

It was inappropriate for Xiao Chiye to touch Shen Zechuan again as both men stood at this spot. But when he saw Shen Zechuan getting doused with the rainwater until he looked visibly sick, he said, "The Secretariat Elder told you to keep a watch in the palace, so go back. You just need to sit in the office to drink a cup of hot tea with your eyes on the door."

"That's Han Cheng's job." Shen Zechuan turned his head. "... It worries me that shifu is at Zhao Zui Temple. There's no time to lose. Go about your work first. I have to follow the men from the Ministry of Revenue and handle the aid reliefs for the disaster victims behind the scenes."

Xiao Chiye still wanted to say something, but Han Jin, at the other end, was already lifting his shoes and calling out to him. So Xiao Chiye could

only release his hands and retreated a few steps to turn around and leave with Tantai Hu and Chen Yang in tow.

Shen Zechuan had a splitting headache, although the pouring rain cleared up his mind a little. He turned around to call out to Ge Qingqing and brought him towards the low-lying area.

Dredging the public ditches was not an easy task. The work was dirty and tiring. The men from the Ministry of Revenue even had to change their shoes and lift their robes when they went into the water. Those on the job were all cowering under the awning, not even wanting to get wet. In any case, this was a task Hai Liangyi gave to the Ministry of Works and the Imperial Army. They were merely here to assist.

When Shen Zechuan arrived, he saw that there were not even enough of those gathered to count with all his ten fingers. He knew that those at the bottom ladder of the Ministry of Revenue who were used to muddle along were the most slippery; unless they had something to gain, they could not be ordered about.

Ge Qingqing asked, "It's about to be dark soon. Why are there so few people?"

Fawning and bowing to Shen Zechuan in subservience, the official invited him for a seat and said, "We couldn't get them all here. The Imperial Army ahead of us didn't finish digging, did they? It's not too late to call for more people tomorrow morning once they are done digging tonight. No rush. Your Excellency, come and sit! Look at how soaked you are! Have this cup of hot tea. At least warm yourself up. Don't let yourself get frozen!"

Shen Zechuan did not move. He looked at the awning and smiled, "Did you set this up yourself? Good job."

That official held out the tea and grinned from ear to ear, "Of course! Everyone has been so busy; who'd be worrying about us? We could only build it ourselves..."

His voice trailed off. The Imperial Bodyguards stood solemnly behind Shen Zechuan and watched him without so much a smile.

Shen Zechuan wasn't too bad as he received the tea and took a sip.

The official toadied up to him. "This is fine tea from Hezhou, especially steeped for Your Excellency—"

Shen Zechuan flipped his wrist and splashed the tea all over his face. The official yelled in shock and backed off. Shen Zechuan tapped on the

bottom of the upside-down teacup with his fingertips and cleared the cup of the tea leaves, all the while with the smile still on his face. Amidst the downpour, his smiling face was even more luscious and pleasing to the eyes.

“As for this tea...” Shen Zechuan spoke gently, “Consider it a toast from me to you. Why didn’t you drink it?”

The official hastily wiped the tea leaves off his face in a fluster and said, “T-too quick...”

“When the King of Hell calls for you, it won’t do for you not to respond quickly.” Throwing aside the teacup, Shen Zechuan said, “The Grand Secretary gave strict orders to the Imperial Bodyguards to supervise and oversee the matter of aid relief. I reckon the order of immediate execution hanging around your neck isn’t as tight as we’d like. You must drink up all this tea that I’ve splashed on the ground. Since you can’t receive it standing, allow me to send you on your way so you can finish the drink when you’re six feet under.”

The official knelt to the floor in a panic and said, “Y-Your Excellency, how can you do this?! At any rate, this humble subordinate is a sixth-grade official of the imperial court. H-how can you execute as you please...”

“The Imperial Prison has never taken in anyone below fourth-grade!” Ge Qingqing lifted the hem of his robe and kicked him into the water puddle. “If the Judge has ordered you to drink, then drink you must. You can decide whether you’d like to drink it alive, or drink it in the underworld when you are dead.”

The official rolled into the water. Seeing Shen Zechuan staring at him with his hand on his blade, he immediately cupped the water in his hands and stuffed it into his mouth, crying, “I will drink it! I will drink it!”

The surrounding men standing and sitting in various postures jesting and clowning around all quietly stood to stand well-mannerly at the side.

Shen Zechuan swept a glance at them and said, “Can this task be done immediately?”

Everyone answered in unison, “We are at Your Excellency the Judge’s disposal.”

“I’m just a mere supervisor and inspector; what would I know about the ins and outs of things?” Shen Zechuan took out the blue handkerchief to wipe his hands and said with a smile, “I wouldn’t dare to put the various

gentlemen at my disposal. Us Imperial Bodyguards will just follow you gentlemen. So, shall we go?"

Who would still dare to remain behind?!

That official trembled as he tried to come up as well. Shen Zechuan glanced at him, and he retreated and stammered, "Your, Your Excellency..."

"We're on this street." Shen Zechuan said soothingly before leaving, "Drink it all up before you come over."

The sky had already completely darkened, but the rain still showed no signs of stopping. No matter how imposing and awe-inspiring the Imperial Bodyguards were, they also had to enter the water and soak in it until they reeked all over. Feeling the world spinning when he got up, Shen Zechuan braced himself with a hand on a public ditch plank and composed himself for a moment. Everyone around him was busying around, so no one noticed it.

Only Ge Qingqing hurriedly tried to persuade him in a whisper, "There's no hurry for now. It's fine to rest for a moment!"

Shen Zechuan forced a smile, feeling as if he must not open his mouth; the taste of nausea was already pushing up against his throat. Bracing himself against the plank, he went up and felt around for a water bag under the partially collapsed humble abode.

There was a sudden weight on his back as someone covered up Shen Zechuan's head. Shen Zechuan was still crouching, and the obstruction before him was lifted once again. Xiao Chiye gasped for breath as he suddenly burrowed his way in and stuffed the still warm lunchbox to him. The next moment, he burrowed his way out and lifted his foot to leave.

Shen Zechuan pushed aside the overcoat that was covering his head. That man who had already taken a few steps away returned the way he came. He stepped on the collapsed debris and crouched down to cup Shen Zechuan's face in his palms, then kissed him hard. After he was done kissing, he rubbed Shen Zechuan's cheeks vigorously.

Rainwater poured noisily. Xiao Chiye was panting hard. He looked at Shen Zechuan under the dimness for a split second. Without saying a word, he turned and ran. He flipped over with agility and vigor, putting on the dirty, wet robe hanging over the crook of his arm again as he sped off into the alley.

If it weren't for time constraints.

Xiao Chiye tugged at his collars as he made his way across the ruins.  
Stepping on the filth as he hurried over to where the Imperial Army was, he  
cursed—

Damn it!



#### Footnotes

1. 斤 *jin*; a catty. 1 catty equal to 0.5kg

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 64 : BARRAGE OF RAIN



The overcoat was too big, and it slid down along his shoulders. Shen Zechuan scooped it up. That warmth enveloped him as his entire being soaked in Xiao Chiye's scent.

Shen Zechuan fished out the handkerchief again to wipe the cheeks that Xiao Chiye had made wet with his rubs. On this noisy, rainy night, he could not help but sniff at that handkerchief again.

It was all Xiao Chiye's scent.

Shen Zechuan lowered his eyes for a moment and nuzzled the handkerchief with the tip of his nose as the gloom at the corners of his eyes and tips of his eyebrows dissipated.

The upper tier of that lunchbox was filled with steamed twisted rolls, while the bottom contained hot medicinal decoction. Hot steam rose the instant the lid was lifted. It was not easy to make a hot meal on this night. Even Xiao Chiye would have to run like mad to rush his way here before hurrying back.

Ge Qingqing initially wanted to pour a cup of tea for Shen Zechuan. When he climbed his way up to see the latter drinking the medicine, he could not help but feel stunned before he said in delight, "So you have it all arranged. That's great. I was just thinking of sending someone to buy a bowl of medicine."

Shen Zechuan downed the medicine and wiped the corners of his lips with his fingers. He asked, "To what end has this street been torn down?"

"Just past Ouhua Pavilion. It's hard to tear down areas where the collapse is severe." Ge Qingqing rolled up his sleeves and said, "There's something fishy about this matter."

"Another unexplainable account." Shen Zechuan sat up and composed himself for a moment before continuing, "Only His Majesty himself knows who the one who sent him out of the palace is. If he refuses to say, then this case is a dead end."

"As I see it, this collapse is not a coincidence. Donglong Street gets submerged every year, yet Ouhua Pavilion just had to collapse last night." Ge Qingqing watched the rainy night, then looked at Shen Zechuan. "Do you have any inkling?"

Shen Zechuan had been thinking about this matter since this morning. The collapse had wiped out all traces in Ouhua Pavilion, and this was, by no means, a coincidence. Xi Hongxuan was a man who treasured his life. He had only just renovated Ouhua Pavilion some time back, and those who knew about the hollowed-out bottom were few and far between.

Shen Zechuan's widened eyes looked out into the rainy night. As if saying to himself, he said, "There's no need to fret. There's bound to be a follow-up move. We still don't know who the target is this time."



The imperial physician retreated from the bedchamber and paid his obeisances to the Empress Dowager and the others. From where she was behind the hanging curtain separating them, the Empress Dowager leaned forward to inquire about Li Jianheng's condition. The imperial physician gave his report in detail. It was only when she heard that the bleeding had stopped that she felt relieved.

"This matter is bizarre." The Empress Dowager straightened up in her seat and said, "To think not a single person knew when the Son of Heaven had left the palace and headed out. How can anyone rest reassured given the state of patrols within and outside the palace now?"

None of the old ministers below uttered a word. All of them hung their heads in silence, like clay sculptures.

The Empress Dowager said, "I'm a member of the imperial harem. I'm not supposed to interfere in governmental affairs. But this, once again, concerns His Majesty's safety. As his mother, I'm truly worriedly watching with my hair all gray and tears all ran dry.<sup>1</sup> How can I take another scare like this? Excellencies, you ought to give me an explanation this time!"

On hearing this, Pan Xiangjie's heart clenched.

After a moment of silence, Kong Qiu said, "The patrols in the inner palace might not necessarily be able to stop His Majesty even if they want to. In this subject's opinion, Xi Hongxuan should be severely punished this time! If he had not used those temptresses from foreign lands to lure His Majesty, then why would His Majesty leave the palace?"

"That's right." The Minister of Revenue, Wei Huaigu, was the elder *di* brother<sup>2</sup> of Wei Huaixing, who had denounced Xiao Chiye before. Wei Huaigu was the current head of the Wei Clan. He usually did not have the habit of speaking out, but this time, he said, "Xi Hongxuan deserves to be punished, but his crime does not merit the punishment of death. This subject



feels that it's the Ministry of Works the blame should fall on this time. They are the ones in charge of the repairs in Qudu. Your Excellency Pan, how could you let the public ditches get clogged to such an extent?"

Knowing that Wei Huaigu was about to shift the blame, Pan Xiangjie immediately fell to his knees and said to the Empress Dowager, "I ask of Your Majesties to discern the truth and render fair judgment! Our Ministry of Works has already notified the Ministry of Revenue regarding the blockage of the public ditches during Emperor Xiande's reign, hoping that they can allocate some money for us to carry out repair works. But the Ministry of Revenue kept delaying the approval of funds. What can the Ministry of Works do? This is not a minor construction work!"

Wei Huaigu was in no hurry. He was even more of a tough nut to deal with than Wei Huaixing. He merely said, "Our Ministry of Revenue has to discuss it with the Grand Secretariat in order for the funds to be moved. At that time, approval has yet to go through Secretariat Elder Hua, so who would dare to allocate the funds indiscriminately? Qudu has to clean up the mess in the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo during those few years. The treasury is almost emptied out. Even if we have the intention to help, we do not have the means."

"Everyone has their difficulties." Pang Xiangjie said, "So why are you only holding our Ministry of Works responsible? Left Censor-in-chief, Cen Xunyi, wants to impeach the Ministry of Works for negligence in irrigation works, saying that we failed to secure the embankment of the Kailing River. But did it collapse today? No! This shows that the Ministry of Works has never cut corners; we are dependable and diligent when it comes to our work! If we had the money, we would have long cleared out the public ditches!"

The Ministry of Revenue would not acknowledge this debt, and the Ministry of Works would not shoulder this blame. Both parties were elders of the Eight Great Clans. Neither of them was willing to take a step back, and so they both simply stood here and passed the buck around.

Kong Qiu almost wanted to sneer. He was from a humble background, and an official that Hai Liangyi himself had lifted to this position. He could work together with the ministers from the noble clans, but he could not be of the same mind with them. Now that he was hearing them kicking the ball around, he felt vexed and fed up.

It was true that the Ministry of Works had made a report before. But who was the one who reported it? It was a subordinate, a minor official, who had never set foot into the court. Did Pan Xiangjie take it seriously? If he did, he would have taken it up with the Ministry of Revenue himself, but he did not. Did the Ministry of Revenue know? They did. What was the relationship between Wei Huaigu and Hua Siqian? Both clans could be considered in-laws. Although they did not seem to be on close terms in recent years, the ties still existed. Wei Huaigu was far more resourceful than Wei Huaixing, and he was the one who could discuss political affairs with Hua Siqian. But he had never really talked to Hua Siqian about this matter. This was a matter they simply muddled their way through—If you drowned, then you deserved it; you could only blame your own bad luck!

Sitting behind the curtain, the Empress Dowager saw through these people clearly. Hua Xiangyi stood behind her, listening with rapt attention.

Hai Liangyi finally coughed a few times. Covering his mouth with a handkerchief, he said, “There was indeed this one account in the Grand Secretariat’s past reported accounts. But it was only once, and no one bothered to ask about it afterward. Now that the place has collapsed, everyone remembers it, but is this year the first time the water level rose? Let’s not bring up what happened way back, but did the water level rise during spring last year and the year before last? Did the Ministry of Works report those rises?”

Pan Xiangjie turned his head away and said remorsefully, “When the Grand Secretary puts it that way... it’s indeed an oversight on our Ministry of Works’ part. But it really can’t be helped. What’s of essence now is to dredge up the ditches without delay.”

“The Ministry of Revenue has also allocated the money to the disaster victims.” Wei Huaigu said. “The situation is critical at present. The appropriation of blame can wait until the public ditches have been dredged. Is the Eight Great Training Divisions the ones digging right now?”

The Minister of War, Chen Zhenyan, replied succinctly, “It’s the Imperial Army. Viceroy Xiao is still soaking in the water.”

The Empress Dowager was about to speak up when the palace maid inside hurriedly rushed out and fell to her knees on the ground. She said, “To report to Your Majesty, His Majesty has suddenly developed a fever. His back is covered all over in rashes!”

The Empress Dowager suddenly rose to her feet and exclaimed in shock, "What?"

Hai Liangyi bent over and started to cough violently. Hua Xiangyi held the Empress Dowager to support her and promptly made a decision. "Summon the imperial physician! And support the Secretariat Elder, quick!"



Xi Hongxuan had broken out into rashes too. The one who discovered it first was the military medic of the Eight Great Training Divisions. He promptly lifted the hem of his robe and hurried out to report to Han Jin.

Han Jin wiped his face, still feeling a little dumbfounded as he said, "Is it eczema? Just dispel the cold and it'll be fine?"

"It's not eczema." The medic was so anxious that he stomped his foot. "How is that eczema? It's an epidemic disease!"

Now, it was not just Han Jin whose expression changed; the surrounding Eight Great Training Divisions' soldiers who were still in the water had all gone pale. Han Jin turned his head back and saw the Imperial Army still busying around a short distance away. He waded through the water to them and grasped hold of Chen Yang to yell, "Where is the Viceroy? Call the Viceroy over quickly. It's a matter of urgency!"

Xiao Chiye pushed away the broken plank and walked over, asking, "What is it?"

Han Jin's hands trembled as he smeared the dirty water on his clothes and said, "We can't pull them down anymore or soak in this water either! Viceroy, an epidemic has broken out!"

There was a cold glint in Xiao Chiye's eyes as he asked, "Who got it first?"

"Xi Hongxuan." Han Jin's breathing was hurried. "Is His, His Majesty..."

"Gu Jin!" Xiao Chiye immediately commanded. "Rush to the palace and report this matter to Secretariat Elder Hai!"

Gu Jin climbed up the bank and sped off. In a few steps, he somersaulted to the rooftop and stepped across the ridge of the roof to leap his way to the palace gates.

"Take me to see Xi Hongxuan." Xiao Chiye said in a steady voice. "Now!"

Xi Hongxuan was feverish and hot all over. Medicine had only just been applied to his crushed legs, and now his legs were already drenched in sweat. He lay on the bed, delirious and incoherent.

The medic wiped his sweat and said, "Four hours earlier, he still looked as if he had caught a little cold. I fed him medicine, and his fever subsided. But who knew that when I touched him earlier, his fever was back with even more of a vengeance! When I changed the medicine for his legs and pulled down his pants for a look, it was all covered in rashes!"

Xiao Chiye looked at those rashes and questioned, "Are you sure it's an epidemic disease?"

The medic said, "During the reign of Yongyi, an epidemic like this had broken out in the City of Dancheng. It was reported to the Imperial Academy of Medicine; they have past records of it on file. Viceroy, once this rash spreads all over the body, the high fever will not subside. In another four hours, the infected will fall unconscious and keep vomiting. I'm afraid there are still sick people among the disaster victims. Without losing any time, Zhao Zui Temple must arrange for the decoction of the relevant herbs as a precaution!"

Afraid now, Han Jin hastily asked, "What caused this? There has to be a reason. Otherwise, how are we going to continue digging this ditch?"

The medic said, "We're now at the point when winter transits into spring. It's damp and cold. The low-lying area gathers sewage and filth throughout the year. Their houses are closely clustered together; it's so cramped that there's not even a window. The lack of sunlight will make the people prone to illnesses."

"If that's the case, then how did he get infected?" Xiao Chiye furrowed his eyebrows. "Ouhua Pavilion is far from the low-lying area, and there are people cleaning the connected alleys at the back, so there's no contact with contaminated objects. Is the reason just because he soaked in the swill water those few hours during the collapse?"

The medic hesitated. He wiped his sweat again and mustered out the courage to say, "I'll be honest with the Viceroy. I'm afraid he did not contract this illness during the collapse, but when he was fooling around in the brothel before the collapse. Second Young Master Xi is already burning up to such an extent, then His Majesty—"

"Viceroy!" Meng Rui lifted the curtain and entered with a solemn expression. "Over ten people have suddenly collapsed at Zhao Zui Temple.

Two men from the Ministry of Revenue who are here on duty have collapsed too!”

Xiao Chiye was about to give his command when Chen Yang, all drenched in rainwater, barged in and said, “Master! Laohu is also down with a fever!”

The sound of the rain outside suddenly grew urgent. Like battle drums sounding on all sides, they came pounding down for all they were worth, as if they wanted to shatter this pitch-black night.

Xiao Chiye abruptly lifted the curtain and stepped out. He said, “It’ll be too late to wait for the approval. Head over to the various major medicinal stores on Shenwu Street to get the medicine. Help anyone who caught a cold, has a fever, is vomiting, or is physically weak to Zhao Zui Temple. Withdraw the rest of the men. Get the men on duty from the Ministry of Revenue to start decocting the herbal medicine! Ding Tao!”

Ding Tao said, “Young Master!”

Xiao Chiye tugged Ding Tao over, breathing heavily in the rain as he whispered, “Tell Shen Lanzhou to leave immediately!”



Special Thanks to: [Eggy](#)

#### Footnotes

1. 白发愁看泪眼枯 Line from the poem “Parting from/Bidding Farewell to My Old Mother” 《别老母》 by Huang Jingren (黄景仁)
2. 嫡长兄 Elder di brother, i.e., brother of the same mother who is the legal wife.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 65 : EPIDEMIC



Raindrops bounced all over, while splashes of mud spattered.

People hurried in and out of Zhao Zui Temple. The awning to provide shelter from the rain had already been erected, and the strong, bitter aroma of the herbal decoction pervaded the air everywhere. Even the Imperial Bodyguards keeping an eye on the stoves were covering their noses and mouths with handkerchiefs.

With a cloth wrapped around his head, Qi Huilian distributed the medicinal decoction together with Ji Gang. Seeing the feverish man who had fallen unconscious vaguely mumbling some words, he scrutinized him for a moment.

Ji Gang was clearing the bowls with nimble movements, but when he saw an unmoving Grand Mentor, he asked, “What’s wrong?”

“This is the Dancheng epidemic disease.” Qi Huilian pushed apart the patient’s collars. “The rashes will spread over his body. We cannot get close to him. It’s contagious.”

Ji Gang asked, “Can it be treated?”

Qi Huilian’s scalp itched. He scratched it a few times and said, “Yes, but it’s troublesome. The public ditches must continue to be dug, but who knows if any of the infected have spat or pissed in the water? If the diggers were to get infected without realizing it and come into contact with the others, then wouldn’t another bunch of them topple over ill?”

“Such a sin.” Ji Gang looked beneath the rain shelter awning. “What should be done then?”

“What should be done...” Qi Huilian suddenly pulled up the cloth to cover his face as he looked at Zhao Zui Temple’s entrance where some people had come. He whispered, “It all depends on fate. First of all, the public has to be reassured; there’s no room for unrest. Then, assemble all the big and small medicinal stores in Qudu. The infected have to be quarantined and isolated.”

“We can’t stay for long too.” Ji Gang put the bowl down. “There’ll be someone handling this matter. I’ll ask Chuan-er to leave.”

“Lanzhou can’t leave.” Qi Huilian said. “He’s the one handling this matter. At such a juncture, can you count on Han Cheng to step forward and

handle this? All of them can hardly wait to hide and dodge this bullet.”

“No!” Ji Gang turned pale. “He’s only just a fifth-grade Judge now. He doesn’t even have the qualifications of a fourth-grade to attend court. So how can they let him do it? This is a major issue. There are plenty of higher-ranking people with more authority and power than him!”

“Who are you reasoning with?” Qi Huilian put down the bowls. “There’s nothing you can do if Han Cheng keeps him here in the name of gaining experience! Once the disease starts spreading, which high-ranking official would be willing to come down here? Even Hai Liangyi won’t be able to come! Besides, Lanzhou can’t leave. This is the opportunity of a lifetime. If he succeeds, he can get promoted again! A promo—”

Ji Gang shoved him away abruptly and said, “What nonsense are you spouting?!”

Qi Huilian fell to the ground and climbed back to his feet. He said, “What are you still waiting for if you don’t seize the opportunity to act now?!” His temper flared too. “This is the time when people trample over one another for personal gain. He has to do it no matter what! Do you understand?”

“I don’t care to understand.” Ji Gang flushed with rage. “I’m telling him to leave. I have to take him away!”

After saying that, Ji Gang moved to head inside. Qiao Tianya walked out towards him and blocked his path.

“Those in Zhao Zui Temple will be evacuated out. Only infected patients can remain inside. Shifu, don’t go in again.” Qiao Tianya said with a smile. “Teacher’s journals and notes have already been shifted to the old residence. Master told me to rent a small building on Shenwu Street for both of you. It’s close to the palace gates, so there’s no way it can get flooded.”

“Move aside!” Ji Gang said. “It’s all the infected inside, so how can Chuan-er stay for long? I have to talk to him!”

Qiao Tianya reined in his smile and said with a stern countenance, “Shifu, why put me in a spot? Since Master has already given the instructions, then there’s absolutely no reason to change it. It’s all the infected here. Master will worry if you remain here. Please come with me on account of his filial piety.”

Hearing the sound of intense coughing all around, Ji Gang grew even more anxious. He grabbed Qiao Tianya’s arms and pushed it back. Qiao

Tianya had already anticipated that he would make a move, so he promptly took the blow. Half of his arm had gone numb, but his legs were faster as he moved to block Ji Gang with his entire body.

“Shifu!” Qiao Tianya said in hushed tones, “Calm down! For Master to make such an arrangement, he would naturally already have a countermeasure in mind. I still have to return here later. Let us leave earlier, and Master can go back earlier too, alright? There are so many pairs of eyes watching. Do you think you can really take him away? Where can you go?”

This “where can you go” calmed Ji Gang down. He looked at the interior for a long time, then flicked his sleeves and trembled as he pointed at Qi Huilian. But in the end, he said not another word more.



Shen Zechuan sat on the bench and closed his eyes to rest. His ears had been buzzing, and he was presently feeling dizzy. Yet his face betrayed none of his discomfort. It was only after a while when he heard someone calling him that he opened his eyes. There was not a single trace of weariness the instant he opened his eyes.

The official from the Ministry of Revenue said, “Your Excellency the Judge, the supply of herbs isn’t sufficient. What are we going to do tomorrow?”

“It’s a matter of grave importance. There won’t be a break in the supply of herbs.” Shen Zechuan gathered the overcoat around him. “The imperial physician from the Imperial Academy of Medicine ought to be here already. When the time comes, he will bring news of the prepared herbs over as well. Tell them to continue decocting the medicine. Don’t scrimp on the herbs.”

That official uttered an acknowledgment in response.

Seeing his panic-stricken expression, Shen Zechuan said, “Which section of the Ministry of Revenue are you an official of?”

The official hurriedly said, “This humble subordinate is not really an official per se, but merely a minor official in charge of the records of official documents.”

“We are all working for the people. It’s all the same whether you are a major or minor official.” As Shen Zechuan spoke, he extended his hand and pinched the center of his eyebrows. He composed himself for a moment before he continued with a question, “What’s your name?”



“This humble subordinate’s name is Liang Cuishan.”

“You will take over the supervision of the herbs tomorrow morning. No matter how big or small, make a detailed record of them.” Shen Zechuan said, “My guess is that the Imperial Army has already gone to transfer the herbs. Time is tight. We most certainly can’t wait for the palace’s memo, so the herbs these few days must all be clearly recorded.”

He suddenly stopped and paused for a moment.

“Go and rest for now. Pay attention to your health these few days. Report it immediately if you feel any discomfort.”

Liang Cuishan took his leave. The moment the curtain fell back down, Shen Zechuan felt his forehead, which was scalding hot.

Ge Qingqing came in right after. Shocked at the sight, he stepped forward and whispered, “Judge...”

Shen Zechuan asked with calm, “When did Xi Hongxuan get the rashes?”

“Four hours after the medicine was applied.” Ge Qingqing said. “The rashes started spreading up from his legs.”

“For me, I got the rashes first before the fever.” Shen Zechuan said with a clear head. “The symptoms don’t match, so it’s probably not an epidemic disease. But as a precaution, I’ll drink that medicine too.”

Ge Qingqing felt a little more relieved. He said, “Fortunately, you did not take leave this morning!”

The Emperor had been infected with the epidemic disease. Which imperial physician would dare to say he got it while he was out fooling around? They could only find an excuse to fob everyone else off, saying that he got infected out of carelessness. But who could infect the Emperor with the disease? If not his personal eunuchs, then it was the guards who often moved around the Emperor. Shen Zechuan was, at present, officially tasked to act in the Emperor’s presence. Supposed he had taken leave this morning, and someone got a handle against him after the fact and made his eczema out to be rashes from the epidemic disease, then he would lose the right to remain before the Emperor. Shen Zechuan still carried the burden of Shen Wei’s crime on his back. Once he went down, it would really be hard for him to rise again.

Even Shen Zechuan himself would find it hard to breathe at this moment. Compared to schemes and intrigues, this kind of unpredictable providence was hard to guard against. If he had not been so cautious, he

would have already fallen into someone else's grasp right now. His life and death would then be at the mercy of just one utterance.

Seeing Shen Zechuan close his eyes, Ge Qingqing withdrew.

Shen Zechuan listened to the sound of the rain, but his thoughts had already drifted far away. Those murky old memories followed right on the heels of the sound of rain. He furrowed his brows amid his vexation and weariness.

He did not like snowy days, nor did he like rainy days. The cold and wetness would remind him of the Chashi sinkhole, of Ji Mu, of all the days he had been on his knees at the mercy of another. In addition, the cold and wetness would make him uneasy, and make him gloomy. It would make him into nothing more than a fleshy vessel that was all chilling forbearance and irritability within.

Just like this, Shen Zechuan leaned against the wall and dozed off for a moment. But the more he dozed, the more drowsy he became, until he fell asleep for real in this corner.

It was already late when Xiao Chiye arrived at Zhao Zui Temple. He entered Zhao Zui Temple together with the imperial physician who had hurried over. Behind him, Ding Tao looked miserable, because he did not manage to find Shen Zechuan and missed the time.

Xiao Chiye asked the Imperial Bodyguard who was decocting the medicine, "Where's the Judge? I'm looking for him!"

The Imperial Bodyguard, with half of his face covered, handed him a bowl of medicine and said, "No matter who you are looking for, you have to drink the medicine first. Viceroy, you Imperial Army still has to enter the water. Please be careful and take care!"

Xiao Chiye choked down the medicine without a word.

The Imperial Bodyguard rose and yelled under the rain shelter awning, "Qing-ge! Is Qing-ge there? Where's our Judge? Please notify him and tell him that Viceroy Xiao is looking for him."

Ge Qingqing was lying on the bench, sleeping. On hearing this, he swiftly sat up and draped his clothes around him before walking over. When he saw that it was Xiao Chiye, he said, "The Judge is resting inside... He hasn't slept all night. Please take a rest too, Viceroy. The Eight Great Training Divisions said they are going to guard the city gates, so there will be only us digging up the rest of this unfinished ditch tomorrow."

“Physical work naturally has to be done by someone strong and sturdy.” Xiao Chiye said as he walked. “Watch the door. Don’t let anyone in.”

Xiao Chiye lifted the curtain and entered. There was no light lit inside. He swept a glance around but did not find the man he was looking for. It was only when he took a few more steps that he saw Shen Zechuan, who was leaning against the wall.

Xiao Chiye was dirty, so he removed his outer garment and sat beside Shen Zechuan to pour out the water in his boots. It was cold inside the room. He put on his boots and went out again to borrow a fire from the stove, then re-entered to find a copper basin to start a fire.

Shen Zechuan opened his eyes and said, “Are you done digging Donglong Street?”

“Yeah.” Xiao Chiye stoked the fire. “Why aren’t you sleeping on the bed?”

“Just taking a short nap.” Shen Zechuan said. “If I lie down, I won’t be able to get up.”

Xiao Chiye shifted the basin before the bed and said, “Come sleep on the bed. I’ll call you up later.”

Shen Zechuan did not stand on ceremony. He lay down, and Xiao Chiye embraced him from behind and pressed his face against his cheek. Shen Zechuan could still hear Xiao Chiye whispering at first, but it grew progressively vague towards the back.

It was only when Xiao Chiye heard Shen Zechuan’s breathing deepened a little that he reached out to undo his collars and take a closer look at those red rashes.

Not the same as Xi Hongxuan.

Xiao Chiye closed up Shen Zechuan’s clothes again and hugged Shen Zechuan until he himself fell asleep.

Xiao Chiye slept for an unspecified amount of time until he felt a scalding heat in his arms. He was still dazed when he half-opened his eyes, but once he got a clear look at the man in his embrace, his mind instantly cleared.

Shen Zechuan seemed to be on fire. Sweat had already drenched his temples. Xiao Chiye felt him; Shen Zechuan was burning up everywhere.

Xiao Chiye abruptly sat up and called out to him, “Lanzhou, Lanzhou?”

Shen Zechuan was dripping with sweat. His brows were tightly furrowed, and his breathing was slightly urgent. Roused half-awake by Xiao Chiye, he said, “Qua... Quarantine... You can get infected with this disease even if you aren’t near the water.”

Xiao Chiye wrapped him up in the overcoat and shouted, “Chen Yang, summon the imperial physician!”

Chen Yang, who was leaning against the wall outside taking a nap, jerked awake instantly. He rose and leaped off the steps, then made his way under the rain shelter awning and pulled the imperial physician into the interior.

The imperial physician lifted the overcoat open, looked for a moment, then said in an urgent tone, “Viceroy, the Judge is infected with the epidemic disease! Seems to me that he caught a cold first...”

Xiao Chiye grasped the imperial physician’s arm. Staring at the imperial physician, he said in a frosty voice, “The Judge is what?”

Panicking, the imperial physician corrected himself, “He’s... overworked and overstressed... that’s why he fell ill...”

“That’s right. The Judge fell ill here today.” Xiao Chiye tightened his grip. “He wasn’t ill prior to this.”

The imperial physician repeatedly said, “Right, right, right...”

“All the medicine in Qudu is here. I know Your Excellency has the miraculous hands of a healer in the medical field.” Xiao Chiye suddenly softened his tone. “You can cure him, right?”

On seeing Xiao Chiye’s eyes, the imperial physician went weak in the knees. He held on to the edge of the bed for support and nodded in a panic as he said, “I can, I can...”



## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 66 : RAIN CEASED



Translated with: [Eggy](#)<3



Access in and out of the imperial palace was strictly forbidden, so the Empress Dowager arranged for Hai Liangyi and the other heavyweight ministers to rest in the Grand Secretariat's council compound. Everyone inside and outside the palace was in a state of anxiety.

The daily cleaning of Li Jianheng's bedchamber was carried out with extra caution, with those serving eunuchs and palace maids all appointed by the Empress Dowager herself. Every time they entered and exited, they had to wash up and change their clothes. They were not even allowed to go out without permission during their breaks. Mu Ru kept watch by Li Jianheng's side, not once relying on the servants. She personally taste-tested the decoction and fed it to Li Jianheng herself. Even when she ate or slept, she never left Li Jianheng's bedchamber.

Li Jianheng drifted in and out of consciousness, and subsequently, the Imperial Academy of Medicine was on tenterhooks too. Even when they prescribed and decocted medicine, they were careful. Everyone was already walking on eggshells, ready to lose their lives at any time. An air of dread and gloom hung over them all around. Each of them looked utterly wretched and grieved, as if bereft of their parents.

The Imperial Academy of Medicine's men outside the palace made all the arrangements for the medicinal ingredients in Qudu. Other than those already infected, all the disaster victims shifted out from the low-lying area had to take the medicine too. The Ministry of Revenue and Imperial Bodyguards assisted with the distribution of aid reliefs. They set up a porridge and medicine shack outside Zhao Zui Temple, where they gave out medicinal decoction and rice porridge every day according to schedule.

Han Jin had already pulled out of Donglong Street on the night Xi Hongxuan fell ill. On the pretext of patrolling the various city gates, the Eight Great Training Divisions completely threw the matter of dredging up the public ditches to the Imperial Army. But half of the Imperial Army men

had been on standby on Mount Feng awaiting orders, and now, they could not get in at all. Xiao Chiye did not have that many elite soldiers.

Fortunately, there were still some people from the Ministry of Works who had yet to be withdrawn. Together with the dozens of Imperial Bodyguards, everyone pooled manpower and braved the rain to dig through the four main streets.

By the fourth day, everyone was exhausted and weak. Chen Yang, Ge Qingqing, Qiao Tianya, and Gu Jin gathered together when they returned and leaned against the wall for a nap. Ding Tao and Xiaowu were young. The various gege took care of them and took turns to stretch and straighten out their legs for them to use as pillows when they slept. Ding Tao could not lick ink out from his brush, so the note-taking in his little notebook came to a halt. It had only been a few days, and every one of them had taken on the look of a disheveled and unkempt beggar.

Xiao Chiye did not sleep much these days. He had to lead men to dig ditches before dawn, and there was no time for rest throughout the day. At night, when he returned to Zhao Zui Temple, he still had to watch over Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan was still able to remain awake and clear-headed a few days before, but later on, his fever would not recede, and he had a severe case of vomiting. But without food in his stomach, he could only regurgitate bile. When he was fed medicine, he would puke it all out in the middle of the night. So, when Xiao Chiye returned, he would hug Shen Zechuan. He would lean against the wall and let Shen Zechuan sprawl face-to-face on his chest or shoulder. Each time Shen Zechuan felt like vomiting, he would rub his back.

In the dead of night, when all was quiet, Zhao Zui Temple was as lonely as a deserted island beyond the realm of the mundane world. The rain had ceased, and there was nary a sound from the birds as the thick, ink-like night shrouded everything in sight.

Shen Zechuan's breathing was heavy. He suddenly started to cough, his chest heaving violently. Xiao Chiye was jerked awake from his light sleep. He covered Shen Zechuan's back and tiredly jolted his legs to shake him gently.

"Lanzhou." Xiao Chiye coaxed him. "Where is Lanzhou?"

Shen Zechuan looked sickly and wan. The nauseating feeling of wanting to vomit was stuck in his throat. He half-opened his eyes and

replied in a hoarse voice, "Here..."

"Give it a shake, and the illness will dissipate." Xiao Chiye said, "When you've recovered, this Second Young Master will take you horseback riding."

Shen Zechuan rested his head on Xiao Chiye's shoulder and let out a hoarse "hm" in acknowledgment.

"This is actually a position of hugging a child." Xiao Chiye ran his palm down Shen Zechuan's back soothingly and, in this moment of intimacy, whispered, "When I had a rash before, my mother held me like this. What are you going to call me now that I'm holding you like this today?"

Shen Zechuan nuzzled his cheeks against Xiao Chiye and buried his face. After a long while, he said in a muffled voice, "Call you daddy."

Xiao Chiye's chest shook as he chuckled and asked, "Touched?"

Shen Zechuan coughed. He did not answer.

Xiao Chiye said, "When I tamed horses in the past, I ate and slept with them. While Lang Tao Xue Jin was still a foal, we were stranded in the heavy rain. We also snuggled up like this to keep warm then. It has probably already forgotten about this."

Shen Zechuan listened in his drowsy state.

Xiao Chiye said, "Don't forget this. If you're touched, you have to remember this and repay me in the future."

Shen Zechuan wanted to say something. He opened his mouth but did not utter a sound. Xiao Chiye reached a finger out to brush away Shen Zechuan's damp hair and lowered his eyes to look at Shen Zechuan's pale side profile.

"Oh, Lanzhou."

Xiao Chiye murmured in hushed tones, and it was under these murmurs that Shen Zechuan fell asleep. He lay immersed on the verge of a certain kind of agony and delight, wallowing in torment. And from the bitter depth of his misery, he tasted sweetness.

Xiao Chiye was like the blazing sun. He was also like the wind from the grassland. He stood out from the masses. To Shen Zechuan, hiding that handkerchief on that day with the gloomy and damp rain and snow was like hiding a rousing and passionate dream. In this dream, there was the unrestrained galloping of horses over a thousand *li*<sup>1</sup> of grasslands, and the spreading of wings soaring through ten thousand *li* of clear sky. These

eventually turned into an indescribable glimpse—one he would be hard-pressed to recount in detail.

Xiao Chiye was the one who was a kind of temptation. Every word of “oh, Lanzhou” he uttered was spoken with deep feeling. Those frivolous cynicism and firm steadfastness of his blended together contradictorily. He was frivolous as he whispered to Shen Zechuan, yet he was also incomparably dependable as he opened his arms to Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan was too powerless to resist. Those deep and frivolous kisses deceived him into dropping his guard, until he became a baddie on intimate terms with Xiao Chiye, until he was muddleheaded enough to come to rely on Xiao Chiye amidst this affliction.

Shen Zechuan’s vomiting subsided a little later. Xiao Chiye fed him the medicinal decoction little by little. Every time Shen Zechuan showed signs of not waking up from his lethargic sleep, Xiao Chiye would say that phrase “where is Lanzhou?”, which seemed to have the inexplicable power to call Shen Zechuan back time and time again.

Xiao Chiye originally would still hug Shen Zechuan as he took a nap. But several people died successively one after another in the days after, and he no longer dared to sleep again at night as he listened to Shen Zechuan’s gasps for breath whenever the occasion demanded.

On the ninth day, two more people died under the rain shelter awning. They could not just leave the bodies lying around, nor bury them, so Xiao Chiye left them to Ge Qingqing to dispose of.

At the time Ge Qingqing led the men to sort out the corpses and carry them out, Qiao Tianya was squatting by the stove fanning the fire. As he watched the medicine, he went through some matters in his mind.

“The Viceroy is waiting to feed the medicine.” Xiaowu came over and asked. “Is it ready?”

“The public ditches have already been dug through, so there’s no hurry today. Tell the Viceroy to wait.” Qiao Tianya added two pieces of firewood and shifted aside the handkerchief covering his mouth and nose to say, “Keep an eye on the Viceroy. He’s with my Master every day. If he gets infected, we won’t have any surplus medicine for him.”

“There was an epidemic at Luoxia Pass during the reign of Yongyi. His Lordship led his men to handle it then, and he never got infected.” Xiaowu squatted down to wait. He said, “I heard the various gege from Libei say



that the Xiao Clan has the mandate of Heaven. That physique is not one a common man would have.”

“Tantai Hu is strong and sturdy too. Didn’t he still fall ill just like that?” Qiao Tianya said. “It doesn’t hurt to be careful and pay more attention. Have you drunk this morning’s medicine?”

“Yeah, I did.” Xiaowu honestly answered.

“How’s Tantai Hu today?” Qiao Tianya moved his slightly numbed legs.

“He hasn’t vomited since yesterday.” Xiaowu said. “Chen-ge said that it’s because he’s strong, and we found out about the infection in time. He’s being fed enough medicine too. Plus, the imperial physician is constantly at his side looking after him. He’ll be fine!”

“We can’t let our guards down before he’s awake.” There seemed to be something constantly on Qiao Tianya’s mind as he tossed the fan to Xiaowu. “Watch the fire for me. There’s some serious business I need to discuss with them.”

With that, he rose to his feet and headed for the rain shelter.

The curtain of the rain shelter was lifted partially as Qiao Tianya made his way inside. It was dim inside, but not damp. The beddings were also dry. An errand-runner from the Imperial Academy of Medicine washed and changed them daily. He saw Xiao Chiye in the midst of speaking to Tantai Hu, so he waited for a while.

Xiao Chiye turned his head aside and asked, “What’s the matter?”

Qiao Tianya lifted the hem of his robe and took a seat at the bench by the side.

Xiao Chiye caressed his thumb ring as he looked at Qiao Tianya with calm and composure.

Qiao Tianya said, “The Imperial Academy of Medicine and Imperial Bodyguards have records of this disease on file. Have you looked at it?”

Xiao Chiye nodded his head.

“Do you know the cause of the outbreak in the City of Dancheng? Xiao... Viceroy.” Qiao Tianya almost called out Xiao the Second again and promptly corrected himself. “Before my Master fell ill, he checked through the Imperial Bodyguards records here and specifically told me to make a note of certain matters. I’ve been thinking about this disease these few days, but since Master is not yet awake, I can only discuss this with you.”

“What did Lanzhou say?”

“He said that there’s something unusual about the origin of this disease.” Qiao Tianya propped his elbows on his knees and whistled at Ding Tao. “Recite the details of Dancheng’s epidemic to the Viceroy. You have a photographic memory; you still remember, right?”

Ding Tao thought for a moment, then said, “There was an outbreak in the City of Dancheng during the year of Yongyi. It was summer. The Imperial Academy of Medicine dispatched a delegate to go with the Imperial Bodyguards to check on it, and they discovered something strange about this epidemic disease. After some investigation, they learned that there was a burial mound behind the outbreak site. It was dirty and messy, with no one having cleaned it up before. The corpses thrown there before the start of spring had soaked at the rear until it reeked. There was even a cooked food stall in service at the front. The weather was hot at that time, and flies were buzzing all around. The shopkeeper was the first one who fell ill. At first, no one paid it any attention; even he himself suspected it to be a cold. He grabbed some medicine and carried on with his business at the shop. Oh, my! A whole bunch of people subsequently fell ill after those cooked foods were sold. And that was when the prefectural yamen of Dancheng realized something wrong.”

“A burial mound, huh? There are all kinds of people thrown there. Perhaps it just happened that one of them had some diseases or was bitten by some wild animals. Coincidentally, it had already been soaked rotten, thus becoming a feast for the flies to dine on. People are naturally susceptible to infection if they get too close.” The imperial physician packed his case and said, “It wasn’t easy for everyone at that time. Dancheng was sealed off for half a year, and quite many people died. We are lucky this time to have discovered it earlier, and we have the experience now. That’s why we managed to take precautions in time.”

“True that. But how did the outbreak happen in Qudu?” Qiao Tianya said, “The low-lying area of Donglong Street had indeed been submerged in sewage. It’s only to be expected for someone to fall ill. But there are no homicide cases on Donglong Street. I’ll be honest. Viceroy, please don’t take offense, but being infected with venereal diseases is to be expected on Donglong Street. Why is it so strange this time that we would get an outbreak of the Dancheng epidemic disease instead?”

The imperial physician tactfully found an excuse to head out.

“There’s no definitive explanation for the outbreak of Dancheng epidemic.” Chen Yang thought for a moment, then continued, “There’s a collapse and heavy rain this time, and everyone is in the water, so perhaps...”

“There are too many epidemic diseases.” Qiao Tianya said. “For example, the outbreak in Luoxia Pass at that time was a rat plague; so no way Hezhou would have an outbreak of the same plague. The situations in the various lands are different, so we can’t lump them together. This humble servant is a deeply suspicious man, and an honest person does not resort to insinuations. I think this disease did not start in Donglong Street, but—”

Qiao Tianya lifted his thumb and pointed it at the roof.

It fell silent under the awning. The bystanders had more or less turned pale.

Qiao Tianya let out a chuckle and said, “Isn’t it a coincidence? The celestial being met with misfortune upon descent to the mortal world. It’s virtually impossible to guard against dodging a pit only to fall into a well.<sup>2</sup> These few days, the palace has not sent any word out to us. Viceroy, the public ditch has been unclogged, and the water level has gone down. But why does this matter seem to me like it’s only the beginning?”

“Everyone living in the heavenly palace is an immortal.” Xiao Chiye said slowly. “These immortals value their lives. They won’t dare to play it this way. A possibility like the one you speak of is only something a desperate person at the end of his rope staking everything he has on this one throw would dare to do.”

“I don’t know about that.” Qiao Tianya said. “The Directorate of Ceremonial now lacks a major-league eunuch who can take charge and control the twenty-four yamen. Many matters exist among the chaos where things are left unsupervised. If there’s really someone who brings a certain something in, then he would be able to pass it through just by hoodwinking his way through. Our Imperial Army and Imperial Bodyguards are all soldiers from the outside. There’s nothing we can do about what’s happening on the inside. But I feel that we have to take precautions and be on guard when it comes to this matter.”

Why did Li Jianheng leave the palace? Was it only just to have fun? He had just been through an assassination attempt not too long ago. He was not a gutsy man, so how would he dare to sneak out on the sly? Not unless someone was putting him up to it.

Xi Hongxuan would discuss everything with Shen Zechuan nowadays. Meeting with mishap this time was something he himself had never expected. And now, he was still lying on the bed with his life hanging in the balance. So who was the one who instigated Li Jianheng and brought about the collapse of Ouhua Pavilion at exactly the right moment?

Xiao Chiye contemplated it in silence.

His intuition told him it was not the Empress Dowager. Because Li Jianheng was already showing signs of showing filial respect to her. This, to her, was precisely the moment she could stage a comeback. She definitely would not bear to let Li Jianheng die now.

Then who else is there?

This time, the intent was not to intimidate Li Jianheng, but for Li Jianheng to die for real. But who would benefit if Li Jianheng died?

The curtain was lifted once again. The imperial physician poked his head in and said joyfully, “Viceroy, His Excellency the Judge is awake!”

Xiao Chiye quickly rose to his feet and strode a few steps out under the awning and entered the house. Shen Zechuan, who had been in a lethargic sleep for days, had his eyes half-opened. Xiao Chiye crouched softly beside the bed and gazed at him.

Shen Zechuan lifted his finger and weakly caressed Xiao Chiye’s brows and eyes. Xiao Chiye grabbed his hand and pressed it against his cheek.

“Go ahead and touch.” Xiao Chiye leaned in closer to him and laughed in a husky voice, “I’ll let you touch.”



#### Footnotes

1. 里 *li*, an ancient measure of length, 1 *li* = approx. 500m
2. 避坑落井 literally dodging a pit only to fall into a well, i.e., out of the frying pan into the fire.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 67 : SHARING A PILLOW



Translated with: [Rie](#)<3



Shen Zechuan was in a slight daze as Xiao Chiye's stubble rubbed against his palm until it felt ticklish. He gazed at Xiao Chiye and said, "... Prickly."

"Does it not feel comfortable to the touch?" Xiao Chiye asked.

Shen Zechuan replied, "Comfortable."

Both men were just a short distance apart, yet it seemed as if there was no gap between them. Xiao Chiye was dirty and unkempt. He hardly had time to spare these few days to tidy up. Now, he leaned close to Shen Zechuan, giving no regard to his slovenly state as he let Shen Zechuan touch him.

Chen Yang gripped the door curtain, reckoning that it was about time. He wanted to let the others enter, but then he did not hear Xiao Chiye give his permission, so he remained stuck at the entrance with a group of guards, each of them staring at the sky and the ground with a blank expression.

"Feel good touching it?" Xiao Chiye could not help but laugh out.

"Almost." Shen Zechuan pursed his lips and whispered into Xiao Chiye's ear, "So prickly, it's hurting me."

"Where does it hurt?" Xiao Chiye tilted his head and pressed his forehead against his.

Shen Zechuan gazed at him with eyes that seemed like mountain lakes moistened with fog. He put that bit of yearning for more in those eyes and revealed it all to Xiao Chiye as he exchanged gazes with him. Even the corners of his eyes contained the barest hint of faintly discernible emotion.

Xiao Chiye suddenly covered Shen Zechuan's eyes. After a moment's pause, he said, "This is not the right time to egg me on, is it?"

Shen Zechuan said, "What are you thinking? I'm just looking at you."

"Not letting you look." Xiao Chiye said, "Do it when we get back."

Outside, Chen Yang let out a few coughs and raised his voice to say, "Master..."

Xiao Chiye shifted his palm away, stood up, and said, "Come in."

Only then did Chen Yang lift the curtain, and everyone entered in a single file.



Shen Zechuan leaned against the pillow with an overcoat draped over him. As he drank the medicine, he listened to them recount the details of what had transpired in recent days. When Qiao Tianya was done speaking, he contemplated for a moment before he said, "That's right. There's something fishy about this matter from start to end. I also suspect that the collapse of Ouhua Pavilion is not a coincidence, but a deliberate act that took advantage of the opportunity offered by the blockage of Donglong Street's public ditches."

"It has only been half a year since His Majesty's ascension to the throne. With so many things waiting to be done now, it's just the time for everyone to get their big break." Xiao Chiye sat on the bench beside him. "Who could bear to let him die?"

This was also what Shen Zechuan could not figure out. He finished his medicine and handed the bowl to Qiao Tianya, then said, "We can't very well investigate matters in the palace. We need to have a suitable person on the inside before we can do it."

It was not a good thing for the position of the Brush-holding Director of the Directorate of Ceremonial to be vacant. Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan both could not interfere in matters within the palace. That was the Empress Dowager's territory. The Empress Dowager had the final say over who would be appointed to the post in the future. But it was better than nothing. If they had a planted agent inside, then that would also be a lot better than being completely blind.

When Shen Zechuan thought to this point, he suddenly asked, "You wanted to investigate Xiang Yun the last time. Did you find out anything?"

Xiao Chiye said, "I was so busy I forgot about that. Gu Jin."

Gu Jin stepped out and said, "I didn't find out any crucial information when I went to Xiangyun Villa. Xiangyun has only those few patrons. I checked them out one by one, and none of them had anything to do with the perjury matter the last time."

Shen Zechuan somehow kept feeling as though there was something he had missed. There was an unseen hand pulling strings behind the scenes that gave rise to these incidents. There must have been some causal

relationship between them. He lost himself in his thoughts again. He did not know if it was because he had just recovered from a bout of illness, but no matter how he thought, he could not figure out the link.

“His Majesty is still unconscious, and his disease has not completely subsided. We still have a few days to spare; there is no rush at this point in time.” As Xiao Chiye spoke, he moved his shoulders and arms. “The public ditches are now unclogged. So everyone should rest well these few days. This matter will eventually be resolved. It’s now more important to conserve our strength and energy for the next stage.”

The guards echoed in agreement and retreated out of the house. Once they were all gone, Xiao Chiye sat at the edge of the bed and took off his boots.

“You’ve gotten your fill of sleep, but this Second Young Master is still barely hanging on.” Xiao Chiye lay down beside Shen Zechuan and said, “Come closer. Be my blanket and cover me.”

Shen Zechuan turned his head sideways and said, “Sleep with an overcoat draped over you.”

Xiao Chiye closed his eyes and said, “You do it.”

Shen Zechuan tucked the pillow under Xiao Chiye’s neck. Xiao Chiye made a blind grab for Shen Zechuan’s hand and grasped his wrist in passing. Then he pulled Shen Zechuan towards him and embraced him.

“Too thin.” Xiao Chiye touched him. “So much that your bones jab against me when I hug you. Once autumn arrives, the wild game from Libei will be here too. You’ll need all the nourishment you can get then, and you’ll be able to fatten up by the time it’s winter.”

Xiao Chiye’s breathing was slightly heavy. Feeling sleepy, he turned his head and pressed the tip of his nose against Shen Zechuan’s temple. Then he forced a smile and said, “... Sleep with your Second Young Master for a while.”

Xiao Chiye was exhausted. He had not got any shut-eye these few days as he had to stay awake in both the day and night like a lone wolf pacing around his base. No matter how physically strong he was, there would come a time he would exhaust his strength and energy. Shen Zechuan was on top of him. Xiao Chiye found this weight just perfect, with the pressure on him making him feel warm and content.

Xiao Chiye initially wanted to sleep for a while so he could do a proper tally at night for the medicinal herb expenses incurred over the last few

days. But who knew that he would sleep until the third quarter of the hour of *yin*<sup>1</sup> the next day? Still in a trance when he woke up, he turned on his side and buried himself between Shen Zechuan's arms.

Xiao Chiye was momentarily dazed before his mind suddenly cleared. He propped himself up for a look. Turned out that his head had slipped off the pillow last night, and he had been lying on Shen Zechuan's arm for the latter half of the night. Shen Zechuan had turned to his side with his head resting on the pillow, while his other hand had pulled over the overcoat and covered him with it. This was a posture similar to a protective hug.

Dawn had yet to come. It was dark inside the room.

Xiao Chiye fell back onto the pillow and hugged Shen Zechuan over to himself, face-first. The overcoat just about covered both of them. He asked in a husky voice, "Did I make your arm numb?"

Shen Zechuan, half-awake, let out an affirmative "hm".

Xiao Chiye rubbed Shen Zechuan's stiff arm and said, "Can't you just call me?"

Warmed, Shen Zechuan said, "Xiao'Er..."

Xiao Chiye said, "Hm?"

Shen Zechuan opened his eyes to look at him and said, "You were calling out for Shen Lanzhou in your sleep."

Xiao Chiye smiled and kept his voice down as he said, "Just dreaming about what I think of in the daytime."

Both of them were very close to one another. Shen Zechuan's gaze on him made Xiao Chiye's body and heart both hot. His recently recharged energy from having slept enough skyrocketed. He wanted to tease Shen Zechuan, but at the same time, he also wanted to let Shen Zechuan sleep.

Some random bird was cooing outside, sending a ripple reverberating through the silent night.

Xiao Chiye said, "Was the reason you asked about Xiangyun earlier because you thought of something?"

Shen Zechuan said, "Where is Mu Ru from? Was she the girl the former Emperor bought?"

"She was a birthday gift the manor down there gave to His Majesty." Xiao Chiye wrapped his arms around Shen Zechuan. "At first, she was kept in the manor. It took a lot of effort just to train her. I saw from her registered birthplace that she's a native of the City of Jincheng. You think it's her?"



“Because of the assassination attempt, His Majesty came to detest eunuchs completely. There has never been any eunuch he’s on close terms with after Shuanglu. The palace maids who usually wait upon him by his side are all carefully selected people. The only person who can egg him on and help him out of the palace is Mu Ru.” Shen Zechuan lost himself in his thoughts again as he spoke. “If it’s her, there must be a reason... She does not have an imperial heir at present. She can only live if His Majesty is alive. So she should be more concerned about His Majesty’s safety than anyone else.”

“That’s the thing.” Xiao Chiye said. “The one who can pull off such a scheme must have thought it through carefully. There has to be a reason. The late Emperor’s sudden death and the Hua Clan’s subsequent fall from power did not simply result in the removal of a few *wusha* hats.<sup>2</sup> It even affected the situational arrangements of Dazhou’s various lands. In the past six months, Hai Liangyi has been locked in a stalemate in his face-off with the noble clans and barely managed to stabilize the situation. It would benefit no one if the current Emperor were to meet with misfortune now.”

“We have to wait for His Majesty to wake up before we can know more.” Shen Zechuan said. “The Ministry of Works made such a slip-up this time. Pan Xiangjie will be hard-pressed to absolve himself of blame. He will definitely be censured and held back for investigation. Have you seen the governmental clerk from the Ministry of Works, Liang Cuishan?”

“Yup, I’ve seen him.” Xiao Chiye thought for a moment. “He is one diligent man.”

“I got him to keep a detailed record of all the medicinal herbs coming and going these few days. Once we go out, the Ministry of Revenue and the Chief Surveillance Bureau will come to check the accounts. You just have to hand over this book to them.”

“Well done.” Xiao Chiye was not stingy with his praises. “When the epidemic broke out, there was no time at all to wait for the memo from the palace. I got my men to get the herbs from the medicine shops. The Imperial Army has our own handwritten notes on record. But, when all is said and done, it’s not as convincing as the testimony of a man from the Ministry of Revenue. With this book, the Imperial Army and the Ministry of Revenue won’t have to rip into each other.”

Xiao Chiye hated to deal with the officials from the Ministry of Revenue. It was so much trouble just to reconcile accounts with them every

year. With this major issue of the public ditches being clogged, those old foxes might even think of dragging the Imperial Army into the mire so as to put the Grand Secretariat in a spot; after all, the law could not be enforced if everyone was an offender! The beginning of spring was also the most complicated time for political affairs, where piled-up mountains of official documents instantly gave the Grand Secretariat a massive headache.

“You have no wish to see the Ministry of Revenue, and they are also afraid to see you.” Shen Zechuan laughed. “The matter of Quancheng silk the last time implicated Wang Xian. I see that he has already been transferred to the Ministry of Rites. Was that your handiwork?”

“I bear no personal grudge against him. The collections of debts in the past were simply official business. Because of me, he was implicated and slapped with an ill reputation for bribery. Shifting him over to the Ministry of Rites is merely a stop-gap measure.” Xiao Chiye said. “His hope of getting an ‘outstanding’ this inspection is definitely dashed. Even if he’s appointed a post outside the capital, he’ll only be sent to somewhere remote and barren.”

Wang Xian was unlucky. He originally served as the Secretary in the Ministry of Revenue and had a very hard time dealing with Xiao Chiye. A few years ago, when the Imperial Army’s equipment was worn out, Xiao Chiye was the one who personally hemmed him in to reconcile accounts and hound for money every time they carried out manual labor. He had no personal relationship with Xiao Chiye to speak of at all. Who would have expected an unexpected calamity to come flying out of the blue? Xiao Chiye was denounced before the Emperor, and by sheer coincidence, those Quancheng silks passed through his hands; there was no way he could explain himself. In the end, Xiao Chiye and Li Jianheng fell back on their brotherly ties and acted out the roles of a harmonious ruler and his minister. But he was stripped of his Secretary post for real and almost became a prisoner. He could no longer be an official in Qudu now, and even if he were to be assigned a post outside the capital, there was nowhere decent to go. He even got an assessment of “negligence of duty” for the inspection. Half a lifetime of prudence and caution—wasted. What a grave injustice.

But something clicked in Shen Zechuan’s mind, and he said, “Don’t tell me you are thinking of making use of this opportunity and assign him to Zhongbo?”

Xiao Chiye laughed and said, “To think you could even guess this.”

Xiao Chiye gave Wang Xian a helping hand and had him moved to the Ministry of Rites. At the very least, the latter managed to secure his job and means of livelihood. In the past, Wang Xian disliked him, but now he had to be deeply grateful to him. Xiao Chiye planned to transfer Wang Xian to Zhongbo when the latter was appointed to a post outside the capital. At present, Zhongbo was full of rogues and bandits. Everyone all wanted to stuff their own people in there.

“We can’t get close to other places. But we must plant manpower in Cizhou.” Xiao Chiye relaxed and said. “That was a good suggestion you gave for the demolition subsidy. Cizhou’s Prefectural Prefect, Zhou Gui, is now on good terms with us. He will naturally understand the implication if we put Wang Xian under his command. The Six Prefectures of Zhongbo will definitely put an emphasis on supervision this year. But no matter who the imperial court deploys over, Cizhou has to remain under my watch.”

Cizhou was close to the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path. By doing this, Xiao Chiye was keeping an eye from where he was in Qudu on the main entrances to the granaries for the Libei Armored Cavalry. He and Xiao Jiming had hardly exchanged correspondences, but the two brothers understood each other perfectly.

“The Quancheng silk is a latent danger. If Fu Linze had not been too eager for fast returns and messed up by some freak coincidence, then this account would be a blade buried deep in the Imperial Army’s account book.” Shen Zechuan moved his head and said, “Was this account handled by Xue Xiuzhuo?”

“That’s him, all right.” Xiao Chiye said. “Xue Xiuzhou, huh... What do you think of him?”

“I didn’t really pay him any notice at first. But I checked his evaluations for the past few years’ inspections, and they were all outstanding. He joined the imperial court during the reign of Yongyi, those last three years of Emperor Guancheng. It was only when Emperor Xiande ascended to the throne that he assumed the post of Chief Supervising Secretary in the Ministry of Revenue. He held this position for eight years until the sudden rebellion at Nanlin Hunting Grounds last year. He was then promoted and transferred to the Court of Judicial Review, where he became the Assistant Minister of the Court of Judicial Review. He then went on to handle two major cases that concern His Majesty’s safety—the Hua and Pan’s rebellion case and the Feast of A Hundred Officials’s assassination

case. He has a good reputation, has extensive contacts in the Eight Great Clans, and is on good terms with the officials from humble backgrounds headed by Hai Liangyi.” Shen Zechuan pondered over it for a moment before saying, “But I know nothing of his background before he entered the imperial court.”

“I know of it pretty well.” Xiao Chiye said, “Ask me.”

Shen Zechuan raised his eyebrows slightly and said, “Tell me.”

“Why doesn’t that sound like someone who has a favor to ask of?”

Xiao Chiye gathered the overcoat around him and put his head to Shen Zechuan’s. “I’ll tell you only if you coax me until I’m happy.”

The way he said it was frivolous, partially to tease Shen Zechuan. He did not expect Shen Zechuan to look at him, part his lips to puff out a breath, and murmured under hot and soft breath at such close quarters, “Ce’an~”

That tiny puff of damp heat landed on Xiao Chiye’s cheeks and edged along his straight nose to the front of his lips. Both men touched, almost imperceptibly.

Xiao Chiye suddenly rolled over and propped himself up above Shen Zechuan, leaving a space between them. He pinched Shen Zechuan’s chin to correct its position and said, “All talk and no action—this Second Young Master won’t fall for it.”



#### Footnotes

1. 寅时 hour of *yin*, i.e., 3-5 am, based on the system of two-hour subdivisions used in former times. The third quarter (三刻) is at the 45min mark.
2. 乌纱帽 *wusha* hat, or black gauze hat, is the headwear of Ming dynasty officials, comprising a black hat with two wing-like flaps of thin, oval-shaped boards on each side. Simply refers to officials here.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 68 : LOVEMAKING

Translated with: Yunyun, Lin & Rie<3

“Then what will you fall for?” Shen Zechuan’s narrowed his eyes from the pinch, making it hard to tell if he was in discomfort or pleasure. His expression was very alluring, as if fanning the flames.

Light through the window was faint. Xiao Chiye observed Shen Zechuan at close proximity, then reached out and stroked the corner of Shen Zechuan’s lips with his thumb. He said, “Get a feel of it yourself.”

“I’m afraid someone will say one thing but mean another.” Shen Zechuan’s lips parted and closed as he spoke. The tip of his tongue appeared indistinctly, casting moist warmth on Xiao Chiye’s thumb, yet Xiao Chiye could not touch a thing.

“Who’s acting contradictorily?” Xiao Chiye leaned over and pressed down on him. “Second Young Master is so honest.”

“Honest indeed.” Shen Zechuan sighed. “You’re so hard.”

“I just had my fill of sleep.” Xiao Chiye was feeling him up. “And I’ve been abstaining for quite a number of days to let it all build up. So give me a sweet little treat?”

Shen Zechuan exchanged a gentle kiss with him and said, “I just recovered from a serious illness, so let’s keep it first for another time. I really... don’t have the energy.”

“Who would bear to let you exert yourself in bed?” Xiao Chiye asked, “Would I bear to do that?”

“You would.” Shen Zechuan gazed at him and said softly, “Whatever you say now are just words to coax and trick me. Once we get on the bed, it all counts for nothing.”

Xiao Chiye chuckled. “Is that so? So what did I say when I cajoled you?”

Shen Zechuan lifted a finger to block Xiao Chiye’s lips, which was about to drop a kiss. “If you want to hear all about it, then first tell me about Xue Xiuzhuo.”

Xiao Chiye tightened his arms around him and asked, “What do you want to hear? His background before he served as an official is nothing impressive. Xue Xiuzhuo is a son of common birth, born of a concubine in the Xue Clan. Since his early years, he has never been a favored child. Look at his age. He’s older than Xi Hongxuan and Yao Wenyu by a few years. By all logic, he shouldn’t be attending school at the same time as them, so how did he become their fellow student? It’s all because he has been neglected at home back then, and the delay by his family caused him to get a late start in his education.”

“This person looks refined and has a way in the way he conducts himself in society and deals with people. Compared to Xi Hongxuan, he seemed more like a son of lawful birth from the noble clans.”

“He was already eleven years of age when he enrolled in the academy.” As if recalling this person, Xiao Chiye thought it over carefully for a moment before he continued, “He’s talented and intelligent, and he’s willing to study hard, so it didn’t take him long to stand out from the bunch of noble clans’ descendants. But the good times didn’t last long. A few years later, Yao Wenyu also enrolled in the academy.”

“Everyone now wants to associate with ‘Unpolished Jade Yuanzhuo’<sup>1</sup> to show that they are genuine talents too. But at that time, their teacher was Teacher Chang Zong, who was well known for being harsh and exacting. Once Yao Wenyu joined them, the number of times the others got criticized and punished increased. This was because no one could outdo Yao Wenyu when it came to strategies and literary essays. The moment his writings surfaced, no one else’s works could ever again catch Teacher Chang Zong’s eyes. Xue Xiuzhuo’s limelight was thus stolen in those few years. After that, he never displayed his talents again.”

“Later on, Yao Wenyu became Hai Liangyi’s student. You know what Hai Liangyi is like, so you can get a glimpse of how talented Yao Wenyu must be for him to be able to become Hai Liangyi’s student. But what the others didn’t know is that the one who first sent a visitation card<sup>2</sup> to Hai Liangyi was Xue Xiuzhuo. He kowtowed thrice to Hai Liangyi, but in the end, Hai Liangyi didn’t accept him as his student. If this had happened to someone else, then even if they didn’t have a falling out with Hai Liangyi, they would still bear a grudge. But that’s what’s so impressive about Xue Xiuzhuo. He was there on the day Yao Wenyu underwent the rites to become a formal pupil of Hai Liangyi. Not only was he there, but he was

also even the one holding the crown. Hai Liangyi disliked him, yet Xue Xiuzhuo had never once uttered a word of grievance and resentment. Hai Liangyi's residence was bestowed upon him by Emperor Guangcheng back then. The Secretariat Elder is usually particular about having his peace and staying clean; he doesn't receive local officials as guests in private, and he doesn't arrange for excessive errand-runners to assign tasks. There was this one year when his pavilion collapsed. When Xue Xiuzhuo heard about it, he didn't even take his meal and instead went to replace the stones for Hai Liangyi personally."

"He holds Secretariat Elder Hai in high esteem." Remembering, Shen Zechuan said, "When I looked up his past inspections' evaluations, I also saw his essays on contemporary politics from those few years when he had just entered public service. They were all discourses on increasing incomes and reducing expenditures, and straightening out the local field books,<sup>3</sup> which were also issues that gave Hai Liangyi headaches when he first entered the Grand Secretariat."

"He is more like Hai Liangyi's student than Yao Wenyu. Hai Liangyi used to serve in the Ministry of Revenue for over ten years, so he's very well aware of all the dirty tricks used in the local accounts. To get to the bottom of the accounts then, Xue Xiuzhuo was the one he assigned. As such, Xue Xiuzhuo took on the post of the Ministry of Revenue's Chief Supervising Secretary with the specific purpose of inspecting and auditing the various accounts." Xiao Chiye lay back down on the bed with Shen Zechuan in his embrace and continued, "I think that his current social connections were all established back at that time. He remained in the Chief Supervising Secretary post for eight years, and his evaluations were all outstanding. He should have long been promoted, but he never received a promotion. Why? Because Hai Liangyi had the intent to hold him back."

"Looks like Secretariat Elder Hai was moved by his sincerity. To think he was willing to spend time to polish Xue Xiuzhuo. With this camaraderie, even if both men aren't teacher and pupil in name, the relationship between them has already surpassed even that of one." Shen Zechuan slowly furrowed his brows. "Serving as the Ministry of Revenue's Chief Supervising Secretary, he can go down to the localities. He has subordinates handling the accounts under his leadership, and he also holds the special privilege of directly submitting petitions to the Emperor. It'd be a piece of cake for him to befriend anyone he wants to be friends with."

“That’s right. The Provincial Administration Commissioner of Juexi is Jiang Qingshan. This is not a man to be underestimated. The last time when Xue Xiuzhuo blew the whistle on Hua Siqian, Jiang Qingshan was the man he investigated the accounts with. Jiang Qingshan’s achievements are remarkable. Back then, when Qudu fell behind on the aid relief funds to Juexi, it was him who did all he could to bear the costs and carried on handling the matter without letting the Thirteen Cities of Juexi succumb to starvation. He is bold and decisive in what he does; he has the courage to act first and report later. A man with an iron fist. But he has a bad temper and doesn’t really socialize much with the officials from the capital. When the parties of Hua and Pan were at the height of their powers, he never once paid Pan Rugui ‘ice respect’.<sup>4</sup> He’s a dauntless man, and he has the capability to go with it. That’s why even though Hua Siqian hated him, he was not able to get him demoted. A man like him who doesn’t even think much of Yao Wenyu could still be on close terms with Xue Xiuzhuo and call Xue Xiuzhuo his brother. So you can imagine how good Xue Xiuzhuo’s ability to make friends is.”

Xiao Chiye suddenly paused.

“It’s actually all due to Xue Xiuzhuo’s own competence that Secretariat Elder Hai would later come to promote him. Last time, you spoke about luring the noble clans into a trap. I think you’ve hit the nail on the head. There’s no telling if Xue Xiuzhuo can really make it into the Grand Secretariat.”

“I noticed that this person is very contradictory.” Shen Zechuan said. “His essays on contemporary politics in the previous years were all about the commoners’ welfare and livelihood. He went down to the localities, and the stuff he did was all practical and real. Yet, he’s inseparable from the noble clans’ younger generations like Xi Hongxuan and the likes. The matter of Quancheng silk is a critical point. I think he’s a deep one; he’s not acting at random, but planning far ahead.”

“Didn’t you say that there was a man at the helm hiding in Qudu?” Xiao Chiye’s expression grew a little more serious. “He’s a good candidate.”

“His official grade wasn’t high six years ago when Zhongbo troops were defeated, and he was young to boot. So how can he manipulate those noble clans’ old foxes? Just one Wei Clan is a pain to deal with. My guess is that if there’s really such a person, he should be of the same age as Hai



Liangyi. Otherwise, with this kind of credentials, it would be hard to convince the others.”

“Nevertheless, there are too few clues. We’ll still need to deal with them carefully in the future.” Xiao Chiye rubbed Shen Zechuan’s wrist and said, “The collapse of Ouhua Pavilion is not without benefits. Xi Hongxuan is frightened out of his wits this time. Even if he wants to look for you for a drink in the future, there is nowhere to go.”

“Wine can be drunk anywhere. Even if his Ouhua Pavilion has collapsed, there are still other establishments. It’s Xiangyun who is gone that will be really gone for good.” Shen Zechuan looked askance at him. “Second Young Master has really suffered a loss.”

“Without Xiangyun, I can always look for someone else.” Xiao Chiye looked at him. “Beauties are aplenty; isn’t there one right here?”

With his fingertips, Shen Zechuan drew a few strokes on his palm and said, “If you don’t have five hundred taels, I won’t drink with you.

“I am filthy poor.” Xiao Chiye caught his teasing fingertips. “I have no money, so I can only give you something else.”

“What rare item is that to be able to move my heart?” Shen Zechuan asked.

Xiao Chiye guided his hand to land on his waist. “Second Young Master is a fine specimen of a man. So, what do you think?”

“I, Shen Lanzhou, am also a dashing man.” Shen Zechuan said leisurely, “I can just admire myself in the mirror; there’s no need for another person.”

“You still don’t know how to have fun.” Xiao Chiye said. “How can self-admiration be as delightful as being admired by me? Both of us have to be reflected in the mirror for it to be aesthetically rousing.”

With glistening eyes rippling with desires, Shen Zechuan asked, “So what’s considered aesthetically rousing?”

“Seeing is believing.” Xiao Chiye checked Shen Zechuan’s temperature. “Try it with me one of these days, and you’ll find out.”

His caresses made Shen Zechuan gasp softly for breath. Both men had not found relief for a long time, and they had just survived the epidemic. All the energy that had just been recovered pooled in their lower abdomens, weighing down on it. And now, all these hugging and fondling had ignited the first signs of desires.

“Shen Zechuan with a pure heart and few desires.” Xiao Chiye sighed with deep feelings under his breath. “Why can’t I tell which is it?”

“That is Shen Zechuan; you are calling for Shen Lanzhou.” Shen Zechuan asked, “Who do you want?”

“I want both of them.” Xiao Chiye scooped Shen Zechuan up, made him lean on one side, and pressed down against him from behind. “Are you giving, or not?”

With half of his face buried in the bedding, Shen Zechuan merely panted without saying a word. Xiao Chiye bit him. His ears were sensitive, and the licking and biting caused his gasps to hitch. Scarlet tints materialized at the corners of his eyes.

“Chen Yang boiled some water. I’ll let you wash up before dawn.” Xiao Chiye lowered his head and called out to him in a nasal tone, “Lanzhou.”

The bed was makeshift for emergency use. It was small and narrow, and it was a strain on both men to squeeze onto it. Xiao Chiye did not dare to thrust right in. Instead, he entered slowly and gingerly from the side. The Imperial Bodyguards outside all had keen hearing. Shen Zechuan did not make a sound and tugged at the overcoat amidst those alternating deep thrusts and shallow withdrawals, even as the sensation of melting apart engulfed him.

They were breathing unevenly—both afraid the other would cry out loud, so they kissed, neck against neck. The bed shook gently. Xiao Chiye’s repressed desire fired up, but he could not rock hard into Shen Lanzhou. All he could do was to grind against him.

Between the kisses, Xiao Chiye said in a hushed tone, “Cry out for me again.”

Shen Lanzhou said, “Ce…… Mhn……”

Xiao Chiye laughed. He thrust a little harder and said, “What does ‘Ce’an, mhn, Ce’an’ mean?”

Shen Zechuan could not take it anymore and did not dare to reply. Xiao Chiye’s finger pressed into his mouth, moving and stroking for a little while as he hugged him tightly from the back, thrusting in deep until Shen Zechuan almost moaned out loud.

Without them realizing it, the day began to break outside as their bout of lovemaking left them drenched in sweat. Considering that Shen Zechuan had just woken up, and that it was not the place for this, Xiao Chiye only did it once. Even after they hastily concluded things, Shen Zechuan

remained flushed for a long while. He did not even want to lift a finger during the cleaning up.



On the other end, Liang Cuishan looked at the sky and saw that it was almost dawn, so he sorted out the books from these few days and put them in order in preparation of making his report when he met Shen Zechuan. He took a detour to the place and saw Ge Qingqing drinking tea under the rain shelter awning, so he greeted him and asked, "Is His Excellency the Judge better today? This humble subordinate has tidied up the accounts and specifically come to report the details."

Ge Qingqing did not speak. Chen Yang just happened to walk down and replied, "His Excellency the Judge has just recovered from a serious illness, and the epidemic has just passed. His Excellency is also concerned about infecting all of you, so he's not receiving guests today. If the nature of this account permits, I can send it in on behalf of Your Excellency later?"

Having been ordered by Shen Zechuan to record the accounts, Liang Cuishan did not dare to be sloppy. Naturally, he could not just hand the accounts over to Chen Yang. Thus, he merely said, "I'm glad His Excellency is fine. Since it's not convenient today, this humble subordinate will request an audience again tomorrow."

Chen Yang nodded, and Liang Cuishan took his leave. Before he left, he noticed that there was no one else around that house, so he knew that the area had been cleared of people, and there were personal guards standing watch. The Imperial Bodyguards were on duty, and Shen Zechuan was personally appointed by the Emperor himself, so he reckoned that there was probably still work to be done. Not daring to take another look or ask another question, he hurried away.

Not long after, the shadow before the door shook slightly. Xiao Chiye lifted the curtain and stepped out. He had already changed into a clean robe. There was a pair of half-aged boots on his feet, and Shen Zechuan's ivory fan in his hand. He asked, "Was he here to report the accounts?"

"I told him to come tomorrow." Chen Yang said.

Xiao Chiye walked down the steps. Now that he felt refreshed, the hostility that had been in his expression a few days before had all dissipated. He asked, "Has Laohu's fever subsided?"

"Yes. He's feeling more spirited too, and he ate quite a bit this morning. He wanted to pay his respects to Master. I told him to come again tomorrow

too.”

“I’ll go see him.” Xiao Chiye weighed the fan in his hands and said, “The water in the streets has receded, and the sky is now clear. We won’t need to stay at Zhao Zui Temple for two days before there should be news from the palace. How about Xi Hongxuan?”

“He has woken up. But men from the Eight Great Training Divisions are keeping a tight watch on him. They aren’t letting anyone see him.”

“There’s no hurry.” Xiao Chiye said with a hint of a smile. “His Majesty should have already woken up too. Xi Hongxuan can’t escape this. The Chief Surveillance Bureau is waiting to impeach him.”

The public ditches had been dredged up, and the epidemic did not manage to break out in full. The entire matter was beautifully handled. The people at the top did not have to suffer, and it was due to all the credit of those who rolled and crawled at the bottom. It was time to settle the score. He, Xiao Ce’an, had now slept his fill and ate to his content. He had all the spirit and energy to dawdle with them.

Chen Yang was by his side when Xiao Chiye suddenly asked, “The earring I had you made the last time, are they done crafting it? When we return to the residence in a few days, I’ll go collect it on the way.”

Chen Yang said, “I told them to craft it as quickly as possible; it should be done by now. But what rationale is there for a master to go personally? I’ll collect it on your behalf.”

“I have to collect this thing personally,” Xiao Chiye tossed the ivory fan in his hands to Chen Yang and took the lead as he walked away “Let’s go. We’ll go pay Tantai Hu a visit.”



#### **NOTE:**

This is the combined version of the original, uncensored version and revised, censored version.

#### Footnotes

1. 璞玉元琢 literally, Unpolished Jade Yuanzhuo (Yuanzhuo is Yao Wenyu’s courtesy name); unpolished jade here refers to a talent who is still unknown but with the potential to be “polished” into someone that shines, like a top scholar (also known as a zhuangyuan (状元), who would have a bright future before him.)

2. 名帖 (also 拜帖), a name card (or visitation card) written on paper or wood used by officials, nobles, or distinguished people to notify the other party of their visit. It would usually indicate his name, position, and so on. It's like a name card in the modern world.
3. 田册 field books, a register that records fields and farmlands.
4. 冰敬 Literally, 'Ice Respect' (or paying respect with 'ice' during summer) is one of the objectionable practices of 'Three Respects' during the Qing Dynasty, along with 'Coal Respect' and 'Departure Respect'. 'Ice Respect' refers to the bribe money officials outside the capital used to bribe the officials in the capital during summertime.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 69 : EVALUATION OF MERIT

Translated with: [Lin](#)<3

Li Jianheng was unconscious for a few days, delirious with nightmares and mumbling incoherent words no one could understand. Mu Ru stayed by his bedside, personally feeding him medicine and wiping down his body.

The Empress Dowager did not use her royal sedan today. Instead, she took advantage of the good weather to take a leisurely stroll with Third Missy Hua. She said, “Lady Mu is still staying by the Emperor’s side keeping watch over him?”

Supporting the Empress Dowager, Matron Liuxiang said, “She hasn’t left at all.”

“With everything she has done, the Emperor’s affections for her would increase from a six to a ten.” The Empress Dowager said to Hua Xiangyi, “This relationship would take on more weight now that they have shared weals and woes together.”

“Lady Mu may seem delicate and petite,” Hua Xiangyi followed after the Empress Dowager and said, with the Empress Dowager’s words in mind, “But she is also a gutsy one.”

“That’s very accurate.” The Empress Dowager said, “Yesterday, the imperial physician mentioned that His Majesty is fine now and should wake soon. When His Majesty wakes, it’ll be Lady Mu’s time to shine. I saw how badly she was lambasted by the imperial censors before, but today, even Hai Liangyi himself would have to sigh and commend her for the good woman she is. If she’s someone timid, would she dare risk herself like this?”

Hua Xiangyi smiled as she took over the blue and white porcelain bowl<sup>1</sup> from Liuxiang’s hands and tossed fish baits into the newly converted lake. She said, “How can she be His Majesty’s favorite if she doesn’t have a little gut? She already knew how and when to advance and retreat from her time with Pan Rugui.”

The Empress Dowager looked at the brocade carps in the lake vying for the food and said, “The outbreak of this epidemic is fishy. We could have

dealt with Lady Mu and have her sent away for bewitching and leading the Emperor astray with her words. But she's smart. She knows that getting close to His Majesty is an amnesty from death.<sup>2</sup> With her taking care of him to this extent, the only one to be in for a rough time in the aftermath is Xi Hongxuan. In the previous suppression of Xiao Chiye, the noble clans lost Wei Huaixing. Fu Linye has also been denounced and demoted. In the end, no one benefited from it. And now that the Imperial Army has carried out such an urgent task like the dredging up of public ditches, Xiao Chiye will surely be rewarded."

"Xi Hongxuan deserves to be punished." Hua Xiangyi said. "He who gives no thought to difficulties in the future is sure to be beset by worries much closer at hand. Aunt, I think he has gotten too carried away by his own success because of his transfer to the Bureau of Evaluations in the Ministry of Revenue. It's no coincidence that this misfortune has befallen him. If he had been prudent enough, how could anyone get the chance to plot against him? Now that someone has given him to Xiao the Second as a stepping stone to trample on, it's only fitting for him to be punished. Moreover, while I was making inquiries about the matters concerning Qidong, I heard that the Hereditary Prince of Libei had given Zhongbo's Cizhou 40,000 taels as aid relief during heavy snow<sup>3</sup> before the new year. It was also in part due to these 40,000 taels that Xiao the Second was able to persuade the Ministry of Revenue. Because of this, Cizhou and Libei have now become friends in times of adversity. In the future, when the imperial court dispatches the Provincial Administration Commissioner to administer the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo, they would have to show some consideration for Libei too."

"The one who benefits the most this time is Xiao Chiye. It's not far-fetched even if one were to claim that he was the one who released the epidemic." With her fingertips, the Empress Dowager rubbed the baits into crumbs and sprinkled them into the lake. "Lady Mu is in such good health, so why is it there still no news of an imperial heir? If we can't get rid of her, then we can only have her in our grasp. Once she has a child, I won't have to worry about the future."

In truth, the Li Clan had quite a number of descendants. But during Emperor Guangcheng's reign, the crown prince committed suicide by slitting his own throat, and the princes who ranked below him either died or were deposed, leaving only Emperor Xiande and Li Jianheng. Emperor

Xiande reigned for eight years. And because his health was poor, only Imperial Concubine Wei got pregnant with a baby. But on those few days of national mourning, someone drowned Imperial Concubine in a well without so much as a squeak. Subsequently, there was only Li Jianheng left. Even after Li Jianheng ascended to the throne, there was still no news of pregnancy from the imperial concubines in the palace.

The Empress Dowager despised Mu Ru, who had come from an eunuch's compound. She had originally intended to pick a smart and astute girl from the remaining maidens of the Hua Clan in Dicheng and appointed her hand in marriage to Li Jianheng as an imperial consort. Li Jianheng was not a passionate man who was crazy about love, so once he had a new lover, he would surely give his old flame the cold shoulder. Who would have expected Mu Ru to be both clever and gutsy enough to sway the Emperor through pillow talk and speak up numerous times for the Empress Dowager? If the Empress Dowager wanted to raise the future Crown Prince in her own palace, then she had to keep an eye on Mu Ru's belly now.

"Speaking of benefit, Lady Mu has also gained from this misfortune." Hua Xiangyi wiped her hands. "She still has a younger brother. Does Aunt remember?"

"He's called Fengquan." Matron Liuxiang quietly reminded the Empress Dowager from behind.

"I vaguely remember such a person." The Empress Dowager said, "Didn't he acknowledge Pan Rugui as his grandfather? Pan Rugui has been executed. His Majesty secretly retained him for Lady Mu's sake, didn't he?"

"Fengquan has once received a recommendation from Aunt for a promotion. I'm sure he still remembers Aunt's kindness." Hua Xiangyi supported the Empress Dowager by the arm. "Aunt, this sister and brother pair now have no one to rely on. If you give them a little endorsement for a promotion, then to them, you'll be like the Goddess of Mercy, Guanyin."

The Empress Dowager took a few steps and said, "That Fengquan is a eunuch. Call him back. There's so many vacancies in the Twenty-four Yamen. Liuxiang, arrange a good post for him. Consider it a fulfillment of the siblings' wish."

Liuxiang uttered an acknowledgment.

The Empress Dowager asked again, "Has Qidong replied? How can the wedding date be scheduled in the autumn? The autumn wind in the Cang



Commandery of Qidong is strong. I can't bear to let you marry over during that period."

Hua Xiangyi merely smiled. Matron Liuxiang said, "The old commander has replied, saying that he'll leave it all up to Your Majesty to make the decision, as long as it falls on an auspicious day and hour. The messenger even specially brought along a few chests of Hezhou's silk and satin for the Third Missy. The head ornaments were also crafted with care and attention—he clearly has put his heart into this."

"Shouldn't he put his heart into it?" The Empress Dowager's smile diminished. "He has received such a momentous imperial favor."

Liuxiang immediately lowered herself in obeisance and said, "He should. In order not to make Third Missy feel slighted and aggrieved, the men Qidong chose for the bridal escort squad<sup>4</sup> are all respectable generals, and the one leading the procession is none other than Commander-in-Chief Qi."

The Empress Dowager's expression underwent a subtle change. In the end, she did not fly into a rage and merely said, "I've specifically sent a letter to the Bianjun Commandery to get the Earl of Biansha, Lu Pingyan, to come and fetch the bride. But he kept coming up with all kinds of excuses to decline. Isn't it on account of the Prince of Libei that he didn't dare to accept? The people from the Lu Clan are a bunch of blockheads! I'll have to see exactly what Libei can help them with in the future. As for Qi Zhuyin being the one to fetch the bride... As a girl and a daughter, her seniority is already a notch lower. The nerve of Qi Shiyu to think of it!"

The Empress Dowager's anger had yet to subside when a eunuch swiftly trotted over and kneeled to say, "Greetings to Your Majesty. Someone from the bedchamber had come earlier to say that His Majesty has woken up!"

Liuxiang hurriedly said, "Prepare to set out!"



Tantai Hu, with his clothes draped over him, was carving wood to sculpt a crudely-made giant cricket for Ding Tao and Xiaowu. The moment Chen Yang lifted the curtain, all of them got off the couch and paid their proper respects in order.

"You have only just woken up, so it's fine to sit." Xiao Chiye motioned for them to rise and took his seat on the chair. "How are you today?"

“To report back to the Viceroy.” Tantai Hu wiped away the wood shavings on his hands. “My fever is gone, and I have eaten too. I can return to duty today.”

“There’s no hurry.” Xiao Chiye’s old robe dropped down deftly. He sat on the chair for a moment. “You got ill so suddenly that day. Your health is usually pretty good, so what happened? What did the military medic say?”

“The medic can’t explain the cause of this illness either.” Tantai Hu said. “I’ve been wondering. Why me? I never caught a cold even when I trained bare-chested in the rain during all those times our Imperial Army trained on the military drill grounds. I’ve seen the name list of those who had fallen ill that the Viceroy had told Chen Yang to compile. Although there are also elderly and youngsters, it’s still mostly the young and strong.”

“This epidemic is bizarre.” Chen Yang piped up when he heard to this point. “His Excellency the Judge may be right. It’s not a natural disaster this time, but a man-made one.”

Xiao Chiye leaned back to ponder it over and said, “Regardless of which it is, so much time has passed since then. The clues are most likely already disposed of.”

“It’s still not too bad since I’m the one who fell ill.” Tantai Hu was still filled with trepidation. “If Viceroy were the one who fell sick instead, then the patrols in Qudu would be in chaos!”

Startled, Xiao Chiye’s hand, which had been stroking his thumb ring, stopped in place. He said nothing, and the others did not dare to interrupt his contemplation.

“This didn’t cross my mind before you said it.” After a long while, Xiao Chiye let out a fearless smile. “Never mind. It’s a bad debt, no? Thankfully we have a backup plan. It’s not all that worrisome. Take a good rest today. Who is taking care of those few children in your home these days?”

Tantai Hu did not expect Xiao Chiye to remember the children. His eyes felt hot as he said, “Before coming in, I entrusted them to Chen Yang. He kept them in the Imperial Army’s office compound. With the brothers there to take care of them, they should not have to worry about food. It’s all good.”

“Most of the original households in the Imperial Army are locals from Qudu. You guys are non-locals from beyond Qudu who were recruited to

fill up the posts here. All of you have no houses and no wives, so it isn't easy for you to raise a few children. This time, you fell ill while digging ditches in the face of a disaster. Consider it a meritorious service. Chen Yang will report it to the Ministry of War for you to get a promotion at the start of spring. In the future, in addition to your monthly salary, the internal division of the Imperial Army will also allocate you some child support funds from my personal account."

Allocating the money from Xiao Chiye's personal account meant that the money was designated and withdrawn from Xiao Chiye's official salary—it could be said to be money that Xiao Chiye gave him.

Tantai Hu had already kneeled down on one knee when he heard this. He said, "How would that do? I'm already very content that the Viceroy didn't boot me out and still kept me on duty!"

"Credit where credit is due; you deserve it. I'm giving it to you, so just take it." Xiao Chiye rose and said to Chen Yang, "Keep a record of the soldiers who have dug the ditches this time and distribute money to them. The epidemic is no joke; everyone is risking their own lives here, so what is taking some money in the grand scheme of things? Let it be known that all promotions and assignments will be assessed according to one's merits and demerits in the future if this happens again. For people like Laohu, I, Xiao Ce'an, will take care of the whole family."

That bit of displeasure Tantai Hu had initially harbored had utterly vanished. It would not do for him to bring up the issue about Shen Zechuan again because of the kindness he had received. Xiao Chiye also took a look at those few from the Imperial Army who had fallen ill, and he did and said the same to them. Even the young ones like Ding Tao received a monetary reward.

Shen Zechuan drank his medicine as he watched the bustling scene outside the window.

Qian Tianya set up the fire basin and roasted a few potatoes. As he poked the fire, he said, "See how others have gotten a promotion and a windfall. Master, what about me?"

"I'll keep it in mind for future reference." Shen Zechuan set aside the bowl.

Qiao Tianya looked at the potatoes with undivided attention even as he said, "Xiao the Second is doing it right when it comes to managing his subordinates. He has really put in a lot of thought and effort to be able to

consolidate the Imperial Army and turn it into his very own impenetrable defense in the span of just a few years.”

“It’s not surprising for him to put in a little thinking and effort into matters that concern his safety and security.” Shen Zechuan said. “The Imperial Army is his newly sharpened blade. Naturally, the more smoothly he can wield it, the better. Tantai Hu is a high-ranking military officer he recruited from the outside into the Imperial Army. If not properly managed, then this batch of people with Tantai Hu as the head will become the root of troubles.”

“Timing and people’s hearts are all essential and indispensable. He has just the perfect grasp on them all. He suppressed them and rewarded them, sorting them out until they are all submissive and obedient. Even the root of trouble has become a stabilizing force. <sup>5</sup> Given Tantai Hu’s disposition, even if someone were to bribe him with a thousand gold in the future, it’ll be hard to shake his loyalty.” Qiao Tianya peeled the potatoes and sighed. “Now that I’ve compared it this way... Master, you’re really way too cold-blooded.”

“The Imperial Bodyguards differ from the Imperial Army. All those in the Imperial Bodyguards are men from noble clans. Each of them is ambitious and arrogant. Being cold is just perfect. Without any life and death tribulations, there is no way true friendships can form. Everyone has a scale in their heart. Han Cheng has assumed the post of Commander-in-chief for quite a few days, and there have been quite a number of rewards he has made out as a bribe to those below him. But how many of them really think well of him in private?” Shen Zechuan paused for a moment, then continued, “Now that you have eaten the potatoes, don’t eat the meat later. You must have put on at least seven or eight *jin*<sup>6</sup> ever since you followed me.”

Qiao Tianya said, “Does Master want to listen to a tune? I can play and even sing. I can skip the money, but you can at least reward me with two pieces of meat, right?”

Shen Zechuan said mercilessly, “Go out.”

At the same time Qiao Tianya went out, Xiao Chiye returned. Qiao Tianya moved to the side to make way, and Xiao Chiye strode through the door, hooked a chair over with his leg, and sat beside the bed.

“Did you have a good sleep?”

Shen Zechuan replied, “So-so.”

Xiao Chiye said, "That residence of yours has been torn down too. Where are you going to live after you get out two days later?"

Shen Zechuan sighed. "Live on the streets, I guess."

Propping himself up, Xiao Chiye whistled at him and said, "I have a small courtyard behind the Plum Blossom Residence. Do you want it?"

"Too close together, and it'll be easy to arouse the suspicions of the others." Shen Zechuan gathered his clothes around him, offering a brief glimpse of the marks on his nape.

"Too far apart, and it'll be hard for us to even meet once every few days." Xiao Chiye reached out his hand to smooth down Shen Zechuan's back collar. His eyes lingered on those teeth marks.

He was the one who left those marks, kissing that portion all over as if he was holding his prey in his mouth.

Shen Zechuan raised his eyes to look at him and said, "See you on the imperial court... hm?"

Xiao Chiye averted his gaze and said, "That sounds so distant."

"Then what's to be done?" Shen Zechuan looked at him. "Where's my fan?"

Chen Yang just happened to be holding a tray as he lifted the curtain. Without even thinking about it, Xiao Chiye said, "Gone. Chen Yang lost it."

Shen Zechuan looked towards Chen Yang who, despite his shock, nodded calmly and said to Shen Zechuan in a heavy voice, "Your Excellency, this humble subordinate..."

"It's just a fan. This Second Young Master will compensate you on his behalf." Xiao Chiye said leisurely. "That ivory fan is so crude. I'll gift you one."

"Even if it's crude, it's from Xi Hongxuan." Shen Zechuan said. "How can I put on an act of a crude rascal if I go and meet him later without that fan?"

"I'll give something even more crude." Xiao Chiye said, "Inlaid with gold along with jade. This Second Young Master has lots of money."

"The military drill ground on Mount Feng has to undergo renovations at the start of spring." Shen Zechuan spread his palms open. "Second Master Xiao, have you tightened your belt? You'll soon be so poor that you'll have to go vegetarian. Where on earth would you have the money to inlay gold and jade?"

Chen Yang put the tray down and backed out of the room.

Xiao Chiye said, “What? Is this going to be a check of my \$ecret \$tash?”

Shen Zechuan said, “Yo, there’s even a \$ecret \$tash.”

Xiao Chiye said, “I’ve plenty of those.”

Shen Zechuan smiled and said, “Then that’s really...”

Chen Yang, who had just exited, turned back and said outside the curtain, “Master! An imperial edict has arrived from the palace.”

Both men reined in their expression. Xiao Chiye immediately rose and single-handedly brought Shen Zechuan up as well.



#### Footnotes



- 1.
2. 青花瓷(碗) blue and white porcelain (bowl)
3. 免死金牌 Death-Exemption Golden Token; a tablet or token bestowed by Emperor which would allow a person to be exempt from the death penalty.
4. 大雪 means both heavy snow and also Great Snow, which is the 21st of the 24 solar terms in the lunar calendar. (Winter).
5. 迎亲队 a procession squad sent by the bridegroom along with a bridal sedan to meet the bride at the bride’s home and escort her to the bridegroom’s home for the wedding.
6. 定海神针 literally “The Sea-Anchoring Divine Needle”. According to the novel Journey to the West 《西游记》, this was a divine ‘needle’ (or pole) that could shrink and grow according to its owner’s wish. At first, it was a treasure of the Eastern Sea Dragon

King's Dragon Palace, but Sun Wukong (孙悟空) later took it away to use as his weapon and changed the needle's name to the Ruyi Golden Cudgel (如意金箍棒). It's used to refer to a stabilizing force.

7. 斤 *jin*, 1 catty = to 0.5kg, so 7-8 *jin* is approximately 3.5-4kg.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 70 : TEMPLE REOPENING



As it was with haste that Zhao Zui Temple received the imperial edict, Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan were both not wearing their official robes. Everyone gathered in the courtyard and kneeled. The eunuch who had come to deliver the edict looked unfamiliar. Not daring to put on airs, he quickly started to read out the imperial edict when he saw the person it was intended for emerge.

The eunuch finished reading the imperial edict and bowed slightly, saying to Xiao Chiye, “Viceroy, please rise quickly!”

Xiao Chiye received the imperial edict, and Chen Yang immediately called for someone to brew and serve tea.

“Zhao Zui Temple is pervaded with the stench of illness all over,” Xiao Chiye said, “so I won’t invite *gonggong* inside for a seat today.”

“The Viceroy has been hard at work attending to official duties and has gone without rest for days. It’s the Viceroy who should be the one invited to take a seat first.” The eunuch merrily took a few sips of the tea, then furrowed his brows and sighed, “How is this tea fit for distinguished men? Viceroy, now that His Majesty is awake, then according to the Secretariat Elder, His Excellency the Judge and you may take a rest.”

“There are still people under the awning who are still down with the disease. I’m on official duty, no? I wouldn’t dare to be careless.” Xiao Chiye put on a relaxed expression as he acquainted himself with eunuch over a few exchanges of pleasantries. Both of them stood in the courtyard, drinking tea as they chatted and laughed. Xiao Chiye asked, “Did His Majesty regain consciousness today?”

The eunuch, named Fuman, replied, “That’s right. He just woke up this morning. All the *niangniang* in the palace are weeping tears of joy. Her Majesty personally instructed the Imperial Academy of Medicine to take good care of him.”

Everything mentioned in this imperial edict was merely formalities. They simply commended the Imperial Army, Imperial Bodyguards, and the Ministry of Revenue Secretary for their quick actions and timely defenses this time round. But details of their rewards were only briefly mentioned in passing.



Fuman had only just assumed office, and he usually served in the Grand Secretariat compound. The Grand Secretariat officials held eunuchs in contempt, and Hai Liangyi, in particular, loathed eunuchs. So whenever Fuman was on duty before, he could not look at Hai Liangyi right in the face; he had to retreat to the side and kneel down to reply. Whatever Hai Liangyi asked him, he would answer the same. He did not dare to jest and clown around, much less grin or beam. Now, he had not only received a cup of hot tea here; he also saw how Viceroy Xiao was a man who was naturally carefree and not bothered about trifles. Thus, he gradually relaxed as they conversed, intending to do Xiao Chiye a favor and use this chance to cotton up to the latter.

“This humble slave has been going around the Grand Secretariat these days to serve the Secretariat Elder tea, and so this humble slave has more or less come to hear some rumors about the Viceroy.” Fuman shifted two steps over and said in a hushed tone.

Without a change in expression, Xiao Chiye lifted his hand to motion for the others to back off. With his arm around Fuman’s shoulders, he said, “Then you’re the new favorite close to the Secretariat Elder. I myself have to watch the sky for the weather before I act and make wild guesses as to which impending storm is brewing. Perhaps *gonggong* can give me a pointer or two?”

Fuman hurriedly said, “I would not presume to be worthy of giving pointers. For the sake of the sovereign and people, the Viceroy carries out his official duties with conscience; the Secretariat Elder knows this too. The Grand Secretariat has also deliberated for a few days over the conferment of award this time. It’s nothing bad. All the Viceroy has to do is to wait for it!”

Xiao Chiye merely smiled, “I wouldn’t dare to hanker after the credits this time. The situation isn’t something I alone can get back to normal. I’d feel uneasy if the reward is too much.”

“Oh, my. Viceroy!” Fuman slapped his leg. “You’re too humble. Is Shen Zechuan the one from the Imperial Bodyguards who is in charge of the mission?”

“That’s right.” Xiao Chiye said. “He’s a frosty one.”

Having heard that they were on bad terms, Fuman promptly laughed and said, “Who would have known that the Viceroy would get together with him this time? Since the matter has been handled, then he is bound to

receive a reward too. But he serves in the Imperial Bodyguards, so how is he going to be rewarded? The Grand Secretariat can't overstep their authority.<sup>1</sup> It all depends on His Majesty's intent."

"An exception was made for him when he was promoted to the position of Southern Judge before the new year. It's too fast for him to be conferred another reward again now." Xiao Chiye said. "The Grand Secretariat didn't object?"

Fuman carefully set the teacup aside and said, "The Viceroy is sick and tired of him, so naturally you take note of him. But now, the various Excellencies in the Grand Secretariat are all busy with other matters. If he were to be promoted for real, no one would dare to contradict and rebuff His Majesty over such a small matter like this. His Majesty has met with misfortune one after another. Even Secretariat Elder Hai would acquiesce to him at this point in time. But let this humble servant tell the Viceroy something in strict confidence. This man, if promoted too quickly, will be a latent danger. The current officials of fifth-grade and above in the Imperial Bodyguards are all lads that come from families with a long history and deep roots. That Shen Zechuan... who would think well of that family background of his? Head to the streets now and yell out Shen Wei's name at the top of your voice, and all you will get is countless spittle of saliva. His promotion to the top will only make these people humiliate him in public and in private. Someone who has many merits to his name and has received rewards for them will only cause the others to be jealous of him. The Imperial Bodyguards are, to begin with, a behemoth that is as ferocious as beasts of prey like the wolves and tigers. If he wants to hold on to his prize, it will still have to depend on his capabilities!"

Xiao Chiye chatted a little more with Fuman before getting Chen Yang to see him out. When Chen Yang saw him out, he gave Fuman a hand and helped him up. It was only when Fuman got onto the horse and was midway through his journey that he felt a heaviness in his sleeve. He fished it out for a look and instantly beamed with delight.

"The Viceroy is generous." Fuman stuffed the money back into his sleeve. "A man worthy of being a friend."



Shen Zechuan met Liang Cuishan and listened to him give a clear tally of the accounts. He asked him a few questions, and the latter could answer

them all readily and methodically. It was really a shame for this person to be a minor, unranked<sup>2</sup> official.

Shen Zechuan said, "These few days have been chaotic. There are countless small and big medicinal shops in Qudu, and the coming and going of the medicinal herbs is a complicated mess. You have certainly gone to great trouble to have recorded it all this clearly."

"This is what this humble subordinate does in his official capacity. This is my duty. It's what I should do." Liang Cuishan said with concern, "Your Excellency looks better today."

"The illness is eradicated once the medicine takes effect. I'm fine now." Shen Zechuan said. "Make copies of this account and leave one for the Ministry of Revenue; you have to report back to the higher-ups. Then give the Imperial Army a copy so that they know what to expect."

Everyone was on tenterhooks with the epidemic spreading a few days ago, so they could set aside all old grudges and hatred. But now that the rain has stopped, it was time to decide on the awards on the basis of each man's merit. With three parties all involved in this matter, it was hard to guarantee that there would be no mutual denunciation and backstabbing among them.

As a minor official at the lower ranks, Liang Cuishan had seen a lot. He initially thought that Shen Zechuan did not get along with the Imperial Army, so at present, Shen Zechuan should be strangling the Imperial Army until he went red in the face. But unexpectedly enough, Shen Zechuan did not step forward, nor did he speak up on the matter. Even with the job done, he did not hog all the credit for himself.

Liang Cuishan hesitated for a moment before he decided to say, "It was Your Excellency who instructed this humble subordinate to record these accounts. For me to hand it over like this..."

"I was in a muddle while I was ill. You did many of the stuff on your own." Shen Zechuan closed the book. "I can see that you're methodical when it comes to your work, and you've served in the Ministry of Revenue for so many years. So why are you still just a desk clerk?"

Liang Cuishan seemed to have a hunch and said in a pained voice, "This humble subordinate has served in the Ministry of Revenue, starting from the second year of Xiande. At that time, the one in authority up there is a member of the Hua Clan. This humble subordinate is embarrassingly short on money, and I only know how to run errands. I don't have the money to grease the higher-up's palm. The higher-up let me attend to

official duties in my original post, and my evaluations all these years have been in the lower-middle range, with neither merits nor demerits.”

After a moment of silence, Shen Zechuan said, “His Majesty is now opening up opportunities to air one’s views, and the Six Ministries are lacking in talents. There’s no need for you to feel disheartened. The opportunity will present itself when it is due.”

Knowing from this that Shen Zechuan meant to recommend him for a promotion, Liang Cuishan hurriedly bowed to him and said, “Your Excellency’s recognition and appreciation of this humble subordinate is a kindness this humble subordinate will never forget!”

Shen Zechuan got up and said nothing further as he lifted the curtain and stepped out. Liang Cuishan looked at the floor blankly, only realizing after a while that the tears were already streaming down his cheeks.

What he did not tell Shen Zechuan was that he was from Juexi, and his first few decades were spent on a prolonged period of studying; as such, he passed the imperial examinations a few years late. At first, he was supposed to assume duty at the Ministry of Personnel, but someone spent bribe money to take his place. He was then transferred to the Ministry of Works, where he received outstanding evaluations for the few years he worked there. As he was good in calculation, he was once again transferred to the Ministry of Revenue. He initially thought he could show and put his skills to good use at the Ministry of Revenue. But in the end, he was oppressed from above by a distantly related descendant of the Hua Clan—an utter disgrace who simply muddled his way through. He was the one who did the job, but it was this higher-up’s name on the reports that were submitted to the top. He tried to seek help from his connections to get a transfer elsewhere, but those at the top did not agree, wanting to exploit him as a manual laborer for free. He was suppressed and oppressed again and again until he eventually became a clerk in an official post so minor that he could not even be considered a legit official.

He initially thought that he had to give up his dreams of glory in this life, disillusioned as he was with worldly affairs.<sup>3</sup> Who would have expected that misfortune could turn out to be a blessing in disguise? Every cloud indeed has a silver lining.



It was only two days later that the order forbidding access in and out of the palace was lifted. The operations of the Six Ministries reverted back to

normal, and Zhao Zui Temple withdrew the men. Those who had yet to recover were all left under the continued care of the Imperial Academy of Medicine.

Shen Zechuan was all clean as he stood before the door, once again all decked out in his embroidered python robe<sup>4</sup> and phoenix-tail belt<sup>5</sup> with his authority token hanging on his waist and sword by his side. Xiao Chiye had also tidied himself up, dressed in a scarlet court robe with an embroidered lion rank badge,<sup>6</sup> looking tall and leggy.

Both men put on a hypocritical show of bidding each other farewell.

“I’m heading this way.” Xiao Chiye whistled to summon over Lang Tao Xue Jin. He patted his horse on the back. “Is Your Excellency the Judge entering the palace with me?”

“Please go ahead first, Viceroy.” Shen Zechuan said politely. “This humble subordinate has to go to the commander-in-chief to make a report.”

“It sucks to be a subordinate.” Xiao Chiye flipped atop his horse. “When are you coming up to play?”

“I’m afraid of heights.” Shen Zechuan looked up at him. “You’d do best to sit tight.”

“It’s too complicated and cumbersome to deal with the aftermath. Whether I can sit tight depends on whether you are willing to show mercy.” Xiao Chiye pointed and tapped at his own chest with the horsewhip. “Be gentle.”

Both of them parted before Zhao Zui Temple. Instead of going to look for Han Cheng immediately, Shen Zechuan drove the carriage to the place where he had Ji Gang and Qi Huilian settled down.

This little building was surrounded by a courtyard, with a half-dead pear tree jutting out from the top of the wall. Shen Zechuan entered, passed through the courtyard, and headed up the stairs, only to see the main hall doors tightly shut. There were no signs of Ji Gang or Qi Huilian.

Qiao Tianya sensed the oddness in the atmosphere. He could see from the messy footprints on the ground that there were people here. Grasping the hilt of his blade with his palm, he strode a step forward and said with a smile, “Is there no one here? If there isn’t, this humble servant is going to draw his blade—”

A sudden gust of wind sent the withered branches of the pear tree swaying, and weeds in the courtyard assaulted the hem of his robe. Qiao

Tianya surveyed the place with sharp eyes; he had already discovered that the place was teeming with people both inside and outside the courtyard.

“What blade are you going to draw? We are all acquaintances here.” A rather weak and feeble voice rang out from inside the house. “Lanzhou, why aren’t you saying a word?”

The ruthlessness in Shen Zechuan’s eyes was dimly visible, yet he forced a laugh and said, “Second Young Master, have you recovered?”

Xi Hongxuan was all wrapped up in fox fur inside the house. He had lost quite some weight, and he did not look too good. Holding up the teacup, he stared askance at the door and said gloomily, “Would I dare to see you if I haven’t recovered? My good brother, why didn’t you tell me that you’re hiding such a bigwig here?!”

Shen Zechuan laughed out loud and raised his head to motion for Qiao Tianya to retreat. He abruptly pushed the door open, startling up the dust inside the room. An entire room of guards turned to look at him, each of their blades already drawn with glints of snowy-white light.

Xi Hongxuan sat in the very middle, grasping the teacup.

Showing no signs of fear, Shen Zechuan strode in and said, “One is a fool and the other, a looney. What kind of bigwig can they be? If you want them, then why don’t you just tell me?”

Xi Hongxuan could not bring himself to laugh. He said, “If Qi Huilian is no bigwig, then Hai Liangyi is no rarity either! Lanzhou. Oh, Lanzhou, you are truly a deep one to hide it all this while! To think the Grand Mentor of Yongyi taught and guided you personally. Haha! Is he banking on you to be the Emperor?”

“He’s already crazy.” Shen Zechuan pulled out his handkerchief to wipe the dust at his own pace. He cast a glance at Xi Hongxuan. “You’re afraid of a madman?”

“I am!” Xi Hongxuan suddenly flung the teacup down. “A madman taught a mad dog, whose bites caught me off guard and turned me into a bloody pulp!”

The surrounding blades pressed in swiftly.

Shen Zechuan smiled and said, “That makes no sense. If you want to kill me, at least let me die knowing why.”

“Did you...” Xi Hongxuan said in a malevolent voice, “... teamed up with Xiao the Second to screw me over?”

The atmosphere in the room suddenly froze. Shadows fell upon the sides of Shen Zechuan's face. After a moment of silence, he suddenly smiled and braced himself against the edge of the table.

"That's right."

Shen Zechuan scrutinized Xi Hongxuan with darkness in his eyes as he said both contemptuously and wickedly,

"Even if I dare to say so, do you dare to believe the same?"



### Footnotes

1. As a reminder, the Imperial Bodyguards were elite bodyguards and secret police that directly served the Ming Emperors. The only one above them is the Emperor.
2. (不)入流 (not) within the nine grades of feudal officialdom; i.e., a hierarchy of government officials in feudal times where officials were classified in nine hierarchic grades (品), with grade one being the highest rank. Their salaries ranged according to their rank.
3. 生平傲杀繁华梦，已悟真空 from Tune: Joy before Palace, Lazy Clouds Nest 《殿前欢·懒云窝》 by Wu Xiyi (吴西逸)
4. 蟒衣 (or 蟒袍) "python (or mang) robes" were embroidered robes bestowed by the Emperor to officials with merits during the Ming Dynasty. It was a sign of honor and favor for officials who were granted the privilege of wearing a "python robe".
5. 鸾带 a wide phoenix tail (or luan) belt. Luan is a mythical bird related to the phoenix.
6. 补子 补子 rank badge, or mandarin square, was a large embroidered badge sewn onto the surcoat of an official to indicate the rank of the official wearing it. (i.e., the square image on the robe in the previous footnote). Squares depicting birds were used for civil officials, while animals were used for military officials. So for a second-grade military official like Xiao Chiye, this animal would be a lion.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 71 : TRAP



The atmosphere was forbidding; it was so quiet that one could hear a pin drop.

With his hands on the chair handles for support, Xi Hongxuan reacted quickly in this heart-stopping atmosphere and said, “Obscuring truths with falsehoods. You are throwing out misleading traps again! Shen Zechuan, do you really think I won’t dare to kill you?”

“The blade is already on my neck.” Shen Zechuan turned his head to look askance at the blade. “You can just give the command to take down my head.”

Xi Hongxuan did not dare to let up even the slightest. In this confrontation, he was not willing to miss any of the subtleties in Shen Zechuan’s expression. Although he was sitting tight in the chair, he was even more anxious than Shen Zechuan deep down. Yet, the more he warned himself not to be influenced by Shen Zechuan, the more he would be spurred on by the expression in Shen Zechuan’s eyes and by his tone.

“For what it’s worth, we are brothers.” Xi Hongxuan said with a superficial, insincere smile. “Lanzhou, tell me the truth, and I’ll leave your corpse in one piece.”

“Much ado about nothing. Feel free to do it.” Shen Zechuan egged him on. “Come on.”

Xi Hongxuan’s fingers dug tightly into the chair handles as he exchanged stares with Shen Zechuan. But Shen Zechuan was too calm and composed. Thus, Xi Hongxuan said, “Aren’t you worried about Qi Huilian at all? Once you’re dead, I’ll skin that old dog and sell him out to the Empress Dowager to plead for leniency.”

Shen Zechuan said, “If you handed Qi Huilian to the Empress Dowager twenty years earlier, she might really pardon you for your negligence this time. But Qi Huilian is now worthless. He’s not worth alive, and he’s worth nothing dead. You are a veteran merchant; would you feel at ease to do such a losing deal? I think you’re lost your mind and gone silly from the illness.”

“Qi Huilian is merely feigning insanity.” Xi Hongxuan said. “Do you think I can’t tell? To survive, he tucks his tail between his legs and struggles on whilst at death’s door. That’s quite the convincing act he has put on!”



Shen Zechuan sneered, "Are you trying to sound me out at this point in time? He's just a lunatic."

"If he is a lunatic, then who are you studying under?" Xi Hongxuan stretched his neck out. "Zhao Zui Temple made you a new person. How did that last remaining survivor of the Shen Clan who was so much like a lapdog six years ago become so gutsy and resourceful, huh? Lanzhou, you tell me!"

"Man proposes, Heaven disposes." Shen Zechuan's expression was gloomy. "Don't you know what it's like to be a lapdog at others' beck and call and have them kick you around? If I don't shed my skin, how can I break out of the hardships and make it out there? It's better to rely on oneself than on others. You and I are both fleeing for our lives from perilous circumstances, and yet we are now in internal strife. Xi Hongxuan, you sure are doing a good job getting rid of someone as soon as he outlives his usefulness, much like killing the donkey the moment it leaves the millstone."

"If you hadn't leaked the news, then how would Ouhua Pavilion collapsed for no reason? We call ourselves brothers on the inside, but the moment you step out, you backstab me in the back. I can't be compared to you when it comes to being ruthless! But as fate would have it, I didn't die!" Xi Hongxuan said in a chilling voice. "You want to ingratiate yourselves with both parties, but there's no such thing as having your cake and eating it too, is there?"

"What can Xiao'er give me that is worthy enough of raising your suspicions to such an extent?" Shen Zechuan said sarcastically, "He's not Xiao Jiming; he can't be the Prince of Libei, nor can he command the Libei's Armored Cavalry. He's merely a trapped beast in this Qudu! What's the difference between him and me? Whatever it is that he has, I have no lack of it either."

"He has a good life that you don't have." Xi Hongxuan said. "He's the second son of the Prince of Libei, a legitimate lawful son from the direct line of descendants, born of the same mother who birthed Xiao Jiming. Even if he can't inherit the title and position of the Prince of Libei, he has tens of thousands of willing troops at his disposal. Aren't soldiers precisely what you're lacking?"

With an indifferent expression, Shen Zechuan said, "I hold a post in the Imperial Bodyguards; why would I need troops for? It's only in Qudu that I

have a way to survive. Leave Qudu, and there is nowhere else I can put my abilities to use. I'm the eighth common

son of Shen Wei, while you are the second lawful son of the Xi Clan. Have you and I ever had an easy time before? This shows that there's no difference between the sons of lawful or common ranks. When it comes to people, even heaven cannot reach a final verdict until the very end."

"By speaking such treacherous words, you have already regarded the societal order of this world as nothing." Xi Hongxuan raised his finger and pointed to his own toe. "But you got to admit that some people are born to be masters as the continual successions of the upper echelons of the noble clans keep it going. This is fate! If there is no difference between those of common birth and lawful birth, then how can the bloodline maintain its legitimacy? He who is surnamed Li is just simply a cut above you with the surname Shen!"

Shen Zechuan stared at Xi Hongxuan and roared with laughter. Insanity stirred once again in those expressive eyes as he said, "That's right, that's right..."

When Qiao Tianya saw the upsurge of Shen Zechuan's murderous intent in this split second, he almost thought that Shen Zechuan was going to draw his blade. He did not expect Shen Zechuan to say next in a genial tone, "If that's the case, then what future can I have by following Xiao'er? If you believe the rumors and lay a trap to kill me today, then you will come to regret it someday in the future."

Xi Hongxuan faltered, besieged by doubts and unable to come to a decision, but his expression betrayed nothing. He merely lowered his eyes and said, "Even when faced with imminent death, you're still putting on an act! You came here as soon as you left Zhao Zui Temple. Isn't that proof enough that this place is important to you?"

"Of course." Shen Zechuan's emotions seemed to have sunk into a deep pool of waters, where there was not even a trace of a ripple to be seen. He said, "That is Qi Huilian you're talking about. Even though he has gone crazy, he is also the Qi Huilian who used to be the Triple Yuan Top Scholar,<sup>1</sup> one which the crown prince of the eastern palace personally invited to take on a leading official post. Now that he's in my hands, I'll never hand him over to anyone else unless he's dead."

Shen Zechuan was right in his presumption that Xi Hongxuan was setting up a trap to deceive him. Xi Hongxuan had no idea at all if Qi

Huilian was insane for real or just putting on an act. He merely wanted to pre-empt and catch Shen Zechuan off-guard. Although Xi Hongxuan did not have Xue Xiuzhuo's capability, he had an ability one would find hard to surpass, and that was eloquence. The reason he was able to incite the Imperial College to rise in rebellion with just a single teahouse meeting was all because of his glib tongue. And this also happened to be his weak point.

If he was really certain that Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye were setting up a trap to screw him over, then he would not give Shen Zechuan the chance to open his mouth. He dragged his sickly body here, because he could not be sure if Shen Zechuan was collaborating with Xiao Chiye. That was why he had to bring out his own special skill and engaged in a battle of words to trick Shen Zechuan into telling the truth.

"What do you want Qi Huilian for?" Xi Hongxuan asked with dread and fear.

Shen Zechuan suddenly hit upon an idea. Going along with it, he bent over and said to Xi Hongxuan, "Qi Huilian was the Crown Prince's teacher. There was the incident at the Eastern Palace back then, and I heard that there was an imperial grandson still in his infancy. Ji Lei did not reveal the imperial grandson's whereabouts to me before his death. I was afraid Qi Huilian knew, so I had to keep a close watch on him."

Xi Hongxuan's countenance changed in spite of himself. He said, "The Empress Dowager will never leave any survivors behind. It's common practice to stamp out trouble at its source! So what are you daydreaming about?!"

Shen Zechuan said, "If there is no imperial heir in hand, who would dare to conspire to murder His Majesty? There will be nobody else with the surname Li in Dazhou if he dies. You aren't the one who did it, and it isn't me either. Instead of falling out with me here, why not put down your blade and discuss a countermeasure with me?"

"How would I know that it's not you?" Xi Hongxuan did not move. "No one but you know the structure of Ouhua Pavilion best. It's simply too convenient for you to tamper with it. In addition, I keep encountering calamities one after another, yet you keep getting promoted again and again. Your meritorious deeds sure have grown!"

"I have only just gotten into His Majesty's good graces. It's just the time for me to build up my strength and climb my way up. So why would I kill him? What's more, you and I have been conspiring together for quite

some time, so why would Xiao'er believe me based on some empty promises?" Shen Zechuan gradually let out a smile at him. "Even if I kill you, it should be at a time when there's much more in it for me."

The way he said it was half in jest, but it made the blood of those listening run cold. Xi Hongxuan covered his lips and coughed, using this interval to evade Shen Zechuan's gaze.

Although they had conspired together to kill off many people, Xi Hongxuan still could not confront Shen Zechuan head-on. This was not a momentary fear, but fear accumulated over their course of acquaintanceship. He could not forget the way Ji Lei looked with his skin flayed. That was why he wanted to act quickly now that his suspicions were aroused.

This man cannot live.

Xi Hongxuan thought.

Once the time was right, he had to kill him off no matter what! Such a man would certainly not let himself be used for Xi Hongxuan's own purposes. His talk about there being no differences between those of lawful and common birth had already revealed his lack of respect and reverence for the Eight Great Clans. Everyone was attempting the impossible that ran against the interests of their opponents, much like bargaining with a tiger for its hide. And what they were competing against was who would be faster in the days to come.

Xi Hongxuan secretly made up his mind. He smiled too and said, "I'm scaring you only because I myself was scared after being crushed in that pit. Lanzhou, you'll surely understand if you were the one lying in there. What are you people standing around there for? Put away your blades. Don't hurt His Excellency the Judge."

The surrounding blades returned to their sheaths, one after another. But Xi Hongxuan did not tell his men to withdraw from the room. Pulling at his fox fur, he said, "Everything happened too suddenly these few days. With our communications cut off, it's inevitable that we would come to be mutually suspicious of one another. It's all good now that we've cleared the air. Come, Lanzhou. Take your seat, and we'll talk."

Shen Zechuan said, "Blades and swords have no eyes. Second Young Master, next time, give me a warning first so that I can prepare for it and won't be as in such haste as I am today."

“It’s remarkable how you remain composed in the face of danger.” Xi Hongxuan lifted the teapot to infuse tea. “As you know, what we are doing can cost us our heads. I was really forced into a corner this time; otherwise, how would I treat you in such a way? It’s all because I was forced to! I got anxious seeing how Xiao the Second is going to be as pleased as punch riding the crest of success soon. Come, come. Take a seat quickly. Still holding it against me?”

“I, with the surname Shen, am unworthy of being in high position.” Shen Zechuan sized up the room. “How would I dare to sit next to you?”

Xi Hongxuan laughed out loud and said, “Those are all bullshit! They are merely words spoken to disparage others. How can be you the same as the others? Take a seat.”

Only then did Shen Zechuan take his seat.

Xi Hongxuan held out the tea to him and said with an apologetic smile, “If you ask me, the surname Shen is really holding you back. Don’t you think so? If you had been born in the Han Clan or the Fei Clan, there wouldn’t be this much animosity between us, right? Lanzhou, please be appeased! Now tell me seriously. What are you keeping this Qi Huilian for?”

Shen Zechuan touched his sleeve pocket before he remembered his ivory fan was lost. He said, “The old looney has been scared stiff by the Crown Prince’s suicide where he slit his own throat. I ran into him all the time when I was in Zhao Zui Temple and heard some of his intermittent ravings, so I thought of keeping him just in case there’s a future need.”

“You should have asked me about the matter regarding the imperial grandson.” Xi Hongxuan brushed aside the tea foam. “Don’t think about this matter anymore. It’s impossible.”

“Not even a chance of it happening?” Shen Zechuan turned the teacup around gently. He did not drink it.

Xi Hongxuan drank the tea, grunted twice, and said, “That task was carried out together by Ji Lei and Shen Wei, both of whom were ruthless. Even the fair and beautiful Crown Princess was strangled to death by them, and you want to pin your hopes on them showing the imperial grandson mercy? What’s more, they were the sworn enemies of the imperial grandson for killing his father. You think they had nothing better to do than to sow the seeds of future trouble for themselves?”

“Was that what Xue Xiuzhuo said too?”

Xi Hongxuan cast him a look and asked, "Why are you asking about Yanqing specifically?"

"You're familiar with one another." Shen Zechuan's gaze did not falter. "You're on good terms with him. Wasn't your promotion to the Bureau of Evaluations this time precisely because you listened to his advice?"

"Both of you are Zhuge Liang.<sup>2</sup> I'll listen to whoever makes more sense." Xi Hongxuan kicked the ball back and said, "They said scholars look down on one another. Why are you smart people also mutually belittling each other?"

"That's really not it." Shen Zechuan said. "You were transferred into the Bureau of Evaluations before the inspections, and subsequently, this red-hot assignment fell upon you. That would make others green with envy. It's hard to say that this wasn't the reason you were set up. Xue Xiuzhuo has been an official for quite some years, and he never thought of it? If he did, then why did he still persuade you to go?"

Xi Hongxuan was drinking tea when his movement paused. He said, "Who would have expected someone to really strike out at me? It's not Yanqing's fault."

"He has rendered a meritorious service by protecting the Emperor at the Nanlin Hunting Grounds. Yet he knew to conceal his abilities and bide his time at that time and didn't go all out. Instead, he went to the Court of Judicial Review for more experience." Having said to this point, Shen Zechuan continued no further and merely smiled at Xi Hongxuan. "I just find it strange."

As if he had not heard it, Xi Hongxuan smiled too, "Oh, my! This interruption almost made me forget about it. Lanzhou, now that I've recovered and His Majesty has woken up, the Chief Surveillance Bureau will start to impeach me. Help me think of a way. I can't be transferred out of Qudu."

"The fault lies with His Majesty this time. But no one is blaming him. And the Ministry of Works and Ministry of Revenue are both shirking responsibilities and shifting the blame around. You happened to land right in the middle. Everyone will naturally target you." Shen Zechuan set aside the teacup. "This is a tough one to deal with."

"Pan Xiangjie and Wei Huaigu,<sup>3</sup> huh!" Xi Hongxuan said. "At the end of it all, they just want money. Getting rebuked is really no big deal. They are only latching on to me because they wanted to take advantage of the

situation to raise the price and make me fish out money to pay for the shortfall with my own money. How many people died this time? As long as His Majesty is fine, everything else can be bought.”

“Without tens of thousands of taels this time, I’m afraid it’ll be hard to settle.” Shen Zechuan said with a smile.

“I have money.” Xi Hongxuan set aside the teacup too and said, “But I’m not willing to give it to them. I’m at fault for accompanying His Majesty to the brothel. But the public ditches have nothing to do with me. I’m not going to oblige if they want to slap unreasonable demands on me and use me as a scapegoat.”

“An official one grade higher can oppress an official one grade lower than him. Even if you are not in the wrong, it will still become your fault. Reasoning with them won’t work, and it’s pointless to leave the mess as it is.” Shen Zechuan maintained his composure and said, “Still a pain to deal with.”

Xi Hongxuan said, “It’s not hard. I’m telling you, the Emperor’s heart is with me. Even if they want to punish me severely, they still have to see what the Emperor thinks. We mustn’t lose our heads before Xiao the Second has been dealt with. I am confident that His Majesty will definitely not be the same as he used to be after waking up this time.”



#### Footnotes

1. 三元 “Triple Yuan”. In the Ming Dynasty, the imperial examination system was split into three phases: the provincial exam (乡试); metropolitan exam (会试); and the palace exam (殿试). The titles for the top scholars in each exam were known as the Jieyuan (解元), Huiyuan (会元) and Zhuangyuan (状元). These three are known as the “Triple Yuan”. So a Triple Yuan Top Scholar is one who came first in all these examinations.
2. Zhuge Liang (诸葛亮) was a famous statesman, ideologist, and strategist during the Three Kingdoms Period; also the celebrated adviser to Liu Bei, founder of the Shu-Han dynasty. It’s also used to refer to a mastermind.
3. To recap: Pan Xiangjie, Minister of Works from the Ministry of Works, and Wei Huaigu, Minister of Revenue from the Ministry of

Revenue



## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 72 : NOBLE RANK ADVANCEMENT



Xi Hongxuan spoke with such certainty that Shen Zechuan just had to look askance at him. But Xi Hongxuan was not willing to continue discussing further and merely said, “You don’t have a proper place to stay now, so it’s not convenient to keep Qi Huilian around. Why not leave him with me?”

“It isn’t appropriate to leave a raving looney at your place either.” Shen Zechuan said calmly. “What do you want him for?”

“In my opinion.” Xi Hongxuan held out his hand flat, like a hand blade. “The best option would be to finish him off. It’s inadvisable to get yourself involved with all those old affairs. The more you know, the worse it’ll be for you.” Xi Hongxuan brandished his hand and looked at Shen Zechuan. “Or are you unwilling to?”

Shen Zechuan said, “Of course I’m unwilling to. He’s an old minister during the reign of Yongyi. He knows Shen Wei well. I have a use for keeping him alive.”

If Shen Zechuan had agreed readily, Xi Hongxuan would not have believed him easily. So he said it with seventy percent truth and thirty percent falsehood to throw Xi Hongxuan off.

As expected, Xi Hongxuan made no further mention of killing him. He said, “Are you still thinking of investigating Shen Wei’s case? You should have said so earlier. Lanzhou, do you have to go so far as to hide this bit of matter from me?”

“When have I ever hidden it from you?” Shen Zechuan smiled as he lifted the teapot and poured tea for Xi Hongxuan. “Isn’t this matter obvious? As long as Shen Wei remains guilty, I’ll never be able to live honorably.”

“The evidence against him is conclusive, and his infamy has already been deeply impressed on everyone’s mind. Even if the charge against him is dropped, it will not be enough to convince the masses.” Xi Hongxuan said, “A felony like selling his country to seek personal glory is something that can never be scrubbed clean, even over several lifetimes. Plus, it’s pointless to just rely on the imperial court’s pardon alone. There are many kinds of rumors in this world. He, Shen Wei, has already been crucified to

death under the spray of spittle. Poor you. I can only advise you to forget about this matter. It's not something you'll be able to clear up!"

Shen Zechuan silently set down the teapot.

Seeing the atmosphere growing heavier, Xi Hongxuan continued, "You are already now an Imperial Bodyguard of fifth grade, and you still take those rumors and slanders to heart? Please don't. Look ahead. You've done a good job on this mission, so you should be getting a promotion, yes?"

Shen Zechuan said, "Nothing is confirmed yet. I haven't even settled down in my post of Southern Judge. Charging all the way up to the top isn't necessarily a good thing."

"This time, you and I have to act carefully. We are really gambling with our lives here." Xi Hongxuan tucked his fox fur properly and said, "We have to investigate and get to the bottom of this matter. The other party is hiding in the dark, while we are out there exposed in the open. If we can't get to the bottom of the matter, then it would be hard to guard against the enemy. I'm the one who got crushed this time. But what about the next time? You should watch out too. It's inconvenient for me to stay for long here today. Lanzhou, I'll see you at the residence in a few days."

Saying so, Xi Hongxuan rose to his feet and surveyed the surroundings again.

"This courtyard seems decent to me. If you don't have enough money, just let me know. Just don't take what happened today to heart, alright?"

With that, Xi Hongxuan smiled. Shen Zechuan smiled too. Both of them reconciled, as if there was no ill-feeling between them, as if what happened earlier was merely just them horsing around with one another.

Qiao Tianya sent Xi Hongxuan off. As soon as he returned to the courtyard, he saw Shen Zechuan standing with his back to him and with his face facing the main hall. He was wiping his hands with a handkerchief.

The setting sun outside the courtyard crossed over, casting a scarlet red hue over Shen Zechuan's embroidered python robe. His slightly lowered neck was as fair as jade. He wiped those slender, flawless fingers, which were clearly clean, yet he seemed to detest them to bits.

"Is he gone?" Shen Zechuan turned his head aside to ask.

"I saw him get on the horse carriage." Qiao Tianya stopped a short distance away from Shen Zechuan. He did not move forward, but bent over to pick up a fallen leaf on the ground that had been trampled and scrutinized it for a moment. "The men he hired are all masters from the martial

fraternity, yet a fight didn't break out. Most likely, Ji Gang-shifu was on his guard, and the Grand Mentor did not resist."

"Shifu burned his face with fire to ruin his looks, all to conceal his identity and live incognito. Not starting a fight hastily is a wise move." Shen Zechuan neatly folded that blue handkerchief. "Teacher mustn't remain in Xi Hongxuan's hands for too long. We need to think of a way."

Qiao Tianya crushed the leaf without disrupting Shen Zechuan's contemplation. Shen Zechuan suddenly turned around and was dazzled by the sunset glow. But he did not flinch or hide from it as he looked towards that towering and majestic palace.

"Legitimate bloodline..." Shen Zechuan murmured and asked Qiao Tianya. "Who's living there?"

Qiao Tianya followed his gaze and looked over as well. He replied, "The Li Clan."

"No." Shen Zechuan's eyes were cold and indifferent as he said with a mocking smile, "It's a deer—If Zhou lost its deer, the heroes of the world may all pursue it.<sup>1</sup> Today, you say it's the Li Clan. Tomorrow, I can also say it's some random person on the street. Whoever can step onto that dragon throne at the peak will be the legitimate, rightful one."

Qiao Tianya prided himself on being a nonconformist with an unconventional, rebellious streak, but even he did not expect Shen Zechuan to have the audacity to say such words. In his astonishment, he took a few steps back and looked out into the distance at the palace. He said, "Such rebellious words are tantamount to having no respect for the law."

"You know there are countless gentlemen in this world, all of them good men with unyielding steadfastness and unfailing loyalty." Shen Zechuan kept the handkerchief back into his sleeve and said, "The Earl of Biansha, Lu Pingyan, is known as the 'Wolf and Tiger of the Border Town'. To protect and hold on to Bianjun Commandery, he has given away all his family fortunes. Although he has received a noble title conferred by the emperor, all he eats every day are pickled vegetables and sweet potatoes. Subsequently, Lu Guangbai becomes hard-pressed for military funds whenever there is a war. And because Lu Guangbai is not on good terms with the Eight Great Clans, he has never been conferred a noble title despite all his outstanding and illustrious military achievements. So tell me, is it that satisfying to be such a gentleman and loyal official?"

“Ask your conscience first before we talk about satisfaction. To be an outspoken and candid minister, you have to sacrifice the self and give up your selfish desires.<sup>2</sup> Suotian Pass’s Feng Yisheng’s entire family of loyal heroes died martyrs in battles. This is what we call the epitome of righteousness.”

Shen Zechuan’s insanity, which he had suppressed earlier, swept over him again. He stood up and burst out laughing, saying, “Qiao Tianya, you are not a nonconformist who has deviated from the norms at all. You are a prisoner of the norms. You are one who can be a gentleman.”

Qiao Tianya said, “Master—”

The sunset glow on the horizon faded into night, and darkness came shrouding all over. The pear tree bared its withered branches and brandished them threateningly, casting shadows over Shen Zechuan’s raised face.

“But, in this world, someone has to be the traitor and the rebel. I don’t believe that fate is decided by the Heavens. If there’s a blade held against my neck someday in the future, I will not show mercy even if it’s Li Jianheng, let alone Xi Hongxuan. The bloodline legitimacy Xi Hongxuan speaks of is no different from the nonsensical ravings of a fool. Anyone will die when a blade slices across their necks; there’s no exception regardless of whether one is a di born of the legitimate wife or a shu born of a concubine.”

In the cold, dreary night, the crow of dusk let out a few mournful caws. Shen Zechuan looked back at Qiao Tianya.

“My ambition is not to be a gentleman, nor is it to be a good person. Since vindictiveness has become the tenet I live by, then a kindness given is kindness given, a wrong done is a wrong done. I want Xi Hongxuan to pay with his life for what happened today.”

The wind assailed the scattered clouds and scraped the remaining leaf off the tip of the branch.



The impeachments from the Chief Surveillance Bureau came bearing down upon them in torrents. Xi Hongxuan, Pan Xiangjie, Wei Huaixing, and even Hai Liangyi were all censured one after another. Cen Yu took charge as the chief commentator as the few parties attacked one another on the imperial court.

Having just woke up, Li Jianheng hardly said much these days and simply let them argue among themselves as he held court in Mingli Hall.

Hai Liangyi was already in ill health before the epidemic happened, and lately he looked even more emaciated. Not once had he had the moment to rest, and now, listening to the Ministry of Works and the Ministry of Revenue starting an argument again, he could not help but let out a few violent coughs.

Li Jianheng hurriedly said, "Secretariat Elder, there's no need to rise. If you have something to say, you may voice it out while seated."

Hai Liangyi bowed his thanks and covered his mouth with a handkerchief. After his coughing eased up a little, he said, "The Grand Secretariat has already submitted the clauses for rewards and punishments this time to His Majesty's table yesterday. If Your Majesty finds any part inappropriate after looking through it, you may reject it and let the Grand Secretariat discuss it again."

Li Jianheng had been absent-minded, and Hai Liangyi originally thought that he would hem and haw. He did not expect him to say after a moment's pause, "I've seen it. And there are indeed some parts I don't understand and would like to ask of the Secretariat Elder to clear my doubts."

The entire hall of officials was dumbfounded the moment the words left his mouth.

Li Jianheng opened the memorial and said, "The Imperial Army has done a meritorious service by dredging up the public ditches. Xiao Chiye is already a second-grade Viceroy of the Imperial Army. Just the reward of some gold and jades is simply too meager."

Hai Liangyi answered, "The military drill ground on Mount Feng is undergoing an expansion this year, and the money will be arranged for by the Ministry of Revenue. This could be said to be a waiver of his biggest expenditure this year. This humble subject feels that the reward cannot be too excessive; this is sufficient enough."

Li Jianheng said, "But the deployment of medicinal herbs, quarantine of the patients, and dredging of the public ditches are no small matter. He has done a great job with them all."

Hai Liangyi pondered it over and said, "It's true that he has rendered meritorious service. But these matters are not something the Imperial Army can achieve on its own. If he's shown too much special favor—"

"I want to advance his noble rank." Li Jianheng closed the memorial and looked at Hai Liangyi. "He's the second son of lawful birth of the

Prince of Libei. If he had gone into battle and slain the enemies, then he should have a noble rank and title by now.”

Hai Liangyi did not answer immediately.

Li Jianheng said, “I’ve been thinking about these issues the few days I was confined to my sickbed. I wish to confer the title of ‘Marquis of Dingdu’ upon Xiao Chiye. What does the Secretariat Elder think?”

Hai Liangyi said, “You mustn’t, Your Majesty. Unless it’s military achievements, one cannot be conferred a noble title. Although Xiao Chiye has made great contributions this time, it’s far from the point where he can be made a marquis. The Lu Clan of Qidong’s Bianjun Commandery has numerous military achievements to their name. Yet, only the old General Lu Pingyan is currently conferred with the title of the Earl of Biansha. Firstly, Xiao Chiye has not stabilized the borders, and secondly, he has not driven out the enemies. I fear it will only be hard to convince the public if you make him a marquis out of the blue.”

“To begin with, he has done a meritorious service by protecting me at the Nanlin Hunting Grounds, and he has, yet again, shown no fear in the face of danger this time. It’s a good thing the epidemic did not spread. This matter concerns the peace and stability of Qudu; is this still not considered a merit? The Earl of Biansha, Lu Pingyan, has transferred the garrison troops of Bianjun Commandery in private numerous times. The reason his noble rank has not advanced is merely because his merits are offset by his demerits and vice versa.” As Li Jianheng spoke, his eyes reddened. He covered his face and choked with sobs. “Don’t tell me my life is nothing worth mentioning either? The purpose of bestowing the title of marquis upon him is to commend and honor him. There will be no increment of the numbers of soldiers in the Imperial Army, and no establishments of private rights. It’s just a title in name only. Is this not even acceptable, either?”

Wei Huaigu initially meant to impeach Xiao Chiye for privately deploying the medicinal herbs without authorization, but seeing that the situation was not favorable for his cause, he changed his mind and said, “What Your Majesty thinks is reasonable. Xiao Chiye’s decisiveness and fearlessness in times of danger should be commended and rewarded. But what the Secretariat Elder says is true, too. In this humble subject’s opinion, why not honor Xiao Chiye with the title ‘Earl of Dingdu’ first?”

“No.” Hai Liangyi would not budge. “There’s absolutely no logic in doing so. Your Majesty, if you grant Xiao Chiye a title today, then you will

greatly disappoint the Old General at the frontier. It's an established rule of the imperial court that a noble title cannot be conferred on one without military achievements to his name."

Li Jianheng said, "How about we first promote Lu Pingyan to a marquis, then confer the title of Earl upon Xiao Chiye? Does the Secretariat still not agree to this?"

He spoke of conferment as if it was child's play.

Hai Liangyi's coughing intensified. He wanted to say something further, but Pan Xiangjie beat him to it. He said in a fluster, "This humble subject thinks it's a good thing. This would be Your Majesty's first conferment since Your Majesty's ascension to the throne. It's a special honor. Secretariat Elder, one mustn't be a stickler for conventions on every single matter. Now that he has indeed made a contribution, what's the issue with making an exception?"

Seeing the noble clans unanimously urging Li Jianheng, Kong Qiu could not help but kowtow and said, "This humble subject thinks the Secretariat Elder is right. Your Majesty, Lu Pingyan has spared no effort to defend the Bianjun Commandery. Even if he's to be conferred a title, it shouldn't be done in such a hasty and sloppy—"

"Hasty? I've been repeatedly asking the opinions of all of you here, and yet you still say I'm hasty!" With a fling of his sleeves, Li Jianheng rose to his feet and pointed at Kong Qiu, saying, "I can see that you are always going along with the Secretariat Elder's words on the imperial court. The sovereign and his ministers. Exactly who is your sovereign, and whose minister are you?!"

The various ministers all kneeled and said in unison, "Your Majesty, please be appeased!"

Kong Qiu immediately said, "Your Majesty is the sovereign of this humble subject, and this humble subject does his Majesty's bidding! But it's indeed inappropriate to bypass the regulations and go ahead with the conferment!"

"I *am* going to confer the title upon him!" Li Jianheng wept as he said, "Each time I met with calamity one after the other, it was only with Ce'an's help that I could avert disaster and escape unscathed. Even when I want to bestow a title upon him, you people have to turn me down and throw obstructions in my way! The Secretariat Elder has the final say over all the

matters in this imperial court, so why not let the Secretariat Elder sit on this throne instead?!”

These words truly struck Hai Liangyi where it hurts! Unstable on his knees, Hai Liangyi covered his lips and coughed violently. He never met with officials outside the court and the capital, and he had never held any private feasts. In order not to get involved in a faction or clique, he worked hard day and night. And he taught and guided Li Jianheng with utmost care, all because he feared getting slandered and stabbed in the back. He was the most trustworthy minister, a right-handed man of the emperor, not a tyrannical official in power!

Seeing Hai Liangyi coughing until he was all hunched over, Li Jianheng did not dare to create a scene further and got someone to help Hai Liangyi up. Nevertheless, he still said, “No matter what, Xiao Chiye shall be conferred a title!”

With the commotion in Mingli Hall, the imperial edict was issued a few days later. Like a bolt of thunder out of the blue, it caused a startled wave of memorials flooding in from all over.

Lu Guangbai brought his father to receive the imperial edict at the Bianjun Commandery. Lu Pingyan was promoted to the rank of marquis. Even he himself was at a loss how to react in the very moment he held the edict in his hands.

The Lu Clan had buried generation after generation of its people in this yellow sand. In his heyday, Lu Pingyan was also known as the ‘Wolf and Tiger of the Border Town’. He was renowned for his military exploits, along with Xiao Fangxu and Qi Shiyu. And now, injured and sick all over – and before he retired from active duty to take up an advisory post – he finally received his reward. Yet, it was all to pave the way for a junior of the younger generation.

Xiao Chiye was originally sleeping in his residence when he heard of the arrival of the imperial edict; thus he put on his clothes and came out to receive it.

After reading the imperial edict, Fuman beamed and moved to help him up, only to see a pale-looking Xiao Chiye who looked as if he had no intention of receiving the edict.

—This title mustn’t be accepted!

What Hai Liangyi had said was true. Although he, Xiao Chiye, had rendered meritorious service by protecting the emperor at the Nanlin



Hunting Grounds, and had played a critical role in the latest incidents, his contributions were still poles apart from the hard-won military merits gained from battling with real weapons at the frontiers.

Who was Lu Pingyan?

That was the man who was on brotherly terms with his old man, Xiao Fangxu!

Now that they had humiliated and trampled over Lu Pingyan to confer on him, Xiao Chiye, a title, how would Xiao Chiye be able to take office in the various garrison troops at the frontiers? How would he be able to convince the masses? And the most crucial thing was, what would the Lu Clan think? Could Xiao and Lu still be brothers?

Dingdu, Dingdu. This was simply to nail him dead in Qudu.<sup>3</sup> Had Li Jianheng's bout with his illness fucking short-circuited his brain?!

Rage bubbled up in Xiao Chiye. What's more, he had not gotten a good sleep. He tugged at the official robe he had not worn properly and suppressed his fury to say expressionlessly, "Go and report back to His Majesty that Xiao Ce'an is not worthy of the title and does not dare to accept this overwhelming favor from His Majesty, nor does he dare to accept this heaven-sent noble rank."



#### Footnotes

1. 周若失其鹿，天下群雄皆可逐之 The original quote is "Qin lost his deer, and all under heaven chased after it" 「秦失其鹿，天下共逐之」 from Records of the Grand Historian • Biography of Marquis Huaiyin 《史记·淮阴侯列传》. Deer is a metaphor for the throne. It's an illustration of the rise of numerous rivaling warlords contesting for supremacy to capture the prize, the empire lost by the Qin Dynasty. So Shen Zechuan is saying that if Dazhou lost its legitimacy on the throne/the empire, then all the heroes in the world are free to make a grab for it.
2. 舍小我 From 牺牲小我，完成大我 sacrifice the self for the greater good (e.g. the team or the state, etc).
3. 定都 Basically, the title was to honor him for helping to restore calm/stability (ding) to the capital (du). But (ding) also means to fix in place.



## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 73 : CONFERMENT

Translated with: [Lin](#)<3

Xiao Chiye did not accept the imperial edict. Fuman did not dare to persuade him further and hurried his way back to the palace to make his report.

After hearing the whole story, Li Jianheng leapt to his feet and said, “Is the Son of Heaven’s orders something he can reject as he pleases? When I reward him, he should kneel and accept it! Go again!”

Gripping to himself, Fuman climbed onto the horse again and returned to Xiao Chiye’s residence. Seeing Xiao Chiye still kneeling, he hurriedly held the imperial edict and bowed to persuade him, “Viceroy, Viceroy! Why do this? Didn’t we roll and crawl down there in the ditches all for this?”

With a hint of displeasure on his face, Xiao Chiye said, “I don’t want this noble rank. Don’t bother wasting your breath on me.”

Fuman was so anxious and desperate that he stomped his foot where he stood. But he could not accept the edict on behalf of Xiao Chiye. All he could do was to play for time.

“Then let him kneel!” Back at the palace, Li Jianheng promptly flew into a rage when he heard the reply. “In order to grant him the reward, I even rebuffed the Secretariat Elder, and he still dares to put on airs? Let him kneel!”

So the sovereign and his minister – one within the palace and the other, beyond – remained stuck in a deadlock.

At present, it was the third lunar month in Spring, and the ground was icy cold all over. Xiao Chiye kneeled with a straightened back, determined to get Li Jianheng to revoke his order. Perhaps he could have accepted the edict, then used various means to handle this matter in a better way. But he was not willing to.

The Lu Clan in Qidong was held in check by the Qi Clan at the top and invaded by Biansha at the bottom. Li Jianheng had been gunning for the easier target when he trampled upon Lu Pingyan, because the Lu Clan was

not on par with the Qi and Xiao Clans. The food and clothing expenditures of those 20,000 troops of the Biansha Commandery were all in the imperial court's control. They did not even have military fields. Otherwise, the Lu Clan would not have to stoop so low as to demand payment every year, or be so poor that they had to sell their family properties and belongings. In the past, when Lu Guangbai entered the capital to make his report, he was never taken seriously. Which typical official in the capital would have such audacity? They were all merely taking their cues from the higher-ups. When Emperor Xiande was around, it was rare for Lu Guangbai to be able to seek an audience with the Emperor. This was not simply a matter of him being liked or detested, but because it concerned the balance of Qidong's military power.

The Xiao and Qi were both great generals stationed at the frontiers. Why did the Hua Clan have to guard against the Prince of Libei alone and go to so much trouble to trap Xiao Chiye in Qudu? Because the Xiao Clan was the only dominant force in Libei Great Commandery. There was no other leash in the entire territory that could rein in the Xiao Clan, so they could only tie up Xiao Chiye and turn him into a cage to restrain the Libei Armored Cavalry. Qidong had two generals, Qi Shiyu and Lu Pingyan, who were on par with one another back in those days. But why was Qi Shiyu eventually the one who was conferred with the title of the Five Commanderies' Commander-in-Chief? This was all because Lu Pingyan and Xiao Fangxu were on close terms with one another, and they were in-laws to boot.<sup>1</sup>

The Lu Clan was the chess piece that provided checks and balances to the power between the three parties.

The Lu Clan's position in the Bianjun Commandery was crucial; it was a heavy responsibility entrusted to them by the imperial court. But even so, the imperial court did not generously bestow titles and ranks upon them. This was meant to hold the Lu in their control and let the Lu be held in check by both the Qi Clan and the imperial court. The Lu could only be a weapon used to fight the foreign enemies; there was no way they could be high-ranking provincial officials with military authority at the borders, and consequently, there would be no way they could be the second Prince of Libei.

At present, Lu Guangbai had to consult Qi Zhuyin for the use of troops and consult the Ministry of War and Ministry of Revenue in Qudu for the

use of money. Lu Guangbai was the commanding general in charge of the Bianjun Commandery's defenses. If Qi Zhuyin had not been generous in delegating authority and gave him the prerogative to self-deploy troops in times of peril, then he would be even more of a predicament than he was at present.

This time, Li Jianheng advanced Lu Pingyan's noble rank, yet there was no actual promotion taking place. Thus, the Lu Clan could only remain perpetually hungry cattle and continue to work to their deaths at the Bianjun Commandery. Their reputation had gone up a notch on the surface, but it was actually an insult deep down. Half of the Lu Clan's current difficulties had to do with the Xiao Clan; therefore, Xiao Chiye could not—must not accept the edict without so much a gesture.

The fact that the imperial edict could be issued made it clear that the Grand Secretariat had given the nod. In that case, it was certain that this order would not be revoked; there was no reason for the Son of Heaven to change his order. But Xiao Chiye definitely must not accept it with great delight. Even if he had to kowtow and act unreasonably, or even throw a tantrum, he had to show the Lu Clan his stance.

It was by virtue of power and might that Li Jianheng could trample all over the Lu Clan, because the imperial court had the Lu in their grasp. In contrast, it was by virtue of friendship that the Xiao Clan did not dare to do the same, because both families had always considered the other brother. If this friendship were to break up, then the Xiao Clan would lose their assistive force in the southeast.

Xiao Chiye knelt until it was dark. Fuman did not dare to sit down arbitrarily and stood at the side with the imperial edict in his hands. After an unspecified amount of time, they heard the sound of hurried footsteps from the entrance. An eunuch arrived and conveyed the orders in an urgent tone, "Viceroy, you may stop kneeling! Please get up! His Majesty summons you for an audience!"

Without demur, Xiao Chiye lifted the hem of his robe to get up and got onto his horse to leave. Fuman hurriedly got onto his horse as well, not daring to grouse when he saw Xiao Chiye not showing any signs of exhaustion.

Mingli Hall was brightly illuminated. Li Jianheng sat on the dragon throne and listened as someone announced Xiao Chiye's arrival. But he did not summon the latter in and remained seated to trace characters.

Without being summoned, Xiao Chiye could not enter, so he could only kneel outside Mingli Hall. It was already late, and the leftover cold water on the freshly scrubbed floor dampened his robe. The entire courtyard of eunuchs moved quietly, not daring to make a sound.

Li Jianheng stared blankly at the glazed lamp. He had been thinking a lot this silent night. By the time he returned to his senses, it was already the hour of *chou*.<sup>2</sup> He sat for a moment, then suddenly rose to his feet and walked out.

The palace maids withdrew, and the eunuchs kneeled on the ground. The shadows on the ground were trodden upon. Xiao Chiye did not lift his head.

Li Jianheng looked down at Xiao Chiye. In the past, he was always looking up at Xiao Chiye. When they were hanging out on the streets together, Xiao Chiye could be said to be his big brother. They called each other brothers, and they played the fool a lot too. Li Jianheng thought he treated Xiao Chiye with his utmost sincerity.

How did they get to where they were today?

Li Jianheng was dressed in a bright yellow, round-necked robe with narrow sleeves. With his hands on the amber belt on his waist, he moved over to Xiao Chiye's side and looked at the luminous moon above the majestic palace eaves. He mulled it over for a moment, then said, "There's no one else here at the moment. Let's talk."

The cold moonlight cast a blanket over them, effusing a chill along with the wind.

Li Jianheng said, "Aren't you usually a bold one? To think giving you a noble rank this time can also scare you to such an extent."

Xiao Chiye said, "It's incompatible with reason and intolerable under the law."

Li Jianheng paced and said, "Don't give me that. You have never been one to talk about reason. Before the Nanlin Hunting Grounds incident, we were still good brothers who would risk our lives for the other. After the Nanlin Hunting Grounds incident, we truly became the monarch and his minister, separated by a huge rift. Ce'an, isn't it good for me to be the emperor and for you to be the viceroy? Why do you have to put on a front with me like this? Just accept the rewards you are awarded with. Cowering like this is really unlike you, Xiao Ce'an."

Xiao Chiye could tell what he meant and said, "If Your Majesty wants to reward me with gold and treasures, I'll promptly kowtow and say my thanks. But not for a noble rank. I've served as an official for six years, and I do not have any notable achievements or mentionable merits in Qudu to show for or to speak of. I feel uneasy now that I have received Your Majesty's kindness and become a marquis at a sudden snap of a finger."

"What's there to be uneasy about?" Li Jianheng scoffed. "With our relationship, you should have been conferred a title a long time ago. The Grand Secretariat interferes with my every move, picking on anything and everything I do. I never had a chance to do this, no? This time, you've earned it. Earlier, when Lu Pingyan was conferred a title, it was also because he had effectively resisted and repelled the Biansha Calvary at the border. You protected the Emperor in Qudu, and in that, ensured the safety of our empire and society; I see no difference between both."

"There's no rush since the Grand Secretariat has qualms about this." Xiao Chiye said, "We can't hurt the old officials' feelings."

"The older ones are always thickheaded and obstinate." Li Jianheng said, "How can they be so inflexible? Even those in the flesh trade know when to be flexible and read the situation. But these major ministers are still holding on to broken pieces. How very meaningless. After this scare, I thought about a lot of things during my recuperation. Since I've become the Emperor, it's not productive if I just keep crying and whining. We have to find some way to live on, right? I'm not an unreasonable man. Just voice it out if there is good reason to; it's not like I'll execute them? Like this time, I want to confer a title upon you, but the Secretariat Elder didn't agree and led the others to make a scene before me, saying that I was hasty and sloppy in my decisions. I was so troubled over this matter that I spent nights tossing and turning, and they still say I'm hasty!"

Li Jianheng turned back as he was speaking, and the gold dragon on his crown flashed in the moonlight, giving him an imposing air of elegance and nobility. He did not tell Xiao Chiye to rise. After a long pause, he continued.

"I'm the Emperor, I can't renege on my word. Since the edict has been made, you just have to accept it. You've already rebuffed me once today, but we are brothers, so I won't hold it against you. But if you continue to be so stubborn with me again, then it won't be something that can be settled between brothers, and neither of us will look good for it. Deal?"

Xiao Chiye was silent for a moment before he said, “Your Majesty, that won’t do. The inspection is around the corner. It’s a good thing to advance Old General Lu’s noble rank; he deserves it. But not for me. It’s for Your Majesty’s reputation that I’m not accepting it. I’m someone Your Majesty single-handedly promoted. If I can’t convince the masses in everything I do, then how can I still attend to official duties for Your Majesty in the future? Those who are in charge of military troops are all concerned about their reputation and dignity. If you give this dignity to Old General Lu by showing him due respect, then I will subsequently come to benefit by association too.”

“Are you making up all kinds of excuses to decline for my sake or for the Xiao Clan? Do you really think I don’t understand just because you didn’t say it?” Li Jianheng stared at him. “We are brothers who should treat each other with candor and sincerity. Yet you keep treating me like a fool. It’s for the sake of our friendship that I’m rewarding you, but you turned it down for your own selfish desire! I told you to be honest with me, and you are still beating around the bush with me! Xiao Chiye, don’t you have a conscience?!”

This question Li Jianheng bellowed was so forceful that it faintly reverberated through the cold, dreary night.

“You’re afraid of offending Lu Pingyan. Why is that?!” Li Jianheng suddenly flung his sleeves. “And you still dare to say you’re loyal to me? You are doing it all for yourself! You don’t dare to say it, so I’ll say it for you. You’re afraid of offending Lu Pingyan and ruining the friendship between both your clans, which would make it hard for you to mutually look out for each other. But let me ask you, Xiao and Lu both have their own respective military forces to defend the borders, so what is there that you need to look out for each other for?”

Xiao Chiye tightened his fists, with his thumb ring jammed in the area between his thumb and forefinger.

“All of you are wolves and tigers.” Li Jianheng pointed at Xiao Chiye. “You people have your mind set on Qudu! I was merely sounding you out, and you showed your true colors! Military powers gang up with one another, and the Xiao Clan wants to be in the same faction as the Lu Clan, and then what’s next? Tell me, what are you going to do?!”

Xiao Chiye abruptly half-propped himself up. He had a well-built physique, and kneeling on one knee like this made him seem as if he was a



panther ready to spring into an attack. Li Jianheng immediately took a few steps back and looked at him, badly shaken.

“—Of course it’s to do those Biansha baldies in!” Xiao Chiye’s expression was fierce as he looked at Li Jianheng. “Six years ago, when the Zhongbo troops were defeated, my eldest brother rode non-stop through the night to come to the emperor’s rescue. How dangerous that battle at Cizhou was! Meanwhile, Lu Guangbai held his spear in hand and a dagger in his mouth and fought for three nights before he could break through the siege. He immediately hurried over to Qudu without even stopping to rest to help Qudu out of their predicament. Everything Your Majesty had said today is an affront to the Xiao and Lu Clans’ loyalty. That’s right, the reason I’m not accepting the noble rank today is because of Lu Pingyan, but even more because of the unwavering loyalty of the various generals at the frontiers. It’s all because of Your Majesty’s kindness that I, Xiao Ce’an, a good-for-nothing, could live in this Qudu without having to worry about my own life and death, nor stress about heading out to war. If I could even become a high and mighty marquis with this, then what would Commander Qi and General Lu, both of whom are still enduring hardships at the frontiers, think?”

“After saying so much, you are just doing it for your own untainted reputation!”

Xiao Chiye’s words were firm and resounding. “My life is worthless, but Your Majesty is the ruler of our prosperous lands. If you were to reward me for this small bit of contribution and it ends up diminishing the generals’ loyalty to Your Majesty, who would lose out more? Your Majesty, or I?”

Li Jianheng looked hesitant and doubtful.

Xiao Chiye refused to let this go and continued. “If this is merely a show I put on to collude with the Lu Clan, why did Secretariat Elder Hai try so hard to convince Your Majesty? Your Majesty, you don’t trust me, but don’t you trust the Hai Liangyi whom the late Emperor appointed and who has come to the emperor’s rescue thrice? Your Majesty has repeatedly met with danger and misfortune, and immediately right after, you are disproportionately dishing out rewards. Whoever it is that’s instigating and abetting Your Majesty ought to be executed!”

It was as if Li Jianheng was suddenly jolted to his senses. He retreated under the eaves, held on to the vermilion pillar for support, and said, “But the imperial edict has already been issued...”

“Your Majesty is the sovereign of a new reign and imperial court. It was inappropriate to bestow rewards during the state mourning period earlier. But now that the two great imperial affairs of spring plowing and inspection are in full swing, why not seize the chance to proclaim a general amnesty to the world and reward the various generals at the frontiers according to the merit evaluation from the Ministry of War? It’s not just permissible to advance Lu Pingyan to the rank of Marquis of Biansha. On the basis of the Lu Clan’s most number of enemy kills at the Bianjun Commandery, they should be rewarded again with an increase of military provisions—Juexi had a bumper harvest last year, and their granaries are filled to the brim. This would not only write off the state treasury’s additional expenditure on dishing out monetary rewards, but also relieve the Bianjun Commandery of their pressing needs. The wedding of Old Commander Qi is fast approaching. Your Majesty, if you also reward and confer Third Missy Hua with the title of Commandery Princess, then you’d be raising Qidong’s prestige.” Xiao Chiye’s words were earnest, and his gaze, frank. “You are the sovereign of a great empire, the common ruler of all under the world. Who would still harbor any discontent when you bestowed such grace and favor all around?”

When Emperor Xiande ascended to the throne, the Empress Dowager was the one making the decisions for him, and consequently, he missed his opportunity to make such a big splash during his reign. The most pressing issue to Li Jianheng now was to prove himself as an emperor. He was suspicious and reacted to another’s instigation only because he was afraid of being declared unworthy of his position. Xiao Chiye’s words simply pushed all his right buttons!

“Alright...” With delight on his face, Li Jianheng came down again to move towards Xiao Chiye. “Fine! Ce’an, get up quickly. It’s cold on the ground!”

Fuman, who was kneeling at the bottom, listened with marvel. Who would have thought that in just a few hours, Xiao Chiye would be able to seize the opportunity to deal a counterattack and avert the crisis? If not for having a firm grasp on Li Jianheng’s temperament and mindset, he would never have been able to hit right on the target in just one blow.

The more he thought, the more elated he was.

There’s hope for him if he throw in his lot with the Second Young Master!



#### Footnotes

1. To recap, Lu Pingyan's daughter is Xiao Fangxu's daughter-in-law, i.e., Xiao Jiming's wife, Lu Yizhi.
2. 丑时 hour of chou, based on the twelve two-hour periods of time in former times. This is around 1 a.m. to 3 a.m.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 74 : TOAST EXCHANGE



The second month of the lunar year was crucial for planting mulberry and flax in spring. The various localities hurried to submit their reports and urge the Ministry of Revenue to allocate funds. With mountains of trivial affairs piling up, the various departments were so busy they were burned out from exhaustion. Li Jianheng dished out the rewards and conferments, and Xiao Chiye was promoted to the rank of Marquis of Dingdu. Meanwhile, Shen Zechuan received a skip in grade and was promoted to a third-grade Vice Commander. He also concurrently took up the portfolio of the Northern Judge and began to take charge of the imperial prison.

The Grand Secretariat initially did not agree to this, but Cen Yu submitted a memorial to make a strong case for a recommendation. Hai Liangyi also saw Shen Zechuan in a new light because of the epidemic, and so it was decided.

Xiao Chiye carried the earring case on him, but he never found the opportunity to run into Shen Zechuan. Shen Zechuan was on the go all over the imperial prison, having to go through all the cases accumulated before the new year one at a time. He was so busy he skipped sleep and meals. On the other side, he still had to get Qiao Tianya to lie in wait and keep a watch on Xi Hongxuan so that he could find a way to get Qi Huilian and Ji Gang back.

Young swallows made a ruckus on roof beams, while the young shoots of weeping willows spouted. The vermilion walls and green glazed tiles of Qudu gradually showed as the weather remained clear and sunny for several days in a row. On the day when spring rain fell uninterrupted, Cen Yu hosted a feast and invited a few friends from the latest incident. Hai Liangyi was not one to attend private banquets, and it just happened that he had yet to recover from his illness, so he did not partake in the feast.

By the time Shen Zechuan arrived, it was already late. He was led straight to the main hall. When he lifted the curtain, he saw that it was full of officials who were familiar faces to him.

Han Cheng, Kong Qiu, and Cen Yu shared a table. Xiao Chiye already had his third round of wine, and he was listening with propped arms to Yu

Xiaozai – whose seat was at the bottom – telling jokes to an entire hall of important ministers.

The moment Shen Zechuan entered, Yu Xiaozai hurriedly paid his obeisances and greeted him. “Your Excellency is late. Please hurry and have a seat at the head of the table.”

Shen Zechuan removed his cloak and said with a smile, “There’s much to do in the imperial prison, so I’d like to ask of Your Excellencies to please bear with me. I’ll sit at the bottom.”

Cen Yu stood up and beckoned to him, saying, “Those etiquettes for public display won’t work at private banquets. Once you are here, we are all friends despite our age differences. So why still stand on ceremony? Old Han, you tell him!”

Han Cheng said, “It’s as he said. Lanzhou, come on up and sit here. The few of us old and useless ones have the honor of being in the company of the Marquis today too. Your Lordship, you could be said to have lowered yourself for us!”

“Commander-in-chief, what you’re doing is putting me down.” Xiao Chiye seemed to be a little drunk. He did not look at Shen Zechuan and merely smiled, “Who present here is not a respected elder? I’ll still have to look to all of you for advice in the future.”

Shen Zechuan had already taken his seat, which was a little distance away from Xiao Chiye across the table where he would be able to reach the latter if he stretched out his legs. Both men did not look at each other, nor did they greet the other. Kong Qiu looked left and right at them and said with a smile, “I’ve long heard that both of you have beef with each other. Why won’t you even say a word on meeting each other? You worked on this assignment together, and it seemed all good to me. So why still take those past grudges to heart?”

“The way I see it, both of you are young and promising, and you don’t deflect the responsibility to each other when you’re working. So why not take the chance today to bury the hatchet with a smile?” As Cen Yu spoke, he raised his hands. “The Imperial Bodyguards and the Imperial Army have to mutually look out for each other, too. There are plenty of opportunities for both to continue working together in the future. Your Lordship, what do you think? Would that do?”

Xiao Chiye lazily cast a look at Shen Zechuan. His gaze was indecipherable. He only said, “How would it not do for me? What is there

that I can't do with a smile from his Excellency the Judge? I should say my proper thanks to His Excellency for this time too."

"When have I never greeted Your Lordship with a smile every time I see Your Lordship?" Shen Zechuan touched the wine cup. "I've long forgotten the past. It's just that there has been no opportunity before, isn't it?"

Han Cheng was the one who had the most drinks with Xiao Chiye. On seeing this, he picked up his chopsticks again and said as he picked out the food, "Then, let's have a drink. Your Lordship, please do me the favor!"

Yu Xiaozai, who had not sat all this while, promptly filled both of their cups to the brim with wine. Xiao Chiye held his cup with both hands and said without getting up, "Then, let's toast."

Going by their official grades, it was indeed the case that Xiao Chiye should not get up. Shen Zechuan stood up, revealing his wrist bones as he lifted his cup.

Xiao Chiye suddenly said, "Since this is wine to settle old grudges, then it naturally can't be drunk in such a common way. Judge, how about a nuptial exchange of matrimony wine?"<sup>1</sup>

Han Cheng promptly laughed. He pointed at Xiao Chiye and shook his head as he said with a sigh, "Your Lordship, that's too unethical of you. Why put Lanzhou in a spot?"

"How is this putting him in a spot?" Xiao Chiye said, "I can't even begin to love and honor him. Aren't we doing all this as an expression of our determination?"

Knowing Xiao Chiye's temper, Cen Yu thought that Xiao Chiye was still harboring animosity over Zhongbo and that he was intentionally making things difficult for Shen Zechuan. Just as he was prepared to speak up to dissuade Xiao Chiye, Shen Zechuan laughed.

"Sure." Shen Zechuan said. "We'll do as His Lordship says."

Shen Zechuan held up the cup and leaned over, where Xiao Chiye could see his faintly discernible collarbone. Both men's arms intertwined. As Shen Zechuan drank the wine, his Adam's apple throbbed. Xiao Chiye's gaze seemed to let out a gurgle too as it followed the wine down into that robe.

Xiao Chiye drank very slowly. He held the wine in his mouth, his gaze never once leaving Shen Zechuan. All the time his arm was hooked around Shen Zechuan's arm, Shen Zechuan could clearly feel his sturdiness.

Xiao Chiye seemed to let out a laugh when he finished drinking, but no one heard it; only Shen Zechuan lowered his eyes to look at him. His gaze was naked, and brimming over with dangerous desire.

Shen Zechuan extracted his arm and sat back, his back dripping with sweat. Xiao Chiye seemed unfazed as he put up his arms again and inclined his head to listen to the conversation.

Cen Yu said, "After the spring plow, it'll be the spring examinations.<sup>2</sup> The Imperial College wants to recruit new students this year. Looks like the Ministry of Revenue will be getting another headache."

Kong Qiu snorted a laughter and said, "What would Wei Huaigu ache over? He's the money keeper! He ought to compute them. To begin with, all these should have been suitably arranged way earlier. For him to wait until now to do so is already considered a dereliction of duty."

"He's the money keeper, and you're the living King of Hell!" Han Cheng set down his chopsticks. Having had his fill of wine and meal, he said, "Zhongbo is in such a mess at present, and the number of cases submitted to the Ministry of Justice is as innumerable as the number of hairs on an ox. It won't do for them to keep delaying sending someone over to take charge of the situation there, would it?"

"I think the Secretariat Elder is mulling over whom to send over." Cen Yu lamented. "If Lanzhou formally joins the central administration as an official, then he might have a chance this time."

Whether it was due to the heat or the wine, Shen Zechuan's face was a little red. He said, "I can't. I'm not qualified and experienced enough to be assigned out of the capital. I won't be able to quell the unrest."

"Just gain more experience and it'll be fine." With his interest piqued, Han Cheng said, "It is said that officials from the capital are wily. But how can the capital officials be as slippery and sly as the local officials? Some years ago, I went down with the Chief Surveillance Bureau to check the accounts, and all those 'capital lords' and 'old masters' were all very crafty and cunning! There were two copies of all the account books in their residences. Even if you, Cen Xunyi, went, you would not be able to distinguish the real accounts from the fakes. Every year, when the imperial envoy heads down, there would be a great flurry of activities. Having long heard the news, they would drive out all the disaster victims and refugees in their territories before your arrival to prevent you from seeing them. This is the so-called 'no hunger concern in the territory' you see in the evaluations.

Once you arrive, they would hold a banquet and think up reasons to dunk you with wine. You'd drink until daybreak, then sleep until nightfall. You'd be so drunk that you can't even stride out of the prefectural *yamen*. So what energy would you still have to check the accounts? Once the time is up, and the silver is in the pockets, the evaluation would be marked as outstanding. Then it's off to the next place to drink. And that's considered the end of the check."

"But there are still those who do their jobs. You can't taint them all with the same brush." With that, Cen Yu sighed again. "When Xue Xiuzhuo went down a few years ago, he was a formidable sight to behold. All the accounts of the Thirteen Cities of Juexi were sorted out in perfect order without a single error. I originally thought he would be assigned to the Ministry of Revenue. But who would have expected the Secretariat Elder to transfer him to the Court of Judicial Review instead?"

"Can he get anywhere being Wei Huaigu's subordinate?" Kong Qiu leaned against the chair. "The current vice minister of the Ministry of Revenue exists in name only. Wei Huaigu alone calls the shot and has the final say in the overall management of financial affairs. Won't he be rendered useless if he goes over? The Secretariat Elder has the intent to polish him; he's meant to achieve great things in the future."

Kong Qiu never had any social dealings with Wei Huaigu and Pan Xiangjie. That he was only friendly to them on the surface but estranged from them deep down was a fact everyone knew. So he was not afraid to speak out in Han Cheng's presence.

Han Cheng laughed out loud and said, "Don't discuss state affairs at a private feast! How can you forget this? Old Kong, you ought to be punished!"

Thinking that they were almost done with their meals, Cen Yu said, "When Youjing<sup>3</sup> returned a few days back, he told me about a game. It still seems early to me, so why don't we give it a try? Youjing, take those cards of yours out."

Yu Xiaozai readily agreed in response. He took out a wooden box, opened it to take out small carved wooden cards and said, "This is something this humble subordinate saw others playing when I went to Yongyi Harbor for supervision and inspection—matching cards to pair couplets. Your Excellencies, give it a go?"



Han Cheng said to Xiao Chiye, "I'm not good at playing literary games like these. Your Lordship, how about giving me some advice?"

Xiao Chiye drank his wine and said, "Does the Commander-in-chief think so highly of me, Xiao Ce'an? Do I look like a man who reads?"

"It's just for fun. Let's just go along with it. Youjing, deal the cards!"

Yu Xiaozai dealt the three of them the cards. Fiddling with his wine cup, Xiao Chiye was just looking at the cards when something brushed against his calf. He paused suddenly and fixed his gaze on Han Cheng's cards.

Han Cheng looked at his cards with a frown and said, "The heck are these flowers and plants putting me in a spot! Your Lordship, do you recognize this?"

Xiao Chiye said, "Throw them both a line based on the foxtail grass. I guarantee—"

That foot with a clean sock tapped Xiao Chiye's knee, and its sole stepped on his kneecap, as if testing the position.

"Guarantee they'll be stumped!" Han Cheng tossed a card out and said with a smile, "The swallow teases the foxtail, spring arrives. I randomly made up the first line of a couplet. So now, Xunyi, pair it up!"

Han Cheng truly was not a learned man, but he did not let it hold him back. On hearing this, Kong Qiu and Cen Yu laughed. While the three men were talking, Xiao Chiye cast a look at Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan grasped his fan, a little moso-bamboo fan that Xiao Chiye had sent someone to deliver to him. He tapped the fan intermittently and listened intently to the conversation. As if sensing Xiao Chiye's eyes on him, the corners of his eyes lifted in a little smile.

That foot had already slid in between Xiao Chiye's legs. It nudged against the inside of his thigh, as if wanting for more. Xiao Chiye held the wine cup with his thumb pressed against the rim as he remained motionless.

"Isn't it a fox?" After a while, Xiao Chiye let out a laugh. He lifted his hand to pick out an ink-traced fox from Han Cheng's cards and tossed it onto the table. "Moist is the night as the rain seeps through my roof; sultry is the fox's song in my dream. Where to seek the tide of spring? That wet, persistent drip is the hint—sorry for the obscenity!"

Han Cheng exchanged toasts with Xiao Chiye, then laughed and said, "We are being serious here, but why is it that you just had to turn a fox into

a vixen when it's your turn?!" A foot reached out from under the table. Its toe slowly slid up Xiao Chiye's calf, playing back and forth a few times along the curve of his calf.

"But men like me..." Xiao Chiye drank his wine and looked at Shen Zechuan. "... simply attract foxes."

"How is any respectable person able to continue with that? It's too crude." Kong Qiu laughed and sighed. "You, Xiao Ce'an, don't even close the door tight when you sleep, and you still blame the others for looking for you. You're obviously looking forward to it yourself, right?"

Xiao Chiye did not say a word. But when that foot stepped down on him gently, he laughed. The upper half of Shen Zechuan's body was so steady that nothing seemed off. He rubbed his fingertips, which had been tapping on the fan. In this room full of heat, even the corners of his eyes were about to redden.

It just so happened that Cen Yu threw the card onto the ground. Yu Xiaozai quickly stopped what he was doing and made to lean over to pick it up.

Shen Zechuan prepared to retract his foot. But unexpectedly enough, Xiao Chiye reached his hand down to grab hold of his ankle. His sole was stepping on Xiao Chiye's unmentionable spot through the fabric. Xiao Chiye slipped two fingers into the clean sock and stroked Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan's fan rested on the tabletop. Yu Xiaozai had already lifted the hem of his robe and his waist was already slightly bending over as he said, "Your Excellencies, please lift your legs. Let this humble subordinate see where it has dropped to..."

Xiao Chiye was not the slightest bit flustered as he steadily grasped onto Shen Zechuan's ankle. He exerted a little force with his thumb, caressing Shen Zechuan until Shen Zechuan felt a tingle of numbness run up his spine and tightened his grip on his fan.



Many thanks to Kotoni and Alex for the hornee consultation.

#### Footnotes

1. 交杯酒 nuptial cups; a formal exchange of cups of wine between bride and groom as traditional wedding ceremony; a toast

in which one links one's arm with a partner to drink from one's cup of wine.



- 2.
3. 春闱 imperial examination, which usually took place in the spring.
4. Yu Xiaozai's courtesy name.

# QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 75 : NIGHT RIDE



Translated with: Yunyun, Lin & Rie<3



Yu Xiaozai held the hem of his robe up and was about to squat down when Xiao Chiye let his wine cup drop. Han Cheng, being near, ended up having his robe dirtied. Yu Xiaozai left the cards and went to get a handkerchief for Han Cheng to clean himself. Cen Yu was still squinting at his cards when the wine splashed him. He hastily tried to dodge it too, making Kong Qiu laugh loudly.

Han Cheng tugged at his robe and said to Xiao Chiye, “Your Lordship, you’ve had too much to drink; even your hands are unsteady now!”

Xiao Chiye raised his hand in apology and said, “Apologies, I’ll get someone to send you a replacement tomorrow as compensation.”

“There’s no need. Just how much is a set of robes worth?” How could Han Cheng really let Xiao Chiye compensate him? He did not even dare to pull a long face as he said with a smile, “We’ll treat this cup as a toast from Your Lordship!”

Shen Zechuan had already withdrawn his foot. He leaned over and picked up the card from the floor. As he placed it on the table, he heard Xiao Chiye laughing. The lingering warmth on his ankle where Xiao Chiye had squeezed grew hotter amidst the laughter.

Kong Qiu was already drunk. He looked completely opposite of how he usually did when he was in court as he struck a porcelain cup with his chopsticks and sang out incomprehensible lyrics alone in the chaotic atmosphere.

Cen Yu, seeing Kong Qiu stir up such an improper and unsightly ruckus, tugged on his sleeve and said, “Boran! Stop singing. Let’s go home and sleep! You still need to sit in Xi Hongxuan’s trial the day after tomorrow!”

Kong Qiu held up his cup, struck it with increasing glee, and said, “I remember that. I’m investigating him!”

Cen Yu could not keep a hold of him and said, "Thankfully, I was the one who invited you to the feast today, or else you would be impeached for sure for behaving in such an audacious, unrestrained manner."

"Okay then, let them impeach!" Kong Qiu said, "Let them impeach! Imperial censors ought to have the courage to speak."

"Right, well said!" Han Cheng also laughed, "Before spring, we were saddled with such a massive pile of work that we could scarcely breathe. How many times could we enjoy ourselves to the greatest? Let him enjoy himself to his heart's content!"

"It's almost time to wind down. If we make a ruckus too late into the night, the Secretariat Elder won't be happy with us." Xiao Chiye got to his feet and called to Chen Yang, "Send His Excellency Kong back in my horse carriage!"

The attendants swarmed all around, and Chen Yang helped Kong Qiu out the door. Cen Yu wiped away his hot sweat and said to the remaining men, "You don't know this, but Boran was also once an unconventional and uninhibited person, but because Secretariat Elder is particularly set on self-restraint and observance of proprieties, he put him in order and whipped him into shape. It's not advisable to drink too much of this wine. Why doesn't everyone wait for a moment while I'll tell the cook to boil some soups to sober you up? Drink it up before you leave!"

"I was just thinking about your residence's dough drop and assorted vegetable soup!" Han Cheng forwent the formalities. "Add some vinegar to mine. I'll drink it before leaving."

Shen Zechuan bowed and said, "The imperial prison still has urgent cases to be processed tomorrow morning, so I won't stay. Everyone, please enjoy your meal. If time permits in the future, I'll invite everyone for another round."

Han Cheng knew that he was indeed busy of late and told him, "When you previously held the post of the Southern Judge, the military craftsmen kept a close eye on you. Now that you've transferred to the office of the Northern Judge, there's no need for you to rush between both ends until you are too busy to do anything else. The subordinates will remember your kind treatment of them and naturally won't make things too difficult for you."

Shen Zechuan uttered a sound of acknowledgment. Cen Yu insisted on sending him off. It would not do for Shen Zechuan to decline, so they walked out of the doors together. It was raining heavily outside, and

everything was covered in a thick layer of fog. The drift of fresh air on their faces dispelled the wine-induced heat from their bodies, making them feel much more refreshed.

Cen Yu led Shen Zechuan down the stairs and said, "To find time to attend the feast tonight, you must have pushed back a great deal of work."

"Not quite. The urgent cases that need to be dealt with have been sealed and finalized before today." Shen Zechuan replied with a smile.

Cen Yu nodded and said, "That's good. Assignments cannot be delayed."

Cen Yu accompanied him all the way to the gates and then ordered someone to hold up an umbrella and lantern for him. He truly valued Shen Zechuan for his talents, but it was a pity that Shen Zechuan served in the Imperial Bodyguards.

Finally, Cen Yu said, "All the cases in the Imperial Prison are major cases that not even the Three Judicial Offices can interfere with. You could be said to have enjoyed a meteoric rise with this position, so you must speak with caution and act with prudence. It is often said that being close to the sovereign is as perilous as lying with a tiger. Those who can handle affairs in the presence of the emperor are all born intelligent and quick-witted. That said, you needn't worry too much about qualification, for you are already considered to have reached success in your youth. You still have a long time to go and a long way ahead of you, so remember, there is no need to be anxious about anything else other than your assignments. The Marquis of Dingdu is not a narrow-minded man either. You are bound to have to work together on missions in the future. The hatchet has been buried tonight with wine. Even if you cannot become soulmates with him, it's still better to be friends who can look out for each other than to fly into a rage each time you meet each other. Lanzhou, I value your talent, and I hope that you will work hard and achieve success in your career!"

Cen Yu bared his heart out with such sincerity that Shen Zechuan was wholeheartedly convinced. He bowed, and Cen Yu helped him up again, saying, "The road is slippery on rainy nights. Be careful on your way. You may go."

Shen Zechuan draped the pristinely white fur coat that Li Jianheng had bestowed on him and bade farewell to Cen Yu. He did not get in the sedan, but let Qiao Tianya hold up the umbrella for him as one master and one servant walked into the rain.

The two had not been walking along the streets for long when they heard the sound of hoofbeats behind them. Qiao Tianya shook the rainwater off before stepping aside, and as expected, saw Xiao Chiye on horseback galloping towards them at full speed.

“Good timing. I—”

Qiao Tianya did not even get to finish his sentence as Xiao Chiye bent to pick Shen Zechuan up and left with him. The water droplets kicked up by the horse’s hooves splashed all over Qiao Tianya. He spread his arms open and slowly finished his sentence, “... want to drink some *shaojiu*.”<sup>1</sup>

Xiao Chiye was well-built. Even with Shen Zechuan in his arms, he did not find it inconvenient. It was in this way he hugged Shen Zechuan as he effortlessly rode his horse away. The chest backing Shen Zechuan was firm and muscular, as if it was an indestructible iron wall of silver.

Lang Tao Xue Jin galloped into the rain like a bolt of lightning flashing through the pitch-black rainy night. It trod into countless puddles of water, splattering them as it charged straight for the city gates.

“Who goes there riding his horse this late in the night?!” The guard at the top of the wall raised his lantern and demanded.

Xiao Chiye pulled at his cloak to wrap Shen Zechuan under it before raising his own authority token. He said, “Open the gates.”

“Vice... Marquis!” The platoon commander at the top of the wall immediately paid his obeisances, then waved his hands and ordered, “Quick, open the gates!”

The gates opened with a loud rumble, and Lang Tao Xue Jin galloped straight out. With the night wind whipping against their cheek, Lang Tao Xue Jin galloped faster and faster, while a circling gyrfalcon charged out from the rain and followed closely behind.

Shen Zechuan held onto the back of the horse and said, “We can’t go too far. Tomorrow morning—”

Xiao Chiye grabbed Shen Zechuan’s chin, pulled it toward himself, and tilted his head to kiss him. Shen Zechuan was not gifted at horsemanship, and other than Xiao Chiye, he had nowhere else to hold on to as they raced forth like the wind. With one hand pressing against the jerking back of the horse and the other clutching onto Xiao Chiye’s body for support, there was no way for him to look at the road in front. The pitter-pattering rain wetted his eyes as they kissed.

They had not seen each other for seven or eight days.

Xiao Chiye embraced Shen Zechuan tightly with one hand, pressing him to his chest as he kissed down along his cheek to the side of his neck.

Shen Zechuan's clothes were in disarray. The official robe beneath his white fur coat had been tugged open slightly. When he lifted his eyes, all he could see was the jet-black rainy night. The water droplets trickled down along the curve into his collar, drenching his clothes, and even himself. His caresses wrinkled Xiao Chiye's robe even as Xiao Chiye made him gasp for breath.

The rain poured even harder and noisier as Lang Tao Xue Jin ran blindly into the night. The path in front of them was already hidden in the long, dark night, and the horse was like the lone boat carrying a pair of lovers on a secret rendezvous.

Shen Zechuan closed his eyes while taking all of it, shivering while bathed in sweat and rainwater. Xiao Chiye did not say a word as the horse's hooves trod on mud. The path was so uneven and hard to navigate that a few ensuing bumps and jolts caused the sounds to escape from Shen Zechuan's throat.

Xiao Chiye was also sweating a little. Spurred on by the potent wine, he grasped Shen Zechuan amidst this frenzy of pleasure, making every rise and fall hit just the right spot. He was in even more high spirits after drinking wine, and he used his strength skillfully, making Shen Zechuan incapable of resisting and unable to escape.

"Does the friction feel good?" Seeing that Shen Zechuan wanted to lean away, Xiao Chiye clasped his hands and pulled him back in an embrace.

Pressed against him, Shen Zechuan said, "Mmm..."

Xiao Chiye said, "Next time, I'll grind the right spot."

Xiao Chiye stroked Shen Zechuan's earlobe and fastened an object. He pushed aside those drenched locks of hair and kissed it.

As Shen Zechuan raised his head, the jasper swayed with his movement. He dazedly touched the pendant. Several times, he opened his mouth to speak, but he was always disrupted by his gasps for breath. As he rode on the tidal waves of euphoria, he gazed at Xiao Chiye with a contradictory blend of understanding and incomprehension.

Xiao Chiye killed off the only remaining tenderness he had left.

It was really bad for the spring days to warm up again after a cold spell, for this was the season to have fun. Scoundrels all like having fun. As long as they were together, they could create a stir where there was none. The



suggestive look in their eyes when their gazes met and the tingle of numbness that sprang up their spines was so strong that they itched to tantalize the other into ripping apart his mask of decency. No one understood the debauchery taking place underneath their official robes.

As long as there was no one else, they would show their true colors.



#### Footnotes

1. *shaojiu*, also known as *baijiu* (白酒), is a spirit that is usually distilled from sorghum or maize. Also, the name of a famous Tang dynasty wine.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 76 : CASTING THE NET



The night rain had just stopped, but the sensual dampness between the beddings lingered.

The hot springs had been renovated anew; although it was small, it was completed. With his clothes draped over him, Xiao Chiye fed the horse and gyrfalcon. All that could be heard on Mount Feng at the third quarter of the hour of *mao*<sup>1</sup> was the sound of water dripping from the eaves. He soaked in the mountain breeze for a moment with the front of his clothes opened. The chill of early spring gradually calmed the stimulation and excitement that had lasted all night. He had sobered up, but his passion had become all the more thick and viscous, followed by a kind of post-indulgence relaxation and tenderness.

This was the pleasure of indulging in desire.

Xiao Chiye removed the saddle on Lang Tao Xue Jin's back and gestured to Meng. Meng promptly spread its wings and flew out of the eaves into the forest.

Xiao Chiye turned around to enter the room, where the heat and dampness had not receded. Shen Zechuan was sprawled over the pillow with the blanket over him. There was no way to tell if he was asleep or not. His half-exposed right ear was still wearing the earring. Xiao Chiye lowered his hand to take it off for him and, in passing, rubbed his ear that had gone red from being clasped by the earring.

Shen Zechuan let loose a sound. He had yet to fall into a sound sleep. He laid there for a moment, then slightly opened his eyes to look at Xiao Chiye and said in a hoarse voice, "... It's time we leave."

Xiao Chiye rolled over and lay down beside Shen Zechuan. He looked at him in the eye and said, "It's the day off today. It's still early."

Shen Zechuan uttered a sound of acknowledgment and said, "There is still work to be done in the imperial prison."

"A busy man." Xiao Chiye grasped his fingertips and pulled him towards himself. "In just one day, you rose to the position of Northern Judge, and you were also promoted to Vice Commander. The people you have to deal with now are all noble descendants of hereditary ranks. It's

going to be hard for you to manage them; there's bound to be someone who wants to trip you up with underhand means."

Shen Zechuan said, "It's not easy to be the Son of Heaven and the officials in his inner ministerial circle."

It was in this way Shen Zechuan lay, with the word 'satiated' written all over his expression. Both men looked at each other for a moment. Like the gentleness after a rainstorm, their kiss was both light and slow. In this humble thatched cottage, they wholeheartedly bared themselves to one another. It was as if in these few hours they left Qudu, they could cast aside all the so-called maturity and prudence to become young men of similar ages.

Xiao Chiye whispered, "This place is too small, with the view of the sky all blocked by vermilion walls, and the mountains and plains all surrounded by cities. Lang Tao Xue Jin can't run to its heart's content... When we return to Libei someday in the future, I'll take you galloping all over Hongyan Mountains."

Shen Zechuan pressed against his chest and asked, "Is the moon in Libei as round as the moon in Duanzhou?"

Xiao Chiye thought for a long while before he said, "I've already forgotten... Is the grass in Duanzhou as tall as the grass in Libei?"

Shen Zechuan also said, "I've already forgotten."

They suddenly burst out into laughter, dispelling that bit of melancholy. Shen Zechuan took in Xiao Chiye's scent as Xiao Chiye pressed his chin against the top of Shen Zechuan's head.

Xiao Chiye said, "Let's go together."

Shen Zechuan said, "Home?"

Xiao Chiye tightened his arms around Shen Zechuan and said, "Home... Let's ask Ji Gang-shifu to go together with us. Libei is so big; there will be plenty of places to stay."

Shen Zechuan laughed out loud and said with lowered eyes, "Shifu wants to return to Duanzhou. I'm afraid we won't be able to go together."

Xiao Chiye also lowered his eyes and said to him, "As long as we are out of Qudu, we will be able to go together, even to the ends of the earth."

Shen Zechuan met Xiao Chiye's gaze and said, "The wolf pup should be in Libei. Otherwise, it'd be a pity for it to become flabby due to a long period of inactivity."<sup>2</sup>

Xiao Chiye's eyes were calm and serene as he said, "Libei has my eldest brother, and the Libei Armored Cavalry has my father. Horse-racing is the only thing that suits me."

Shen Zechuan lifted Xiao Chiye's chin and gazed at him. He said, "Natural talents are bound to have their own uses; it's just that the time has yet to come. Ce'an, Ce'an—All of Libei's hope lies in these two words."

Xiao Chiye laughed in a deep voice and suddenly rolled over to pin Shen Zechuan down. Pressing his forehead against Shen Zechuan's forehead, he said, "Do you want me or not?"

Shen Zechuan's waist was sore, and his back was aching. As he recovered his strength and eased up his muscles, he squeezed the back of Xiao Chiye's neck and said in a husky voice, "Are you giving me or not?"

Xiao Chiye lowered his head to kiss him and pulled up the blanket over them.



After that rainy night, Qudu's weather took a turn for the hotter.

The Grand Secretariat demanded Pan Xiangjie's dismissal from his position of the Minister of Works, while the Chief Surveillance Bureau submitted more than ten memorials in a row to impeach Pan Xiangjie. Their daily contentions in the imperial court were so heated that it made Li Jianheng's ears ache.

Originally, Wei Huaigu and the major-league ministers from the other noble clans would stick together for mutual benefits; thus, they would not easily abandon anyone. For example, men like Fu LinYE were eventually demoted with a reduced salary and not exiled out of the capital. After the fall of Hua Siqian, Hai Liangyi took over the position of the Grand Secretary of the Grand Secretariat. Although he entrusted Xue Xiuzhuo, who was from a noble clan, with heavy responsibilities, he had also successively promoted several low-grade officials from humble backgrounds. Of them, Kong Qiu was the most conspicuous, and both sides pit against one another, overtly and covertly. However, what happened this time was a matter of grave importance. If Pan Xiangjie was not impeached, then Wei Huaigu would have to be impeached. Someone had to take the blame for the clogged official ditches. There was no way to find a scapegoat at all.

The way things were playing out, the Ministry of Revenue was obviously much more important than the Ministry of Works. To the noble

clans, the one who did manual labor could be cast aside, but the one who managed money must be retained. It was not just Pan Xiangjie who had to be dismissed and prosecuted. Even his eldest son of lawful birth, who was the Vice Minister of the Ministry of Revenue, had to be suspended from his post to await impeachment.

Li Jianheng no longer spoke up on the imperial court that easily. After adjourning the court, he called for Xiao Chiye, and both men wandered around the garden for some spring appreciation.

“I heard that you braved the rain to head out of the capital some days back.” Dressed in bright yellow regular wear, Li Jianheng picked some candied fruits from the table and shared half with Xiao Chiye. “For what purpose?”

“The military drill grounds are close to Mount Feng. I get worried each time it rains. It has only been a few days since the public ditches incident, so I rushed over that night to take a look.” Xiao Chiye smiled and replied, as if he did not notice that Li Jianheng had sent someone to keep an eye on him. “Your Majesty knows of that military drill grounds too. It cost the Imperial Army a lot of money. If it were to get damaged from the rain, those 20,000 men of mine would have to share and put up with the Eight Great Training Divisions.”

“If you bring the Imperial Army to the Eight Great Training Divisions’ military grounds, the Ministry of Revenue will promptly allocate the funds to you tomorrow.” Li Jianheng tossed the candied fruit into his mouth and said, “I’ve seen enough these days to understand that they are guarding against you. They are only too glad to be as far away from you as possible.”

Xiao Chiye said self-mockingly, “We are all attending to official duties. Where did they get that many ideas from?”

Li Jianheng recalled the last time Xiao Chiye was besieged and attacked on all sides by these people on the imperial court and promptly said, “They are full of evil tricks, and they are crafty to boot. Each one of them is such an eloquent speaker when it comes to handling matters, but in truth, they are all for the specific purpose of setting others up. They even dare to cajole me, what’s more, you? We have to punish this Pan Xiangjie this time. He did not do his job properly and almost caused me to die. And guess what? Last night, Commandery Princess Zhaoyue entered the palace to keep the Empress Dowager company. The Empress Dowager knew better

and said she would not interfere in state affairs. Only then did she manage to send her away. Tell me, how would a lady who's about to get married know about the insides and outs of these matters? Isn't it all because she was forced to by the Marquis of Helian? After all, both of their families are in-laws!"

Xiao Chiye followed Li Jianheng down the stairs and walked beneath those newly-sprouted branches. He said, "Has Your Majesty made up your mind to punish Pan Xiangjie severely?"

Li Jianheng said, "Of course. We mustn't let him off easily. There was a picture of the disaster victims from the low-lying area sandwiched inside the memorial Cen Yu submitted; they are really too pitiful. I'm the Emperor who lives in the imperial palace. Just like what the Secretariat Elder said, there are many matters I can only find out through word of mouth. Pan Xiangjie's negligence and tardiness in clearing up the clogged ditches caused so much harm to the others. I definitely have to punish him. The Secretariat Elder has the same intent too."

Having tasted the sweetness from dishing out rewards and having been praised by the imperial censors, he now wanted to single out Pan Xiangjie to make an example out of him.

"I happen to disagree with the Secretariat Elder." Xiao Chiye said out of the blue. "Pan Xiangjie deserves to be punished. But this man mustn't be too easily removed from office."

Li Jianheng turned his head back and said with a frown, "If we don't deal with him after he makes such a blunder, then are you going to keep him around for him to make another one?"

Xiao Chiye cast a glance at the clear sky overhead and remembered what Shen Zechuan had said. He suddenly laughed and said to Li Jianheng, "Of course Your Majesty has to deal with him. But if you dismiss him from his post, it'll be tantamount to cutting off his career path. Pan Xiangjie is currently advanced in age, and he has also made some contributions in his position of the Minister of the Ministry of Works. Your Majesty, the blockage of the public ditches this time caused a surge in slop, which has indeed flooded and damaged the streets. Yet the embankments of Kailing River remained solid and secured like a wall of iron. In previous years, when the localities were flooded, there were very few dams and embankments that could hold up. Clearly, Pan Xiangjie has put some thoughts into this and has not cut corners."

“But his negligence and oversight of the public ditches is a fact, too. There’s no reason to let him off easy just because of Kailing River.”

“Your Majesty.” Xiao Chiye said, “The court assembly this morning discussed the allocation of funds for the spring plow. The Ministry of Revenue has been wrestling with the localities over this, and this matter has been stuck at an impasse for half a month. If we wait any further, we will miss the time.”

“What has this got to do with not dismissing Pan Xiangjie?” Li Jianheng was not too pleased. “Even if we retain him, the Ministry of Revenue will not allocate the fund. Wei Huaigu’s subordinates are all very articulate. Even the Secretariat Elder can’t be bothered to waste his breath on them. Only the imperial censors from the Chief Surveillance Bureau can tie with them when it comes to rebuking and condemning others.”

“The Ministry of Revenue? The subordinates who are currently capable of attending official duties are all Wei Huaigu’s proteges, so naturally, they will act according to Wei Huaigu’s will. But Pan Xiangjie’s son, Pan Lin, also happens to hold the post of Vice Minister of the Ministry of Revenue. If Your Majesty can simply go through the motions in dealing with Pan Xiangjie this time, then their Pan Clan, graced with imperial favor, will surely remember Your Majesty’s kindness. By then, his son would be just like Your Majesty’s son. If Your Majesty has to deal with the Ministry of Revenue in the future, you’ll have your own man in the Ministry of Revenue who can speak up on your behalf. Furthermore, once Pan Xiangjie is dismissed and prosecuted, the Ministry of Works will have to nominate someone else to take up the ministerial post. The new person may not necessarily be more loyal than Pan Xiangjie.” Xiao Chiye paused here and let Li Jianheng think for himself.

Li Jianheng took a few steps and said hesitantly, “But if he’s not dismissed, there still has to be a punishment that can convince the masses.”

“Pan and Fei are related through marriage, while Fei and Xi are close to each other. What they don’t lack the most is money. Your Majesty can fine Pan Xiangjie and get him to cover all the expenses incurred during the dredging of the public ditches, then hand him the punishment of flogging.”

“Flogging?” Li Jianheng said in astonishment. “He’s so old; won’t he be beaten to death?!”

“How is he going to mend his ways and be grateful if you don’t let him have a taste of ‘death’?” Xiao Chiye smiled. “Let the imperial censors

rebuke him to their satisfaction. By the time Your Majesty summons him for an audience again, he will be deeply grateful even if Your Majesty tells him to bark like a dog in public, let alone cover the expenses.”

Delighted, Li Jianheng circled back and said to Xiao Chiye, “As usual, you’re the resourceful one!”

“Wei Huaigu is also the one who ran the audit of the expenditure this time. I fear he has, out of impure intentions, doctored the accounts. So it’s still better for Your Majesty to go over this case again and act with prudence.”

As expected, Li Jianheng looked to be put in a spot as he said, “This is a job for the Ministry of Revenue. Where would I have the man? The other ministries can’t interfere in this matter either.”

“Then find one of those in the Ministry of Revenue to do it. The official at the top can’t give a clear explanation, but the petty officials at the bottom are all honest men who actually carry out tasks for Your Majesty.” Xiao Chiye brushed aside a branch and seemed to think about it before he continued, “I met a competent official at Zhao Zui Temple this incident, He was the one who kept records of the accounts for the medicinal herbs which the Imperial Army had submitted earlier. Even the Secretariat Elder was full of praise for him. Your Majesty, how about letting him try?”

Overjoyed, Li Jianheng said, “If even the Secretariat Elder has praised him, then we can’t go wrong with him!”

Xiao Chiye said in a steady voice, “This man’s name is Liang Cuishan.”



Xi Hongxuan was taken into custody in the prison. He originally thought that with Li Jianheng to protect him and Xue Xiuzhuo to use his power to help him, he would be quickly released. Who would have known that he would be locked up for so many days? No one delivered messages to keep him updated either; thus, he guessed that something must have gone wrong somewhere in between.

When Shen Zechuan arrived at the prison, he had his authority token with him. He was someone who had a drink with Kong Qiu before, and he was a newly appointed official who rose to prominence the fastest. So Qiao Tianya only had to use a few catty of wine to talk the warden around.

When Xi Hongxuan saw Shen Zechuan, he hurriedly got up and asked through the bars, “How is it? Why has there been no news? Has Pan



Xiangjie been punished? If so, then it's time for me to be released!"

Although Shen Zechuan had his authority token hung, he was not wearing his official robe. He was dressed in a dark blue everyday wear with his collars tightly secured. His facial features were enveloped by the dim light when he entered, and the contrast of his clothes against the color of his skin made him look extremely white, with a hint of frostiness.

"You're still waiting for Pan Xiangjie to be prosecuted?" Shen Zechuan said, "There's been nothing about Pan Xiangjie these days."

"He's in charge of the Ministry of Works. How will they justify it if they don't punish him after there's such a big problem with the public ditches? Even His Majesty won't be able to justify it." Xi Hongxuan clenched and tightened his fists. "What went wrong in between?"

"To shirk responsibility and shift the blame, Wei Huaigu relentlessly latched on to Pan Xiangjie. But as you know too, things can backfire when it reaches its limits. Even a jade rabbit can bite humans when it's forced into a corner, let alone Pan Xiangjie? To mitigate their crime, the Pan Clan wants to cover the expenses this time. The porridge shack over at Zhao Zui Temple has yet to be dismantled, and the womenfolk of the Pan Clan has already gone over to give out porridge to the disaster victims. They put on a meticulous show and did a careful job of keeping up appearance while assuming the stance of eating humble pie, as if they were submitting themselves to physical and verbal abuses from the others. Like they say, not for the sake of the monk but for that of the Buddha.<sup>3</sup> So even the Secretariat Elder would have to take this into consideration and reconsider his punishment." Without a smile on his face, Shen Zechuan said, "There's no way the Ministry of Revenue's delays of the accounts can be covered up. For everyone's good, Wei Huaigu should also admit his mistakes and endure a scolding. Yet, he is simply too oblivious and doesn't know when to advance and retreat. Second Young Master, since Pan Xiangjie isn't dismissed and Wei Huaigu isn't punished, then they can only single you out this time and put you on the chopping board."

After a moment of silence, Xi Hongxuan said, "Wei Huaigu is too money-minded. The reason he's suppressing this matter and refusing to relent is because he's afraid that the Ministry of Revenue's disparity cannot be covered up after he admits his mistakes, and Hai Liangyi would then have him in his grasp. Going by his temperament, if he can't kick out Pan Xiangjie to take the blame for him, then he will force me to fish out the

money. No matter what, he won't let himself suffer. Fuck it, that wily old fox!"

When they were all bashing Xiao Chiye together, they all wanted to ride on the Eight Great Training Divisions' coattails and have a share in the benefits reaped from the Eight Great Training Divisions. But now, Xiao Chiye had not even been knocked out, and they were fighting among themselves. Xi Hongxuan felt indignant. He had previously spent quite a sum of money on the matter concerning Xi Gu'an. The good thing was that their family's salt mines were not confiscated and sealed off, so they were still raking in money. In any case, the imperial court had no idea about the Xi Clan's private accounts. But it was different when Wei Huaigu wanted money. The Eight Great Clans knew best what the Eight Great Clans were like. The Xi Clan sold salt and headed out to sea, and they even kept and maintained a large batch of ships at Yongquan Harbor—these were stuff the Eight Great Clans knew all too well.

"Spending money to ward off calamities." Shen Zechuan said gravely and earnestly, "With yourself behind bars now, you have to choose a man you can trust to handle this matter for you on the outside. You are transferring money within private accounts. If the Wei Clan wants some ten thousand taels, then just the transportation alone would be a big problem. There has to be someone who can organize it all for you. Furthermore, this matter is of utmost urgency, so have it done as quickly as possible."

"Look for Yanqing" Xi Hongxuan blurted out. Having done so, he hesitated again.

Xue Xiuzhuo knew the ins and outs of the Xi Clan, and it was hard to say if he might get some other ideas during the process. The Xi Clan's accumulated mountain of gold and silver was something the previous few generations risked their lives to hoard, and they had countless successions of connected shops and businesses in Juexi and Hezhou. Xi Hongxuan could afford the money, but there was no one he could really entrust it with. With Xi Gu'an dead, the few Xi Clan concubines were really going at it with their abacuses. Perhaps even before he, Xi Hongxuan, died in prison, he would end up dying by his own family members' hands.

Xi Hongxuan suddenly said, "Lanzhou, you've been promoted to Vice Commander, and you also manage the imperial prison. You have the special rights to enter and exit Qudu to handle cases. It's too inconvenient for Yanqing, with him currently being in the Court of Judicial Review and all.

I'm afraid he will be too conspicuous and end up being investigated by the others. How about you handle this matter instead?"

Shen Zechuan was rather surprised and said, "I've neither managed accounts nor dealt with Wei Huaigu before, and I'm not familiar with your businesses on the outside too. So how would I be able to handle this well?"

Unfamiliarity was exactly what he wanted!

Xi Hongxuan said, "There are managers appointed by me over at the salterns. They are quick and efficient, so you don't need to worry about the money. It's just that transportation would prove to be particularly troublesome if the sum is too large. Tens of thousands of money worth would pile up into mountains when loaded onto the carts. You can't go the water route. All my family's routes are sea-based. Head inward to the north, and the Hua Clan of Dicheng has the final say, while the Yan Clan of Hezhou calls the shots in the south. So you can only take the overland route, which would require you to traverse the thirteen cities of Juexi...

Motherfucker! I don't believe this much money can't bury that Wei Huaigu to death alive! In any case, you don't need to fear anything else while passing through Juexi, but you must be on guard against Jiang Qingshan. This man is a tough one. If he catches us red-handed, I'll be skinned!"

Shen Zechuan was in no hurry to agree. He said, "This is an important issue. You should have a word with Xue Xiuzhuo and let him know."

"No." Xi Hongxuan considered it carefully. "Yanqing is not a person who can handle this kind of matter. It'd work to the contrary if he were to intervene again. You only need to tell him to continue to think of a way to plead for mercy on my behalf on the imperial court. His Majesty's momentary hesitation is no big deal, but when I get out this time, Wei Huaigu will be the first one I'll kill!"

After he said that, he smiled at Shen Zechuan.

"There's no need for you to panic. I know you have never conducted a business transaction before. I left a bookkeeper in my Qudu residence. His name is Xi Dan, an old hand in my employ. Let him accompany you... I'll naturally have my own plans once I see him."

Xi Hongxuan was quick-thinking. He did not dare to trust Shen Zechuan just yet. He remembered how Ji Lei had been played to death, so he held back and insisted on seeing his own man before he would take out his money. The Xi Clan's keys were in a place only he knew of. Without the key, all the Xi Clan's money vaults could not be opened.

“Give it a few days.” Shen Zechuan said softly, “I’ll bring him to see you.”



Many thanks to Alex for the advice! ♥

#### Footnotes

1. 卯时 Time in those days was divided into two hours blocks. The hour of Mao is around 5-7am
2. 髀肉复生 literally thighs become flabby from inactivity, i.e., to be out of action for a long time with one’s aspirations unrealized.
3. 不看僧面看佛面 to do something for someone out of reverence or consideration for someone else of greater importance

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 77 : DISPUTE



Pan Xiangjie was suspended from his post as he awaited impeachment. Having also received a flogging, he sighed and moaned as he lay on his stomach back at home to nurse his injuries. His son, Pan Lin, was also implicated and had to endure the rebukes of the imperial censors every day during court sessions. A few days later, he was also suspended from his post to be detained and confined at home.

Xiao Chiye, having received a raise in rank, organized a banquet and specifically invited the Marquis of Helian. The Marquis of Helian was too embarrassed to appear before Xiao Chiye because of the matchmaking attempt for Commandery Princess Zhaoyue the last time.<sup>1</sup> He was also worried that this tyrant would be so proud of his success that he would humiliate him and make things hard for him before the others. So, after thinking it through, he got his son to attend the banquet on his behalf.

Marquis Junior was called Fei Shi. He was also a well-known figure on Donglong Street. He had once gone drinking with Xiao Chiye in the past, but none of them lesser-tyrants were as domineering as mega-tyrant Xiao Chiye. What's more, he feared the Xiao Clan, so he no longer went out for entertainment with Xiao Chiye and would make a big detour whenever he saw Xiao Chiye and Li Jianheng. Now that he had to attend Xiao Chiye's banquet, he first wilted by half, then changed direction and headed to the Pan's Residence to ask Pan Lin to go together with him.

"Go with me. We'll treat it as relieving our boredom!" Fei Shi held up his robe and urged him on. "The banquet this time is on Kailing River. There'll be many people there."

Pan Lin's son was just a month old. He teased the baby for a moment before saying, "Not going. I've been feeling vexed these few days."

"What fun is there in playing with a baby?" Fei Shi squeezed in to intercept the nanny and said, "I can't skip it this time. My father has specifically made his instructions clear. Go have some fun and make friends with him. I heard that he is friends with the Left Censor-in-chief of the Chief Surveillance Bureau, Cen Yu. If he steps forth and intercedes for you, then you wouldn't have to endure as many rebukes."

"Seriously." Pan Lin tossed aside the handkerchief. "Cen Xunyi's the one who's the most brutal in reprimanding me! Xiao the Second only

advanced in rank this time owing to his friendship with His Majesty. Just how much can he convince Cen Yu? I'm not going. I don't want to embarrass myself!"

"Look at you. How are you this inflexible?!" Fei Shi was truly racking his brains to coax him out of the door. "He has a prior friendship with His Majesty. If he can put in a few good words for the Pan Clan before His Majesty, would you still need to be aggrieved to such an extent? Come on, let's go. I had a drink with him before. I'll introduce you!"

Unable to dissuade Fei Shi, Pan Lin was dragged out of the house and onto the horse carriage, which headed right for Kailing River.



With Xiao Chiye hosting a banquet this night, all the gaily-painted pleasure boats on Kailing River were full. He was now famous, and all the brothels and taverns along the riverbanks benefited from association, having gotten a piece of the action. Money was being splashed around on the outside like water. He did not even have to open his mouth; flocking all around him were people trying every means to give him money.

But there's no such thing as a free lunch in the world.<sup>2</sup> If he accepted their money, he would have to do them favors. If he did not do it today, then there would be plenty of pretexts for them to get him to do it in the future. Xiao Chiye knew this all too well, so he did not accept a single coin. This was such a grand occasion, and he paid for it all out of his own pocket.

Chen Yang flicked away noisily at the abacus in the back behind the scene. The more he computed, the slower he became. Eventually, he simply tossed away the abacus and said to Ding Tao and Gu Jin, "The palace has rewarded us with so many fields and mansions. Let's sort them out and find an auspicious day to sell them all."

Xiao Chiye just happened to come out after changing his robe. He cut an imposing sight, all decked in a gold crown, brocade robe, and black clouds boots. On hearing Chen Yang, his countenance changed. He felt his way to his belt and said, "... I'm that poor?"

"We have too many expenses at the start of spring. The villages on the outside are self-sufficient enough to bring in some money. But many residences in Qudu are bestowed upon us by the palace. We can't rent them out, and we still have to arrange for someone to clean them daily. Our Prince Residence and Plum Blossom Residence are permanent residences,

and there are at least three hundred people or so who serve in both. The monthly salaries, monetary rewards, and..."

Xiao Chiye said, "And Ding Tao's candy allowance. You have to eat an entire frontier reconnaissance squad's worth of rations each year, right? We've spoiled you too much."

Grabbing his little notebook, Ding Tao did not dare to make noise and merely mumbled, "The Princess Consort gave special permission for this when I was back at home..."

"You've grown up." Xiao Chiye said callously. "You don't need to eat candies anymore. They are bad for your teeth."

"I'll temporarily hold off on the calculation of the expenses tonight." Chen Yang held on to the table, feeling a little dizzy. He said, "I'll do it tomorrow morning."

"When it comes to dealing with matters." Gu Jin said succinctly. "A man's got to be liberal with his money!"

"Do a proper audit of the accounts for those residences on the outside. I hardly go there even in a few hundred years, and *dage* is too busy to manage them on his end too. When those subordinates go free and unchecked for too long, they would even dare to hoodwink others." Xiao Chiye strode a long step out, then retreated back and said, "Calculate it now! It won't be more than a few thousand taels. There's someone... managing this account."

Gu Jin watched him step out of the door and asked, "Who? Who in our residence can manage how our Second Young Master spends his money?"

Chen Yang carried the abacus back and flicked through it for a moment before giving an equivocally worded reply.

Ding Tao rubbed his boots against each other and stretched out his head to whisper, "I know who it is."



Not many officials were invited to this banquet. Court officials of fourth-grade and above were all subjected to censure from the Chief Surveillance Bureau had they gathered for private feasts. Xiao Chiye was also the Viceroy of the Imperial Army, so he could not invite any of the few important military officials who worked with him on the patrols. The feast Cen Yu held the last time was also a private feast. He first presented a memo to the Grand Secretariat, and it was only when Hai Liangyi gave his nod that he invited the guests. This was how it ought to be. Kong Qiu,

having gotten inebriated that feast, ended up getting censured and had to sit through a lecture from Hai Liangyi.

The censors of the Chief Surveillance Bureau were the imperial censors, just as described. They could rebuke the emperor at the top and denounce the various officials at the bottom. Even Hai Liangyi himself would receive a censure if he were slightly negligent. For example, during the public ditches incident this time, Hai Liangyi just so happened to hold the posts of the Grand Secretariat's Deputy Grand Secretary and Grand Secretary in successive order, so he would have to bear the blame had a problem cropped up. In the beginning, when Li Jianheng had just ascended to the throne, he found the dragon throne in Mingli Hall so hard that his buttocks ached if he sat on it for too long. Thus, he griped about it to those in close attendance. Not a few days later, he received a roundabout rebuke from the imperial censors. To this date, he never dared to bring up the matter of padding it with a thick cushion.

Xiao Chiye could not invite the "authorities in power", but he could invite the "nobles", or more specifically, the "distinguished nobles". As long as it was a person of a hereditary noble rank, he invited them all. Most of these rich young masters with noble titles but no real power had someone in their family to back them, so they could have fun all they want with a peace of mind. One example was Fei Shi. His father was still alive and in good health, and his elder sister was about to marry a man from the Han Clan, so he did not have to worry about his daily essentials like meals and clothing. He was not a good student either, barely learning anything; all he did the whole day was to loaf around.

The moment Fei Shi stepped off the sedan, he dragged Pan Lin over to meet Xiao Chiye.

"Your Lordship, congratulations!"

Xie Chiye laughed and said, "I'm glad Your Little Lordship is willing to honor me with your presence today. Please drink all the wine you want tonight."

Seeing how approachable he was, Fei Shi could not help but relax. He said, "Your Lordship is generous. I shall not leave sober tonight!"

Xiao Chiye looked at Pan Lin and said, "Vice Minister Pan, please drink to your heart's content too. Is His Excellency Pan getting better these days?"



Hearing his usual tone, Pan Lin, whose heart had been in his mouth, relaxed a little. He returned the greeting and said, “Thank you for Your Lordship’s consideration. My father’s health is fine. It’s just that he feels ashamed in the face of His Majesty’s graciousness and has been facing the wall to self-reflect on the errors of his ways these days.”

Xiao Chiye seemed to sigh with emotion as he said, “His Excellency Pan is a veteran minister of three reigns. He acts with prudence and is conscientious in his handling of state affairs. It’s truly a pity for him to meet with such an unexpected misfortune.”

Pan Lin had been suffering setbacks day after day. He had pleaded with a great number of people to intercede on their behalf and have their sentences reduced. Other than the Fei Clan, who still had the heart to help them out of their difficulty, the others all came up with every kind of excuse to turn him away. He was born a *di* – a legitimate descendant – of a noble clan, and his career had been pretty much smooth sailing. It was only now he had a taste of the world and found out just how fickle and hypocritical society<sup>3</sup> was. Thus, he was greatly surprised and touched by Xiao Chiye’s words.

“My father...” Pan Lin felt emotional, but knowing the etiquette, he forced a smile and said, “Forget it. I’m here tonight to congratulate and celebrate Your Lordship’s great happiness, so let’s not mention anything else. Your Lordship, congratulations!”

“I’m just blessed to have His Majesty shower kindness and favor upon me. All I did was to carry out the task of rolling and crawling around in the mud. I can’t be compared to the Vice Minister and His Excellency Pan, who worry about the state all day long. Chen Yang.” Xiao Chiye turned aside. “Invite His Little Lordship and Vice Minister Pan onto the boat and serve them well.”

Chen Yang bowed and respectfully led them both inside. One side of the ship’s interior was draped with hanging sheer fabric, and the sound of pipa flowed into the night. The seats were arranged according to levels of superiority. Chen Yang led them both to the seats of honor. Seated at this table were all descendants from the noble clans.

Pan Lin saw a few acquaintances, but he did not greet them. Seeing the unfriendly atmosphere, Fei Shi hurriedly got up to mediate. He said, “Isn’t this Eldest Young Master Xue? What a truly rare sight!”

Xue Xiuyi was Xue Xiuzhuo's elder brother of lawful birth. But this person had neither talents nor brains and relied solely on his birth to trample over Xue Xiuzhuo for many years.<sup>4</sup> He was an ambitious man, and now, after seeing the Pan Clan on the decline, he was starting to give Pan Lin the cold shoulder.

Xue Xiuzhuo drank his wine and merely said, "Hmph. And how is the Little Lordship doing?"

Fei Shi jabbed his fan and said, "Me? Not too bad. What has the Eldest Young Master been doing lately? Come out for some fun!"

Looking haughty, Xue Xiuyi said, "I'm busy. Been studying some books that are the only copy extant from the previous reign."

Fei Shi smiled and said, "My, my. The Eldest Young Master is a man of great talent. So why do you have time today?"

All this while, Xue Xiuyi had his side to them, as unwilling as he was to look Pan Lin in the eye. He said, "I heard Yao Wenyu has returned to the capital. I thought I should be able to see him here tonight, so I came. There are some issues I need to talk to him about."

Pan Lin had been tolerating him for a long time. Seeing this attitude of his, he promptly sneered and said, "Not necessarily so. The queue of people who want to pick Yuanzhuo's brain stretches all the way to Hongyan Mountain in accordance with their learning and accomplishments. It's pointless even if the Eldest Young Master hangs around here waiting; it's still far from your turn!"

What Xue Xiuyi hated the most was the others making a dig at him for his lack of talents and shallow knowledge. He promptly set down the wine cup and said in a frosty voice, "Fine. I'm not worthy. But I still have a little self-awareness of my own limitations. I know my own worth. I know whether or not I'm deserving of sitting in this position!"

At his double-edged remark, Pan Lin abruptly rose to his feet.

Xue Xiuyi had a mean mouth, and he sneered when he saw Pan Lin go red in the face. Instead of being enraged, he chose some scathing remarks to throw out, "Come on, Chengzhi, take a seat. Why? Are there nails on this chair? Everyone on this boat is looking at you. You are basking in glory tonight—Your Pan Clan has indeed been impressive lately, even more so than the time you had a son!"

Pan Lin's first wife had previously died of illness, and there were a few times his concubines got pregnant only to suffer miscarriages. Seeing that

he was already over thirty years of age and was still without a son, Old Madam Pan went vegetarian and prayed to Buddha while also seeking all over for prescriptions. In order for him to beget a son,<sup>5</sup> she stuffed batch after batch of women into his room, causing such a hoo-ha that everyone knew about it and mocked Pan Lin behind his back for having an unmentionable affliction.

Rage overwhelmed Pan Lin. He trembled and pointed at Xue Xiuyi, so furious was he that he gasped for breath and sputtered, “You, you... and what the hell do you think you are?! You let the common son beneath you take charge and manage the household affairs. You’re simply, simply... as dumb as a boorish boar!”

Xue Xiuyi slapped the table and rose to retort, “You shut up! You are a disgrace to the educated class! You know dogshit!”

Pan Lin countered, “You’re even worse than a beast!”

Sandwiched in the middle, Fei Shi held on to his teacup as he was splattered with a faceful of spittle. He closed his eyes and yelled, “What the heck?! Eldest Young Master, Chengzhi, stop quarreling! Why ruin a good banquet—”

Xue Xiuyi said, “Don’t put me in the same category as him. He’s not worthy. He doesn’t even deserve to carry my shoes!”

Pan Lin looked to his left and right, then picked up the teacup and smashed it. This entire table was thrown into chaos. Fei Shi could not stop them. Both of them showed utterly no regard for their dignity as they tangled and fought with one another.

Xue Xiuyi stayed at home all year round. He was small-sized and thin, and he was not skilled at fistfights and kickboxing. Subsequently, he was shoved to the ground by Pan Lin and ended up banging his waist hard. He repeatedly wailed, “Owow... To think you dare to hit me, you!”

Pan Lin had nothing left to smash, so he took off his shoe and swung it to swat it right at his face, saying, “I’m teaching you a lesson on behalf of Old Master Xue! The hell you think you are. Your foul mouth ought to be slapped!”

There was an uproar all around. Fei Shi dodged that shoe and said urgently, “Stop fighting! Quick, stop it! Men, men!”

Xiao Chiye lifted the curtain and entered, his expression growing grave. Chen Yang led the guards forth to stop them and pulled both men apart.

Xue Xiuyi had been smacked until there were red marks on his face. He covered his face and stretched out his leg, wanting to kick Pan Lin. With his neck craned, he spat out hatefully, “We aren’t done yet. This is not over!”

Pan Lin was truly a sorry sight to behold. He had come to his senses now; he never expected to make a clown of himself in public. Avoiding all the eyes on him and enduring his misery, he said resolutely, “Even if I, Pan Chengzhi, were to starve to death in the future, I’ll never sit at the same table as you, Xue Xiuyi! And even if our Pan Clan of Dancheng were to die out, I’ll never beg your Xue Clan for help!”

With that, Pan Lin tossed the shoe to the floor. He raised his head, but did not look at anyone, and merely cupped his hands before his chest to Xiao Chiye.

“I, Pan Chengzhi, will compensate Your Lordship for spoiling Your Lordship’s fun! And I, Pan Chengzhi, will also pay you back double for all the things I’ve smashed tonight! Not only that, I, Pan Chengzhi, will even book this entire Kailing River for Your Lordship to have fun! Your Lordship, I shall take my leave! I’ll come calling on you another day to offer my apologies!”

He kicked off his other shoe too. And just like that, he stepped over the mess on the ground in his clean socks and pushed Fei Shi aside to make his way out.

“Your Excellency, please wait.” Xiao Chiye said in an unhurried tone. “Chen Yang, take the Vice Minister to have a change of clothes first.”

Fei Shi hurriedly said, “Right, right, Chengzhi! Let’s get your clothes changed first!”

When all was said and done, Pan Lin was, after all, a noble clan young master. What’s more, he was an authorized official of the imperial court. He had to speak tough, but if he really had to walk on the streets in this state, it would have been better to kill him. So, with Chen Yang and Fei Shi urging him on, he relented and went with them.

“Eldest Young Master.” Xiao Chiye lifted a finger to beckon Gu Jin over. He motioned, “After you, too.”



**Special Thanks to:** [Eggy](#), [Yunyun](#), [Lin](#)

Footnotes

1. To recap, Marquis of Helian's daughter is Commandery Princess Zhaoyue. The Empress Dowager once tried to matchmake her and Xiao Chiye in chapter 46.
2. The full proverb is 吃人嘴软, 拿人手短 Literally, "The mouth that eats the meals of others is softened; the hand that takes the gifts of others is shortened." When someone gives another person something out of the blue (e.g., a gift or a meal), they usually have something to ask. And since the person has taken their gifts, it'd be harder to turn them down, so they (usually) end up doing them the favor. The closest modern adage to explain this is "there is no such thing as a free lunch", that is, there is nothing people will let you take or eat (or drink) for free.
3. 世态炎凉 the fickleness and hypocrisy of society, i.e., people are nice to you or not depending on your success and position.
4. Children in those days were classified according to whether they were a child born to the principal wife or concubines. A lawful son was born by the legal wife (this was the wife who has been officially married into the family, also known as the principal wife). Being the eldest of the legal wife made him the legitimate heir. They also had higher social status and often received better treatment compared to the other common sons born by concubines. It's recommended to keep this in mind, as this will be a recurring theme in the novel.
5. Sons were valued more than daughters in those days, especially to carry on the family line. Those who did not have a son (thus ending the family line with them) were deemed unfilial, and filial piety was a big thing in those days.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 78 : INDIVIDUAL SERVINGS



Pan Lin was in a depressed state of mind as he sat on the couch near the window after he had a change of clothes. Feeling guilty, Fei Shi sat before him and made to speak, only to have the words die on his lips.

“You don’t have to say a word.” Pan Lin looked out of the window at the old but brilliantly-lit brothel courtyard. “It’s just my bad luck to come across a lowlife like him.”

Fei Shi said, “You know he’s a lowlife who has an extremely narrow mind. Then why get angry with someone like him? Chengzhi, it’s not worth it.”

Pan Lin let out a self-mocking laugh and said, “Has our Pan Clan fallen into such a sorry state? I can give up my moral integrity had it been for the sake of a meal. But I’d rather die than to let him mock me like this.”

Seeing how sorrowful he looked, Fei Shi knew that the social snubbing these days had really hurt him. Although Fei Shi was a loafer, he was pretty much a person who took it easy. He comforted, “As long as the green hills remain, one need not fear a lack of firewood to burn—Where there’s life, there’s hope. His Majesty has not even issued the edict yet! Chengzhi, didn’t His Lordship say so? His Excellency Pan is a veteran minister of three reigns. He’d still carry some weight in His Majesty’s heart.”

On the other side, Gu Jin lifted the curtain, and Xiao Chiye bent over to enter. Fei Shi and Pan Lin stood up together to pay their obeisances to him.

Xiao Chiye raised his hand and said, “Gentlemen, there’s no need to stand on ceremony. Your Excellency Pan, please take a seat.”

Pan Lin took his seat and said to Xiao Chiye, “Not only have I ruined Your Lordship’s fun tonight, but I’ve also held Your Lordship up from enjoying the wine. I deserve a beating.”

Xiao Chiye did not really mind. As he sat, Gu Jin served him tea. He took a few sips and said, “I’ve long heard of Your Excellency’s talents, but I have never had the chance to strike up a conversation. It could be said to be fate and luck that brought us here tonight.”

On hearing this, Fei Shi smiled and threw Pan Lin a signal with his eyes.

Pan Lin hurriedly bowed. Xiao Chiye motioned for him to take a seat again and said, "I was the one who carried out the task of dredging up the public ditches, so I know very well how it feels. The public ditches on Donglong Street were old to begin with, having been haphazardly dug before His Excellency Pan took up the post of Minister of Works. There are too many points in this matter that don't make sense. If you ask me, the blame for the rise in water level this time shouldn't be pinned on His Excellency Pan."

A surge of warmth welled up in Pan Lin's heart. He said, "A few years ago, my father specifically asked someone to draw up a blueprint. But the Zhongbo troops just happened to suffer a defeat back then, and the state treasury lacked money. The Ministry of Revenue refused to allocate the funds, so this matter was passed over. Who would have known... sigh!"

"To think there's still such a thing." Xiao Chiye covered the teacup with the tea lid. "But Wei Huaigu didn't mention a word about this before the emperor. Aren't both your families on good terms with one another?"

Pan Lin said nothing, and Fei Shi hastened to say, "Your Lordship, why is that Wei Huaigu is going all out to curry favors? It's all for the sake of being a top-league official. He endured for all these years, finally becoming qualified enough and just in time for the inspection this year. He's waiting for the evaluation to be submitted so that he can be promoted to Deputy Secretary; this is so he can stand up to Secretariat Elder Hai as equals on the imperial court in the future. No one expected the public ditches to end up clogged at this juncture. Of course, he has to think of ways to disassociate himself from it. He's not the slightest bit willing to shoulder the responsibility for this at all."

"I didn't expect him to be such a person." Xiao Chiye looked slightly surprised. "Having seen how the Ministry of Revenue's accounts these years have been clear without any glaring errors, I initially thought that it should be Wei Huaigu's turn for a promotion this year. But who would have known that he would turn out to be such a vile person who seeks personal gains this shamelessly? What happened to His Excellency Pan is truly unfortunate."

Hearing the hint of appreciation in his words, Fei Shi could not resist plucking up the courage to say, "Everyone has been pretty much closemouthed about the information lately. Your Lordship, Chengzhi and I had asked quite a number of people, and we still don't know what

punishment His Majesty has conveyed to the Ministry of Justice. If His Excellency were to be sentenced... would he be assigned out of Qudu?"

With his heart in his mouth, Pan Lin looked at Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye sat tight in the chair and twiddled with his thumb ring. Only when he had them on the edges of their seats that he said, "It's hard to say. His Majesty seems to me to be hesitating too."

Fei Shi promptly said, "As long as the imperial edict has not been issued, there's still a chance to turn things around. Your Lordship is truly an official in the Son of Heaven's inner ministerial circle now! I hope Your Lordship can put in a few good words to His Majesty regarding this issue."

"I won't put in a good word for His Excellency Pan." Seeing both men's expressions change, Xiao Chiye continued unhurriedly, "I'll only speak the truth. His Excellency is talented and has made contributions to the state. Even if he has made some minor mistakes, it does not merit execution or banishment. I'll speak to His Majesty again when I enter the palace tomorrow. If all goes well, the pardon should arrive at your residences within four days."

Pan Lin was so delighted that his eyes reddened when he stood up. He did not dare to overstep his boundary and touch Xiao Chiye, so he could only grasp his own sleeves and fall to his knees hard as though he was transplanting rice seedlings and said, "Many thanks... many thanks to Your Lordship for saving our lives!"

"Gu Jin, quick, help the Vice Minister up." Xiao Chiye said with a smile, "This is what I should do. There's no need for Your Excellency to take it to heart. When you return today, tell His Excellency Pan to rest well. There are plenty of state and governmental affairs where His Excellency is still needed in the future."

Fei Shi, who was frank and outspoken, said, "If there is anything we can do for Your Lordship in the future, please just say the word! Chengzhi, let's go. We have to head back and tell His Excellency the good news!"

Pan Lin thanked him again and said to Xiao Chiye with sincerity, "Please let me know if I can be of help to Your Lordship in the future! Libei is too far; I'm afraid I can't help you there. But as long as it's in Qudu, I, Pan Chengzhi, will definitely do my utmost as long as Your Lordship gives the word!"

Xiao Chiye said, "There's no need to act like a stranger. However, you mentioned earlier that His Excellency Pan had found someone to draw up a



blueprint for the public ditches of Qudu. I also happen to be worrying about the repairs for the public ditches. So could I trouble you to ask His Excellency Pan if he could lend me the blueprint for a look?”

Pan Lin said, “There’s no need to ask. I’ll send someone to deliver it right to Your Lordship’s residence once I return home.”

Xiao Chiye comforted him some more, then watched as Gu Jin sent them off the boat. He listened to the reed pipes music from the pleasure boat for a moment before turning back to say to Ding Tao, “Eat what you like. Tell the cook to go ahead and dish it up. Once you’re done eating, prepare some sweet and spicy dishes, then get the cook to grill some fishes carefully and have it delivered to your Young Master Shen. Don’t alert anyone else.”

With his notebook in his bag, Ding Tao ran off. Chen Yang came up from behind and said to Xiao Chiye in a hushed tone, “Master, Xue Xiuyi isn’t going to stay for long inside; he’s still waiting to see Yao Wenyu. Are we going over?”

“Yes. Of course, we are going over.” Xiao Chiye looked back with icy cold eyes, “Xue Xiuzhuo planted a time-bomb for me in the Quancheng silk matter. I have to give him a big gift in return. Tell the attendants to serve a few more pots of excellent wine. This Xue Xiuyi is of great use to us.”



The prison, which fell under the charge of Kong Qiu, was strictly monitored, so Xi Hongxuan could not send out any information. It was as if he was cut off from the world. The more he waited, the more anxious he became. After waking up one night, he found himself detained in isolation, having been swapped over to a windowless room.

“Why is there a sudden change in place?” Because Xi Hongxuan was obese, he could not squat down as freely as he would like. All he could do was to bend over slightly and call out through the gap to the warden who was delivering his food, “Bro! Sir! At least tell me something.”

That warden paid no attention to his words and opened the flap to push the rancid rice and leftover soup in. Then he picked up the tray and left.

“Ay, buddy, please hold it!” Xi Hongxuan raised his voice. “I still have some silver in my pocket. Looking at how hard you’ve been working these few days, why not take it to buy some wine? Consider it my show of respect<sup>1</sup> to you!”

The warden turned back and spat a mouthful of saliva at him.

Snubbed, Xi Hongxuan sat on the straw mat in a daze without even taking his meal. He could not even sleep well these few days he had been waiting. He thought it over from different angles, but he did not where it had all gone wrong. The more time lapsed, the more uncertain he felt. This taste of being subjected to the whims of another was simply too hard to take.

This room was damp, with no ducts for ventilation and no windows to let in light. Xi Hongxuan would usually find it tough to sleep even on bamboo mats, and now, it was even more of a torture for him. Eczema had broken out on his back again, and he could not reach it even if he wanted to scratch.

Later, Xi Hongxuan heard a movement at the entrance. The door creaked open, and Shen Zechuan strode in. Behind him, Qiao Tianya, who was disguised as a stoic-faced youth, lit the lamp.

Xi Hongxuan struggled to move his legs and said, "What's going on? Why am I locked up here? Is this Kong Qiu's idea? I've never heard of there being such a room in prison!"

"You are not a long-staying convict of the prison, so it's only right that you don't know about this place." Shen Zechuan pulled off his cloak and handed it to Qiao Tianya, then said to Xi Hongxuan, "The food here is not fit for human consumption. I've specially prepared some dishes. Eat some, and we'll talk."

With the cloak hanging over one of his hands, Qiao Tianya opened up the food box with his other hand and served up the delicacies they had bought earlier on the way here.

Xi Hongxuan sat on the straw mat and watched Qiao Tianya's movements in silence when he suddenly let out a laugh. His expression quickly cooled off, and he said, "This looks like a farewell dinner."

"This case doesn't merit a death sentence, so why scare yourself?" Shen Zechuan sat down on the bench that Qiao Tianya had dusted clean. When he noticed that Xi Hongxuan had not moved his chopsticks, he got Qiao Tianya to take out another pair of chopsticks. Then, he picked a few dishes to eat before sampling a mouthful of wine.

It was only then Xi Hongxuan moved his chopsticks.

Shen Zechuan set down the chopsticks and looked at him. He said with a smile, "We are brothers. Do you have to be so tightly guarded against me?"

Xi Hongxuan picked out the steamed twisted roll and gobbled them down. It was only after his hunger subsided that he said, "Times are special. If you were in my shoe, won't you act the same way? How did that matter go? Have you seen Xi Dan?"

Shen Zechuan finished up the wine in his cup and nodded to Qiao Tianya. Qiao Tianya opened the door and led the man in.

"Second Young Master!" Xi Dan pounced in. When he saw Xi Hongxuan, he lowered his head and wept, "You have suffered!"

Steadying his hand, Xi Hongxuan drank up the last drop of wine and said, "Get up! Don't make a fool of yourself! It's not the time for me to meet my maker yet!"

Wiping his face, Xi Dan said, "During these few days when the Second Young Master was not at home, I've already informed the shopkeepers of the various areas to manage their accounts carefully. I wouldn't dare to let them mess up. But you're the pillar of the clan. We still need you to take charge of the affairs personally."

Xi Hongxuan ate his dishes in silence. After a long while, he said, "Tell me the situation out there."

Xi Dan replied, "His Majesty wants to pursue responsibility for the matter, and both the Ministry of Revenue and the Ministry of Works do not want to shoulder the blame. At present, Pan Xiangjie has already been suspended, and he has already received a flogging. Seeing as the situation did not bode well, I went to plead with His Excellency Xue, but he was too busy with his official duties that I did not manage to get to see him at all!"

"Yanqing did not see you?" Xi Hongxuan suddenly threw his chopsticks away and looked at Xi Dan with slightly narrowed eyes. "Are you telling the truth?"

On seeing his disbelief, Xi Dan hurriedly said, "Second Young Master, how can this be falsified? All you have to do is to ask when you are released to find out the truth, isn't it? How do I dare to hoodwink you when it comes to such matters?! Doesn't this coincide with His Majesty's issuance of general amnesty? The Court of Judicial Review is going to coordinate with the Ministry of Justice to leaf through all the past old cases. His Excellency Xue has to go through the files with Kong Qiu and the others. I don't dare to block his sedan chair either, and that's why I never got a chance to meet him."

It was only when Xi Dan explained it in this way that Xi Hongxuan more or less believed him. He said, "What rotten luck to be framed at this kind of timing... Lanzhou, exactly who instigated His Majesty to leave the palace? Is there still no update from the palace regarding this matter?"

"There are only so many people around His Majesty, so just throw out a guess." Shen Zechuan said. "But it's obvious His Majesty is reluctant to investigate. He's clearly of the mind to protect the other party."

"Mu Ru is the only one who can make His Majesty protect her to such an extent." Xi Hongxuan clenched his fists. "Bitch is ruthless. There must be a reason for her to do so. You have to be careful... She'd better not be pregnant with an imperial heir and eyeing the throne to rule behind the screen!"<sup>2</sup>

"Since she is in Xue Xiuzhuo's camp, I doubt she will conceive that easily." Once again, Shen Zechuan brought up the past. "It was also Xue Xiuzhuo's idea for you to transfer to the Bureau of Evaluations. If it's indeed the case that Mu Ru wanted to harm you... I can no longer get what Xue Xiuzhuo is thinking."

On the day Xi Hongxuan abducted Qi Huilian, Shen Zechuan had also mentioned that it was Xue Xiuzhuo's idea for him to enter the Bureau of Evaluations. Now that he had brought it up again half a month later, the implication of his words had taken on a different undertone.

Xi Hongxuan pondered it over for a while, then said, "Let's leave these matters aside for the time being. Lanzhou, the priority is to get me out of here. What did Wei Huaigu say? How much does he want? I'll give him!"

Shen Zechuan extended four fingers.

Xi Hongxuan said, "400,000?"

Shen Zechuan did not move.

Xi Hongxuan propped himself up on the table and stood up. He exclaimed, "4,000,000?!"

The dishes and bowls on the table collided. Xi Hongxuan's expression under the lamp gradually grew savage. He flung the wine cup without warning and seethed, "Good one there, Wei Huaigu... Well-played, the Wei Clan! So, four million..."

He began to laugh grimly.

"This is the total military expenditure of Dazhou; it's almost as much as the cost of rebuilding Zhongbo! So much money. Fuck. How's he going to get it? That's truly a real mountain of silver. It would take half a year just to

transport it separately from the west! And it'll also cost money to bribe the various passes and checkpoints during this period of time when the money is being escorted across territories! Even if the money makes its way to Qudu, where is he going to store it? There's simply no way to hide this much money!"

"What he is doing now is ripping you off by making such an exorbitant demand, so why would he care that much? The Imperial Bodyguards have just gotten the news that the Wei Clan indeed has their eyes on Zhongbo. Think about it. Wei Huaigu currently has the Ministry of Revenue in his grasp. If he manages to take down the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo, then this sum of money would be really used on military expenses. By the time the Wei Clan has their own troops, and... with the Empress Dowager... then the Xi Clan would be at their mercy."

Xi Hongxuan suddenly turned his head to look at Shen Zechuan, "When you advised me to join forces with them back then, have you ever thought that this would happen today? Lanzhou! These people are all wolves and tigers; they are all insatiably greedy. The moment they have us in their hands, then you and I will never be able to get back on our feet again in this lifetime!"

"Back then, when I advised you to join forces with them and kick out the Yao Clan, you hesitated. The Yao Clan was initially a good target for you to punish as a warning to others. You missed the chance, so the situation today is only to be expected. Xi Hongxuan, if you don't kick them, then they will think of ways to boot you out." As if lamenting, Shen Zechuan said, "This situation is ever so fast-changing. It's no longer the same as it was decades ago when everyone could still talk reason to one another. The Eight Great Clans is such that one clan rises when another falls. It's wearing down from within. You should have long swallowed up the others and declare yourself king."

Xi Hongxuan's breathing quickened slightly. At this very moment, he regretted his inaction. His palms were drenched in sweat as he faced the flickering candlelight and said, "Lanzhou... When I get out this time, I'll heed your advice in all future plans! Since it has already come to this now, we have to think of a way first to get those four million..."

"Four million is still too much." Shen Zechuan said. "There's simply no way for that much money passing through Juexi to escape Jiang Qingshan's eyes. Wait a little longer. I'm going to negotiate with Wei Huaigu."

At this point, there was no other choice but to wait. Holding himself back, Xi Hongxuan said, "It'd be best to hurry. The situation in the imperial court changes too fast. What's more, His Majesty is indecisive and doesn't have a mind on his own. If Xiao the Second or Mu Ru were to coax and win him over, then it'll really be too late."

It was inadvisable for Shen Zechuan to stay too long. As he put on his cloak, he asked, as if offhandedly, "Oh, right. You are in prison, then what about Qi Huilian? He's important too, so don't let anyone see him."

Xi Hongxuan was about to say something, but he changed his mind in a split second. He softened his voice as he said to Shen Zechuan, "Don't you worry. Qi Huilian will not starve to death. I've found someone to watch over him. It's just that the place is well-concealed. I'll return him to you when I get out of here."

It was under this dim light that Shen Zechuan partially turned his head back with a hint of a smile in the uplifted corners of his eyes. As he secured his cloak, he softly said, "Sure."

A cold draft of wind slipped in through the crack between the door, causing the hairs on Xi Hongxuan to stand on ends. He rubbed his arms, wanting to say a few words more to reassure him, but Shen Zechuan had already stridden out of the door.



#### Footnotes

1. 孝敬 literally showing respect and filial piety, but it also refers to bribes.
2. 垂帘听政 literally to hold court behind a screen or curtain. A practice in ancient China, where the Empress or Empress dowager was allowed to preside over the imperial court without actually being seen by her subjects since women were prohibited from politics. This would usually be done by a child emperor's mother, who would serve as regent and rule in place of the Emperor.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 79 : CLUES

Translated with: [Eggy](#)<3

A cacophony of human voices hung over Kailing River. Xue Xiuyi sat cross-legged on the couch, cracking peanut shells and drinking wine. When Xiao Chiye entered, he hurriedly brushed his robe clean and got off the couch to pay his obeisances to Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye sat directly opposite Xue Xiuyi, and Chen Yang came over to pour wine. Xue Xiuyi placed his fingers at the sides of his legs and subconsciously rubbed them on his robe to wipe his hands. At the same time, he said, “That’s enough, that’s enough... Your Lordship, too much of this wine is bad for your health!”

Holding the cup, Xiao Chiye said to him with a smile, “The Eldest Young Master is quite meticulous. You must be diligent in keeping yourself in good health back in your residence, right?”

“Only a little.” Xue Xiuyi did not dare to take his seat without explicit permission. He was short and small-sized to begin with, and hunching over to Xiao Chiye in a bow made him look even more humble and lowly.

Xiao Chiye cordially said, “Please sit. I’ll still have the Eldest Young Master’s advice to seek.”

With his backside at the edge of the couch, Xue Xiuyi said, “I wouldn’t dare to be so presumptuous as to offer advice.”

Xiao Chiye noted from Xue Xiuyi’s appearance that the latter was clearly poles apart from Xue Xiuzhuo. For Xue Xiuzhuo to have to submit to such an elder brother, it was only natural for him to be unable to take it lying down.

“It has been a while since I last saw His Excellency Yanqing.” Xiao Chiye drank his wine. “I heard that he has been busy investigating cases with Minister Kong. It has been hard on him.”

“It’s only because the Secretariat Elder has promoted him that he’s basking in glory now.” Xue Xiuyi had long disliked Xue Xiuzhuo. He had been making things difficult in all kinds of ways possible for this younger common-born brother of his, but a pity Xue Xiuzhuo had always been like a

cotton that cushioned all his damages and made all his efforts come to naught.

“He’s the Eldest Young Master’s younger brother of common birth. According to customs, the one leading the way to join the ranks of officials in the imperial court should be the Eldest Young Master. So why is it the other way round in your household?”

Xue Xiuyi accepted the wine, not daring to refuse it. He had already lost his sense of propriety after downing a few cups and was now feeling the earth spinning at his feet. At Xiao Chiye’s question, he gripped the cup and said with a snort, “Well, he has the capability, no? Your Lordship doesn’t know it, but he has always been one since young to ingratiate himself with men in power for personal gains. He’s a shrewd and deep one! There was heavy snow in the year he was born. When the time came for him to be named with the generation name<sup>1</sup> ‘xiu’, he was supposed to be named ‘gui’, but a Daoist priest predicted that he would meet an extremely distinguished benefactor in his life, and calling him by this name would instead prove to be adverse. His birth mother, who was a resourceful woman, fawned upon our Old Master in all ways possible, pleading for him to be named with a ‘zhuo’ instead. As in, cultivation of virtues and outstanding capabilities,<sup>2</sup> with the courtesy name <sup>3</sup> Yanqing. He sure has a charmed life...”

Xue Xiuyi’s eyes dimmed when he spoke to this point.

Xiao Chiye comforted him. “Eldest Young Master, why contend with him? You are the eldest lawful son of the Xue Clan; you are way more esteemed than him.”<sup>4</sup>

His words hit right at Xue Xiuyi’s sore point, making him feel stifled. Sure enough, Xue Xiuyi set down his cup and let out a long sigh.

“Your Lordship...” Xue Xiuyi was already drunk, and subsequently, he grew bolder. “You are the second son of lawful birth of the Prince of Libei. There is no one of common birth to pose as a threat to you, so you are unaware of the specifics. People like us fear having a capable younger brother of common birth back at home. He’s of lowly birth, yet he’s a notch above me. Whether it’s at home or out there, who doesn’t praise him to the skies? What is this? How am I supposed to live with this? Look at the Eight Great Clans. Which of them has a descendant of common birth as the head of the clan? How is it that only our Xue Clan has produced a Xue Xiuzhuo?!”



It was all because of his own selfish desires that he detested Xue Xiuzhuo this much. But then, it was also precisely all because of Xue Xiuzhuo that the Xue Clan was able to make a comeback and secure its position among the Eight Great Clans. Just the heirs born to the principal wives in the Xue Clan alone numbered in the hundreds, all of which took on the label of being a “lawful son”. Beneath them, there were also countless common sons born by the concubines. All the momentous family occasions such as marriages and funerals, monthly salaries and monetary rewards, expenses for living in separate residences, as well as taxes and costs for the country estates, came from the Xue Clan’s coffers and assets.

Initially, Old Master Xue planned to support Xue Xiuyi and let this eldest son of lawful birth take charge of the household as well as manage the family affairs. But the latter was either engrossed with cultivating the way of immortality or lavishing money on undeserving imposters and swindlers. It was just like what the Empress Dowager had said in the beginning. The descendants of the current Xue generation were all worthless good-for-nothings. Other than Xue Xiuzhuo, who was of common birth, there was no one else worthy of notice.

At present, Xue Xiuzhuo was the Court of Judicial Review Assistant Minister. At the same time, he was also the head of the Xue Clan. In these few years, he managed to put a stop to the downward decline of the Xue Clan and secured its position among the noble clans. He had plenty of brothers at home who simply loafed around and contributed nothing, and he still had both paternal and maternal uncles up there who devised schemes all day to cheat the clan out of money. All of them lived off Xue Xiuzhuo even as they spat at him, shamelessly seeking personal gains on the sly while cursing him for being of too lowly a birth.

Xiao Chiye was perfectly well aware of this. He had the same thinking as Shen Zechuan, and that was, if not for their uncertainty in where Xue Xiuzhuo stood since he had all along been hiding behind the noble clans, then they, valuing talents, would have been willing to pull this person over to their side. The Quancheng silk incident was the key.; it obscured Shen Zechuan’s vision of Xue Xiuzhuo, turning him into a person they must guard against—A man who was so astute and shrewd to the extent that he had already planted hundreds of thousands of threads of puppet strings as a precaution for future planning long before everything happened was no doubt someone who would not easily put himself at the disposal of another.

When Xiao Chiye, who was stroking his wine cup, thought to this point, he said, "As long as you are human, there will be times you will be down on your luck. There's no need for the Eldest Young Master to be too anxious over this. He seems to me to be doing a pretty good job of attending to official duties at the Secretariat Elder and Minister Kong's side. And he typically doesn't go drinking or fool around with the other; he's a decent person who knows his place."

Xue Xiuyi immediately got all worked up. His wine-induced hiccups persisted, and he covered his nose and mouth for a moment to compose himself before he impatiently said, "That's all just an act! Your Lordship, you know of the Twin Flowers on Donglong Street, right? That's Ouhua Pavilion and Xiangyun Villa! A few years back, Xue Xiuzhuo bought a batch of people from Xiangyun villa and hid them in the residence to groom!"

Xiao Chiye suddenly smelled something fishy when he heard Xiangyun Villa mentioned. His gaze sharpened as he repeated in a lowered voice, "He bought people from Xiangyun Villa?"

"He did!" Xue Xiuyi extended his fingers. "He bought over ten... boys... and girls... all from Xiangyun Villa!"

After a moment of silence, Xiao Chiye rose and said, "Chen Yang, keep Eldest Young Master company. I think it's about time for Yao Wenyu to arrive. I'll go welcome him."

The moment Xue Xiuyi heard Yao Wenyu's name, he sat upright and repeatedly stated his agreement, not daring to pester or bother him further.

As soon as Xiao Chiye stepped out of the door, he shouted, "Gu Jin!"

Gu Jin dropped down from above, got down on one knee, and said, "Second Young Master!"

Xiao Chiye questioned, "How did you not find out Xiangyun sold over ten people to the Xue Clan when I told you to investigate Xiangyun Villa earlier?"

Stunned, Gu Jin did not dare to raise his head and promptly said, "I beseech Young Master to punish me!"

In the previous assassination case, Xiangyun switched sides and provided falsified evidence of Xiao Chiye accepting bribes. This matter was fishy. Their investigations to this date threw up no clues as to why Xiangyun suddenly threw in her lot with the noble clans. Xue Xiuzhuo was no womanizer or lecher, so exactly what secret was there in his buying of so

many people from Xiangyun Villa and taking them back to his residence to hide without so much a word of it all this while?

Shen Zechuan was right.

Even if Xue Xiuzhuo had nothing to do with it, he had already appeared in every single incident ever since the Nanlin Hunting Grounds episode, perhaps even before the Nanlin Hunting Grounds incident.

“Of course, you should be punished. You have drunk quite the volume of wine ever since you came to the capital. Have you drunk yourself so drunk that even those eagle eyes of yours now have gone blind? No doubt you ought to be heavily punished for your incompetence and dereliction of duty. Go on your own to ask Chen Yang for a whipping!”

Gu Jin started sweating profusely.

Xiao Chiye handed Gu Jin’s this job because he appreciated Gu Jin’s meticulousness in his work, and Gu Jin was also the most skilled in conducting searches. As a former scout in the Libei Armored Cavalry, he had never made such an oversight. Xiao Chiye was right. He had stayed in Qudu for so long that he even dared to take his assignments lightly.

“I give you two days to run another check. Get to the bottom of the number of people Xiangyun sold to Xue Xiuzhuo, their names, places of origins and ages, and even who their parents and distant relatives are.” Xiao Chiye strode past him and said in a frosty tone, “Make another oversight, and you need not remain in this position anymore.”

Gu Jin said nothing and kowtowed, then he rose to his feet and headed for Xiangyun Villa.

Chen Yang, having gotten freed up, came out and saw Xiao Chiye’s displeased expression. Thus, he said, “Master, Xue Xiuyi is taking a rest now.”

“Get someone to send him back tomorrow morning.” Xiao Chiye turned back to cast a glance inside. “There is a set of rare books that are the only extant copies in the Plum Blossom Residence. Give it to him when you send him away tomorrow morning.”

Chen Yang reminded him. “Those are the Yao Clan’s collection of books. Should we inform Young Master Yao?”

“Yao Wenyu sold the Plum Blossom Residence to me, that means he has already decided that he doesn’t want them anymore. For most part of the year, he’s out there traveling and living in foreign lands. He doesn’t care for these.” Xiao Chiye had drunk a large amount of wine this night, yet he

did not seem to be drunk. He tossed aside the handkerchief he used to wipe his hands. "Besides, even if he returned to the capital, he's so elusive that it's hard to get hold or even catch a glimpse of him. He will definitely not attend a banquet like this. This is not an easy man to invite."

"Had it not been for the fact that Young Master Yao didn't join the ranks of officials in the imperial court, I'm afraid Xue Xiuzhuo would not even have the chance to shine today."

Still looking displeased, Xiao Chiye said, "The turbulence of politics cannot be equated with the engagement of academia. Yao Wenyu may not necessarily do better than Xue Xiuzhuo. These two are interesting; they are opposites in every way."

"When all is said and done, he's Secretariat Elder Hai's student. If Xue Xiuzhuo is a traveler of the secular world, then Young Master Yao is an immortal who transcends the mundane world." Chen Yang pondered it over. "But looking at Secretariat Elder Hai, he cherishes Young Master Yao more."

"That's right. Hai Liangyi imparts his knowledge to Yao Wenyu without reservation. He did not hesitate to break his original beliefs and overlook the noble clans' prejudice to accept him as his student. This alone is enough to see how much he values him. Xue Xiuzhuo's political achievements all these years are decent, yet Hai Liangyi still would not give him the dignity of being real teacher and pupil. What's more, Hai Liangyi does not have the slightest intent all these years to force Yao Wenyu to serve as an official. Yuanzhuo, Yuanzhuo. It was out of fatherly love that Hai Liangyi bestowed this courtesy name on Yao Wenyu back then. The closeness of a teacher and pupil whose relationship has already reached that extent is already something no one else can compete with." Xiao Chiye said, "Yao Wenyu is a legitimate noble young master of a noble clan. Going by their way of thinking, Yao Wenyu is even more legitimate than those so-called 'legitimate descendants' of the Pan, Fei, and Xue Clans. The Yao Clan is honorable and distinguished. Even the ladies of the Hua Clan would find it hard to marry into the Yao Clan in the past. Mountains of gold and silvers are, to him, not that much of a rarity as a bowl of wild herbs."

Chen Yang had not seen Yao Wenyu that many times. When he bought the residence, he only had a brief encounter with him once. He remembered the latter as a scholar with a *zhaowen* bag<sup>5</sup> on him, one who did not like to ride horses or sit in sedans, and instead kept a donkey.

“Is Ding Tao back?” Xiao Chiye suddenly asked.

Chen Yang said, “... He hasn’t left yet.”

“Let him play.” Xiao Chiye strode into his own house and removed the brocade robe on him to replace with a set of ordinary clothes. “At this point in the banquet, I should have already drunk with all those whom I ought to keep company. There’s still some spare time before daybreak. I’ll be back soon.”



Shen Zechuan stepped out of the alleyway, and Xi Dan followed after him from behind. Xi Dan did not dare to overtake Shen Zechuan and simply stood behind him as he waited for orders with his head lowered.

Unexpectedly enough, Shen Zechuan was gentle. After turning around to look at him for some time, he said, “You spoke well tonight.”

Xi Dan quickly bowed and replied, “It is this lowly one’s greatest aspiration to help Your Excellency with your frustrations and difficulties.”

“But Xi Hongxuan is suspicious by nature; it’s not possible to trick him out of real money with only a few words.” Shen Zechuan commented. “Are you fully aware of his businesses across the various lands?”

Xi Dan said, “Yes, yes, I am! His accounts, whether big or small, would always be sent to his residence in Qudu every month. The sixty-eight shopkeepers under him are all sons of domestic slaves; the parents, wives, and children of these people are all in his grasp. They were raised specifically for the purpose of managing his accounts. There is no way to hide any big or small goings-on in the storefronts from his eyes; he knows the score. And that’s why there has never been a problem in his business empire all these years.”

Shen Zechuan then replied, “If Xi Hongxuan wants to withdraw these four million, he has to brief you to take the money from the money vault and hand you the key to open the vault door. I only want to ask: how will this money be transferred?”

Xi Dan silently made some mental notes and said after a while, “There is, in fact, a huge risk when traveling on land. When escorting the money carts, cargos are needed as a front to conceal the silvers. This is four million we are talking about. Without a business with a long history to serve as the cover, then Jiang Qingshan, the Provincial Administration Commissioner of Juexi, would be able to see through it right away. Moreover, Your Excellency, if we travel by land, then we must first bypass the thirteen cities

of Juexi, as well as Dicheng. These are all difficult checkpoints to pass. Most importantly, Xi Hongxuan is right; there is no place to conceal this sum of money in Qudu at all.”

These were silver ingots and not paper bills. Even if one had vacant a quarter to keep them hidden, there was no knowing whether it would be able to accommodate all four millions of them. Then, there was also the headache of spending this money once he had the money in hand.

Shen Zechuan pondered as he looked into the night, then said, “This sum will not enter Qudu.”

Xi Dan did not dare to make a sound.

Sure enough, Shen Zechuan continued after some time, “The shipment is subjected to inspections by Juexi whether it is transported by land or by sea. Four million is too great of a sum. Even if we are thorough in our planning to keep a tight lid on this matter and hide the shipment from the prying eyes, those who carry out the orders won’t necessarily do a good job of the same. It’s also pointless if the money can’t be spent when it comes in. And so, this money won’t reach Qudu.”

Trying to figure out what Shen Zechuan was thinking, Xi Dan tentatively probed, “What Your Excellency means... is to trick the money out of him, keep it there, and circulate it through trading?”

“One half of it will be handed to you to do just that,” Shen Zechuan said, “I’ll come up with something for the other half. Be prepared. The Xi Clan’s business is extensive, and they can’t do without a manager. When Xi Hongxuan falls, you’ll be the next in the line.”

Xi Dan quickly answered in agreement.

Without another word more, Shen Zechuan climbed into the horse carriage and parted with Xi Dan for the time being. He still had to return to the imperial prison to review the files of all cold cases within the last two decades to infer some clues from them. He did not even have the time to go home and sleep.

The horse carriage reached the Imperial Prison. Ge Qingqing, who was on night patrol, had long since opened the gates to wait for Qiao Tianya to drive in.

When Shen Zechuan stepped off the carriage, Ge Qingqing came closer and whispered, “His Lordship the Marquis is here.”

Shen Zechuan unclasped his outer cloak and stepped onto the front porch. He nodded towards Ge Qingqing, who then took his leave. Shen

Zechuan pulled off his cloak and hanged it on his arm as he pushed open the door.

Xiao Chiye, having drunk wine, could not rid himself of the scent of wine even after he had a change of clothes. He slumped on Shen Zechuan's chair, with an opened book covering his face. When he heard the sound, he lifted the book but did not move.

"Come sit here." Xiao Chiye tossed the book onto the table.

Shen Zechuan shut the door. He hung his outer cloak on the clothes rack and undid the clasps on his clothes in passing. Meeting Xiao Chiye's gaze, he swung one of his legs over Xiao Chiye's thighs, coming face-to-face with him before suddenly drawing even closer to him. Xiao Chiye reached out to wrap his arms around Shen Zechuan's lower back, and their delicate lips met as they first kissed to their hearts' content.



#### Footnotes

1. 字辈 generation name, where each member of the same generation (i.e., siblings and paternal cousins of the same generation) share a common syllable. In the Xue Clan, this character is "Xiu" for Xiuyi and Xiuzhuo's generation.
2. 修德卓能 literally cultivation of virtues and outstanding capabilities, the first and third characters are the characters used in the name Xiuzhuo (修卓)
3. 字 A literary name or courtesy name , also known as a style name, is a name bestowed upon one at adulthood in addition to one's given name.
4. Children in those days were classified according to whether they were a child born to the principal wife or concubines. A lawful son was born by the legal wife (this was the wife who has been officially married into the family, also known as the principal wife). Being the eldest of the legal wife made him the legitimate heir. They also had higher social status and often received better treatment compared to the other common sons born by concubines. It's recommended to keep this in mind, as this will be a recurring theme in the novel.
5. 招文袋 a small bag hung at the waist for keeping documents or money.





## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 80 : BETROTHAL GIFT

Translated with: [Eggy](#)<3

This bout of sparring lasted a long time, pushing their satiety level to an even greater height until it became an insatiable desire for more after they had taken their first taste of the forbidden fruit. They were used to testing each other's limit in the dark. As their love grew increasingly deeper, a mere kiss was no longer able to fill their hunger. Desire, in its prime, laid bare at its rawest. Such a cloyingly sweet and clingy intimacy was a unique treat distinct to lovers, simply because it was a luxury to be in each other's company at all times. Since there were many eyes and ears inside the Imperial Prison, a kiss could only be considered a kind of tacit compensation between them.

When it was time to end the kiss, Xiao Chiye asked, "Where did you go?"

As Shen Zechuan eased into his seated position, his thighs ground against the sides of Xiao Chiye's legs. He took his time slowing down his breathing. With a hint of veiled seduction in his half-lidded eyes, he replied, "Counting money."

Xiao Chiye squeezed him and said, "Did you get off on counting money?"

Shen Zechuan let out a husky laugh. "Getting off from being squeezed by you."

At Shen Zechuan's laugh, Xiao Chiye felt restless. He grabbed Shen Zechuan's chin to hold it in place and said, "Keep going with this seduction of yours."

Shen Zechuan's collarbone was peeking out from his undone collars, and the brutal bite marks from the last time had yet to fade. Paying them no mind, Shen Zechuan wetted his bitten lips and said, "I have to discuss something with you."

Xiao Chiye held him up and said, "What a coincidence. I have something to discuss with you too."

Shen Zechuan was so scalded by Xiao Chiye's gaze that his mouth felt dry and parched. He said, "The military supplies this year have to wait until April before they can be dispatched from Juexi. I need to borrow and use the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path."

Xiao Chiye only had to think for a little to know what he was up to. "The military supplies passing through the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path are personally escorted by the Libei Armored Cavalry themselves. There are no inspection checkpoints along the way. You can use it to transport the silvers, but it's all subjected to my elder brother's approval."

"If this money belongs to me, the Hereditary Prince naturally won't agree to it. But if this sum of money is yours, the Hereditary Prince will surely agree." Shen Zechuan raised his chin slightly. "Here is my betrothal gift. Keep it for me, Second Young Master."

"Only this much as a betrothal gift?" Xiao Chiye laughed as he freed up one hand to place the meal box on the table. "A tough deal."

Shen Zechuan sniffed and said, "There's grilled fish."

With that, he promptly forgot about the betrothal gift and pulled out chopsticks inside the box. It was in this way that Xiao Chiye watched as he ate. In a blink of an eye, the bowl of rice was half gone, and there were only bones left of the fish when it returned to the plate.

Xiao Chiye actually did not like eating fish. He had lost his mother when he was young, and his household was not one to spoil its children, unlike how the Eight Great Clans pampered their offspring. Although he had a nanny and maidservants to wait upon him, he had to feed himself once he had learned how to hold the chopsticks. He was headstrong, and there were plenty of toys he loved to play with, so he did not care to waste his time picking out the fish bones. After getting choked on it enough times, he hardly ate it anymore.

Xiao Chiye looked at him and said, "Does it smell good? Apparently, it's from a chef from Hezhou, who is even harder to hire than the imperial chefs from the palace." Shen Zechuan picked out the fish bones and fed Xiao Chiye the meat with his chopsticks. Xiao Chiye tasted it and commented, "Passable."

Having eaten his fill, Shen Zechuan set down his bowl and chopsticks and said, "What do you want to discuss with me?"

Xiao Chiye handed him a handkerchief and said, "The earlier investigation into Xiangyun missed one piece of information. A few years

earlier, Xue Xiuzhuo bought a batch of people from Xiangyun Villa and kept them in his residence. I'm afraid even Xi Hongxuan doesn't know about this matter."

As expected, there was a shift in Shen Zechuan's expression. He said, "He's not one to keep and raise prostitutes in private. This kind of thing is also almost unheard of in Ouhua Pavilion. This action is too abnormal."

"That's right. It's abnormal." Xiao Chiye leaned back against the back of the chair. "I have a hunch that the reason Xiangyun made a false charge against me lies here."

"He bought them a few years back." Shen Zechuan gradually furrowed his brows. "If it was truly to get Xiangyun under his control, then this move was planned much too early."

"Why would Xiangyun fall under his control because of this? Some pawns, if planted too early, would not necessarily be able to stand up to the test of time. I feel that he's not making such a move just to get a handle against Xiangyun." Xiao Chiye sorted out his line of thought. "Your plotting of the assassination is not something he would be able to predict in advance. So the subsequent post-developments would definitely be hard for him to guard against."

Xiao Chiye groped around these messy threads of clues, one at a time. His wolf-like intuition told him that this matter would not be that simple.

"Improvisation." Shen Zechuan suddenly righted Xiao Chiye's face and said, "You are right. The puppet string connected to Xiangyun was not specifically intended to be used for dealing with you... Xiangyun's act of perjury was simply an opportunity he seized for his own purpose. The fact that he could simply throw out Xiangyun to use shows that Xiangyun is of little significance to him. There is another reason he bought those people, and Xiangyun is merely a convenient pawn that incidentally came with this reason. What's more, she's a pawn he can't wait to discard."

"Then, the key to his purchase of those people is..." Xiao Chiye was on the same wavelength.

"... among the batch of people he bought." Shen Zechuan completed his sentence softly.

Both men looked at each other, caught yet again in another puzzle of unknowns. Xiangyun Villa was a brothel. What person could there be in a brothel who would be of great importance to Xue Xiuzhuo?

“He bought over ten people to obscure the truth and throw everyone off scent so that no one can tell who exactly was his intended purchase. No doubt Xiangyun herself doesn’t know the answer either.” Xiao Chiye said. “I have to get Xue Xiuyi to probe into this matter again. His status in the Xue Residence would allow him free access to the residence. Xue Xiuzhou might be able to obstruct and deny entry to outsiders, but he definitely can’t do that to Xue Xiuyi.”

This piece of information was indeed important, but Shen Zechuan could not figure it out at present. He had maneuvered Xi Hongxuan into action this time also because he had apprehensions about Xue Xiuzhuo, who similarly had Xi Hongxuan in his grasp. Instead of becoming more distinct and decipherable with the passage of time, this person had, on the contrary, become increasingly obscure and unreadable.

“... There’s still time.” Shen Zechuan seemed to be thinking aloud to himself. “We will be thrown off kilter the moment we get overly anxious, and that could easily put us in a disadvantageous position. Since he has not made his move, then it means it’s not time yet, and this is an opportunity we can exploit. At this time, we are the ones hiding in the dark, while he’s out there in the open. We will definitely learn some crucial information if we follow the clues... Xi Hongxuan has always been on friendly terms with Xue Xiuzhuo all these years. Even if he’s unaware of Xue Xiuzhuo’s purchases of those prostitutes, there will still be something he knows that others don’t. I’ll probe him again later.”

“After saying so much, you still haven’t let this Second Young Master in on the details,” Xiao Chiye did not let him get off him. “How much silver did you swindle from him?”

Shen Zechuan snapped out of his thoughts and pursed his lips slightly. He raised four fingers, just like he had done so before.

Xiao Chiye immediately grasped those fingertips tight without demur. “Sweet. Worth it. Put it down as your betrothal gift, quick.”

Shen Zechuan said, “You should act with a little more reserve instead of jumping at it. Four million is too little still.”

Xiao Chiye said, “It’s too generous. A starting price at four million? For someone who can make this much money as you do, this Second Young Master will take whatever price you offer.”

Amused by him, Shen Zechuan said, “I told him that Wei Huaigu wanted four million silvers. There was not the slightest bit of hesitation or

reluctance on his part at all, which shows that four million is simply a drop in the ocean to the Xi Clan.”

Seeing how happy he was tonight, Xiao Chiye made no further mention of Xue Xiuzhuo’s matter. He jerked his legs to jolt him and said, “Only the Xi Clan themselves know precisely how much money the Xi Clan has. All the others can only see are the salterns and copper mines they operate. The extent of their enterprise isn’t just limited to the whole empire, but also stretches as far as the foreign lands. The common rich young masters play by hitting the brothels and the gambling dens, but Xi Hongxuan’s idea of fun is to run brothels and gambling dens. That broker house on Donglong Street is also his shop, and its internal dealings implicate plenty of imperial court bigwigs, all of whom have fields and businesses at stake in his hands, so they have no choice but to give him face. This time, it’s four million, but how much will it be the next time? The Northeast Provisions Bridle Path is only opened twice every year. How to hide and spend that much silver are all issues you have to think through very carefully.”

“No one has ever broken through the Xi Clan’s money vault, so putting the money inside is the most secure. No matter how that money is spent now, it’d be hard to escape the eyes of the imperial court. The accounts of your 20,000-strong Imperial Army already have to be checked and triple-checked in successive order. If this sum of money is not spent and disposed of perfectly, then the Second Young Master would have to be detained in jail to await trial.”

His curiosity piqued, Xiao Chiye said, “Spending money, huh? What else is there other than frittering it away by playing and having fun... Or are you preparing to save it for Zhongbo?”

“Nowhere in mind for the money to go to for the time being.” Seeing that it was almost time, Shen Zechuan fastened his cloak with one hand. “The Second Young Master doesn’t handle household affairs, so how would you know how valuable the daily staples like tea, rice, oil, and salt are? There will be plenty of uses for the money in the future, so there’s no harm in keeping it on hand, even if we can’t spend it all for the time being. It’s better to be prepared for all contingencies.”

Both of them were clearly set on defrauding Xi Hongxuan by convening in this way to discuss the latter’s household finances and assets with such serious expressions. Xiao Chiye still had to return to Kailing River, and after saying a few words, he had to leave. He had rushed over as

soon as he had the free time to see Shen Zechuan, and now, having fed the latter, he could not afford to sit and linger any longer.

As Xiao Chiye turned over to mount his horse, he recalled something else and pulled the reins to say, “The inspection will happen these two days. The Grand Secretariat has already proposed a candidate for the Provincial Administration Commissioner for the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo. That Jiang Qingshan of Juexi had hurried over to report to Qudu on imperial orders. My guess is that it’s likely him.”

“I’ve long heard of his name and reputation. I remembered how he displayed courage and foresight when he handled the aid relief efforts for the thirteen cities of Juexi six years ago.” At this point, Shen Zechuan recalled that this person was also on good terms with Xue Xiuzhuo and could not help but hesitate.

“Although his personal friendship with Xue Xiuzhuo is pretty good, it does not necessarily mean that he’s in Xue Xiuzhuo’s camp. When he enters the capital, you can meet him to try to get a grasp on him. He isn’t a descendant of a noble clan, and he doesn’t rely on the noble clans for backing. You can decide for yourself whether or not we can use him when the time comes.” Seeing Shen Zechuan standing on the steps, Xiao Chiye raised a hand to beckon to him.

Shen Zechuan was all ears to hear him out. He did not expect Xiao Chiye to simply say nothing and merely caressed a handful of his hair with his palm. With a lift of its hooves, Lang Tao Xue Jin broke into a gallop. Ge Qingqing pushed the gates open, and Xiao Chiye rode away into the night.



Thanks to Alex for burning brain cells with Lianyin. Muacks<3

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 81 : SHADOWS



The food in the prison was unclean, and so Xi Hongxuan suffered a stomach upset. His constitution was already weakened during the epidemic, and now he was in even more of a misery. He was not in a good state mentally, so he often fell into a lethargic sleep. Furthermore, it was dark all around each time he woke up, and gradually, he lost track of time.

Without any window to ventilate the room, this narrow and cramped room smelled foul and stale, with a damp, musty smell thrown in for effect. There was no way an ordinary man would be able to endure it.

Xi Hongxuan was badly ill, yet he was unable to turn and move his body as freely as he would have wanted. All he could do was to lay paralyzed on the straw mat and let his consciousness drift along with the dampness and cold.

As usual, the warden moved the flap open and stuffed the rice inside, but he did not hear any movements from Xi Hongxuan today. He looked in through the hole, but all he could see was Xi Hongxuan's drooping arm. The warden was afraid that Xi Hongxuan had died, thus he opened the door and took the lamp to shake it in front of Xi Hongxuan's face.

Xi Hongxuan struggled to open his eyes. With dry lips and a parched mouth, he said, "S... sir, please spare me some water."

The warden flipped his hand over and poured a bowl of water onto Xi Hongxuan's face.

Xi Hongxuan exerted himself to open his mouth to receive the water, hardly bothering with his dampened collars. He drank the water and pulled himself together to say, "Thank you, thank you!"

The warden threw the bowl away, then grabbed the oil lamp and made to leave.

With an unexpected burst of strength, Xi Hongxuan suddenly grabbed hold of the warden's clothes. He forced out a smile on his chubby face and said, "Buddy, tell me. This \*cough\*! This place is not the prison at all, am I right?"

The warden swatted off Xi Hongxuan's hand. But Xi Hongxuan burst out laughing in a hoarse voice instead, gasping violently as he lay on the straw mat. He pulled at the front of his soaked clothes and moved his eye to

stare at the pitch-dark roof. He said, "This place isn't the prison... I... I should have thought of it a long time ago! It has already been a few days. Even if Kong Qiu doesn't interrogate me, there should be officials from the Ministry of Justice coming over to make their rounds for a check... Too quiet... It's too quiet here..."

Xi Hongxuan said, then swiftly fixed his eyes on the warden in a stare.

"I've done some calculations. You come to deliver food every day at precisely the same time, and you even push and put the tray into exactly the same position. Buddy, the average warden isn't this rigid! It has already been a few days, and nobody came to exchange shifts with you in guarding the prison door... You wouldn't even accept my money, and even these sleeves of yours are so clean and tidy without so much a speck of grease and dust! You are well-built and tall, discreet and reticent—You are an Imperial Bodyguard, right?!"

The warden's face was expressionless as he carried the oil lamp and walked away to close the door. Xi Hongxuan listened to the sound of metal chains winding around it, then pounded his fists hard on the straw mat under him.

"Shen Zechuan... Shen Zechuan!" Xi Hongxuan pounded until his knuckles reddened. He abruptly let loose a shout at the top of his voice, "Plotting against me... To think you'd scheme against me! You. Tell him. Tell him to come!"

There was no response from the darkness.

Xi Hongxuan dug his fingers into the straw mat. His consciousness was in a muddle as he spat hatefully, "He wants money, doesn't he? Call him over. As long as he let me out... as long as he let me out..." He forcefully swallowed his saliva, then suddenly pulled at his hair and gasped, "I'll give him money! I can't fucking stand this anymore!"

The warden sat down outside with the oil lamp next to him and popped the broad beans into his mouth to down with his wine. With the metal door behind him blocking off Xi Hongxuan, all that could be heard from within was the sound of faint sobs and whimpers, much like the wind in the dead of the night.



Xi Hongxuan's eyes had turned cloudy. He did not dare to sleep again out of fear that he would not wake up if he fell asleep. By the time Shen Zechuan came again, he had already calmed down.



Shen Zechuan remained on his feet as he sized up Xi Hongxuan.

Xi Hongxuan once had a narrow escape from the jaws of death when he headed out to sea. Ever since he fought his way back from certain death, he had never cut such a sorry sight. He was different from the other descendants of the noble clans. He was not afraid of being caught in desperate situations, nor was he afraid of looking wretched. He let Shen Zechuan look as he strained his dry and hoarse throat to let out an unwarranted laugh for a moment before he said, "Lanzhou, you have guts! Four million... I nearly met my end being fleeced by you."

"This hadn't been an easy place to find. It mustn't be too conspicuous, and it can't be too far away." Shen Zechuan let out a soft sigh. "I sure wasn't expecting you to be this meticulous and discerning in your observations."

Xi Hongxuan shook his arm and said, "Men die for money, while birds die for food. Brother, I'm more than willing to give you this sum of money! But you can't simply want my life for just this bit of money..." His tone was a little weak and unsteady, but hunger and illness were not able to deprive him of the ability to adapt to his circumstances. He continued, "Lanzhou... I could have still pretended to be in the dark. I'm the only one who knows where the Xi Clan's keys are. I could have run around in circles with you and extracted myself out of here through trickery. But see, I didn't do so. I still hold this bit of brotherhood to heart... Lanzhou! We joined forces to kill Xi Gu'an and Ji Lei. You are now the target of envy in the Imperial Bodyguards. If you screw me to death now, you will lose the Xi Clan's support! The more you climb your way up in the Imperial Bodyguards, the narrower the path you have to navigate. You already know what it feels like to be stuck in a situation so difficult that you can hardly move a step forward, don't you? Which of those old men with hereditary positions in noble clans will be willing to submit to you? You are an ambitious one. Isn't it also on my account that Han Cheng could tolerate you? If you kill me, you will become the target of all!"

Shen Zechuan squatted down, holding a handkerchief between his fingers as he looked at Xi Hongxuan and sought his advice with a serious expression. "Then, in your opinion, what should I do?"

Xi Hongxuan had seen this expression of Shen Zechuan countless times; he knew that there was no doubt Shen Zechuan's intent to kill had been ignited. So he dripped with cold sweat as he traded gazes with Shen

Zechuan for a moment before he replied, "We haven't reached the point where we fall out with one another. Shen Zechuan, I lost this time; I concede! It's not a disgrace at all to suffer a business defeat. There's no need for me to create a scene and fall out with you over this bit of trivial matter. I fear you! This is the truth. But it's also precisely because of this fear that I want to continue to work with you. Think about it. If you kill me, you will only have four million. But if you have me in your grasp, then you'll have the Xi Clan's mountains of gold and silver. I concede defeat! So why get your hands stained with this bit of blood? We still have all the days ahead of us to lord it over Qudu!"

"That's a fair point." Shen Zechuan said. "But it's a tad too easy to dismiss me with just the words 'concede defeat', isn't it? I heard that the Second Young Master has sixty-eight keys. So how about we split them forty-sixty? It'd also set my mind at ease."

Xi Hongxuan slowly propped himself up. The expression in his eyes as he looked at Shen Zechuan was ferocious as he said, "I can give you the keys. But once you take the keys, you can't ask for Qi Huilian again. How about it? Are you willing?"

Shen Zechuan slowly raised his fingers before putting it down again as if he was bored stiff. He said, "You think Qi Huilian is worth this sum? Naturally, I want the keys."

"Since he's worth nothing, then it's pointless to retain him. I'm killing him then!"

Shen Zechuan suddenly began to laugh. He said, "You think I don't know where he is? We are already at this point, and you still want to test me."

"You're the one who's testing me!" Xi Hongxuan crawled slowly towards Shen Zechuan, finally revealing a savage expression. "I understand you. Lanzhou, the same trick is useless if you play it one time too many. You are accustomed to deceive others with words. The more you pretend not to give a hoot about someone at this moment, the more important they are to you. You tricked me once that day in the courtyard, and now you still want to use the same trick on me. I, Xi Hongxuan, may not be a person of outstanding smarts, but I'm also not dumb to that extent. You don't know where he is. If you know, haha! Then you'd have killed me after getting the money! So how did it go, Shen Zechuan? Am I correct in saying that you still couldn't find him despite searching all over Qudu?"

Shen Zechuan slightly tightened his grip on his handkerchief.

Xi Hongxuan smoothed aside his messy hair and said, "As much as you may be eloquent, you've forgotten one thing, and that is, your meticulous and careful concealment of him is already enough to make me suspicious. Even if I believe you a little, I still have to be on guard against you. The thing to fear when having dealings with you is that you'd turn around and give me a stab."

Shen Zechuan's eyes were emotionless as he looked at Xi Hongxuan and said, "Then, what do you want?"

"I want to get out of here." Xi Hongxuan pointed at the door. "I want to walk out of here unscathed. If I can't get out tonight, then Qi Huilian's corpse will be left on your doorstep tomorrow morning. Do you believe me? You can try me. Xi Dan, that traitorous bastard who betrayed his master for wealth, must have told you that all the men under my command are children of the domestic slaves in our clan. My safety concerns the safety of hundreds of people. Even if I can't get out, I still have plenty of ways at my disposal to kill off Qi Huilian!"

"You're lying."

Shen Zechuan suddenly got up, and that dreary, ruthless emotion within him burst forth in this filthy room. He took a few steps back, taking advantage of the dimness to blur that face of his into some kind of behemoth lurking in the dark.

"This place is isolated from outsiders. How are you passing on the message to others? Tricking me even when death is near at hand, and you still tell me to try you?" Shen Zechuan said with a shadow of a smile in a frosty tone, "Sure then. Let's us try. I'll send you on your way out."

"If I could be on guard against you in advance, then why couldn't I take precautions against you prior?!" Xi Hongxuan was drenched in cold sweat on seeing the situation deteriorate. He promptly raised his voice, "I've long told the guards on watch that I'll head down once every half a month. If I don't, then they will strike! You asked me the last time if I dare to believe your words. Shen Zechuan, this time I'm asking you, do you dare to believe the same?!"

Shen Zechuan did not make a sound.

Xi Hongxuan then slowed his tone, as if soothing him. "Since you can buy over Xi Dan, then you must have already known that I am the only one who knows where Qi Huilian is. I've long understood that no one in this

world can be trusted, so I have left countless escape routes in place for myself. Lanzhou, why must we both be on the losing end? It doesn't benefit either of us to infuriate each other. Aren't you making all these moves for the sake of gains? This deal is so unprofitable, no doubt you won't do it. Whatever it is that you're lacking, I have it all, and I'll give it to you. You only need to lend me this guts and wisdom of yours, and we can thrive and flourish in Qudu. Look at that Li Jianheng. He's a good emperor, one that's few and far between. He signifies an even faster path to success for men like you and me. This is a meteoric rise we're talking about, Lanzhou! Do you think Xiao the Second would be able to accept you if you kill me and offend the noble clans? How long can the Xiao Clan's prestigious reputation of being infallible and undefeated in battles continue on for? Xiao Fangxu is already old. If Xiao Jiming were to die too, then what is Xiao the Second alone good for? They are doomed to fail and fall!"

Xi Hongxuan seemed to lament, and at the same time, encourage.

"Lanzhou, you and I both have had a hard time being under the control of others, and now you still want to choose to submit to Xiao the Second and be at his beck and call? The only things in this world that can never abandon you are power and money! Join forces with me, and I'll give you money. You just need to help me keep the Xi Clan's reputation intact, and we can bring our business deal up a level. When that time comes, it'd be hard for anyone jockeying for power to sway you and me from our positions! You previously wanted me to swallow up the other clans and proclaim myself king. So why are you now bound by constraints and limits yourself?! Then, there's the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo. Don't you want to rebuild Zhongbo to avenge yourself for the humiliation you suffered in the past? Shen Wei's name can never be fully cleared, but you can use money to smash the gates to Zhongbo open. They are currently so poor that they even exchange children for food<sup>1</sup> in their dire straits. You'll be like a deity who has descended from Heaven. By that time, who would still dare to refuse to yield to you? Who would still dare to curse you? These are all what money can give you. Can the Empress Dowager do the same? Can Xiao the Second do the same? Lanzhou, what are you still hesitating for? We can still continue to join forces and climb our way up to the top just like before."

Shen Zechuan was moved by his words. He no longer seemed to be brimming with murderous intent, and his tone had also softened some as he said, "If you had been this candid way earlier, we would not have to go as

far as to face off each other in a confrontation, isn't it? You're right. It's by joining forces that you and I can save ourselves a lot of troubles."

"I'm a merchant. To a businessman, profit comes first. If there isn't that much of a benefit to our collaboration, then why would I waste my breath like this?" Xi Hongxuan's back itched. The part that had been wounded by the collapse the last time was scabbing over, and it itched so much these days that it hurt. He took a little breather, then continued, "Then there's no time to lose. Let me out now. Once I'm out, we can sit down for a proper discussion."

Xi Hongxuan had more than ten martial arts experts from the martial fraternity in the Xi residence in Qudu. He had spent a large sum of money to hire them to intimidate Shen Zechuan the last time, and he had always kept them in his residence. In truth, he was already burning with anxiety, because he could not figure out what Shen Zechuan was thinking. As such, he had also started to harbor the intent to kill, determined as he was to burn his bridges and fight to the end. No matter what, he had to get out of here first—it was only by getting out that there would be a variable he could exploit to turn things around!

He wanted to kill Shen Zechuan so much that he could not even wait for tomorrow, much less engage in diplomacy with him. Being able to deal with each other for a long time often meant that both parties were evenly matched—they had the room to be able to sit down and trade barbs. Xi Hongxuan felt that the present him and Shen Zechuan had already lost this balance. It was as if he had fallen into a certain kind of pouch that Shen Zechuan had bound to hold him in check as Shen Zechuan climbed his way up the official ranks, thereby rendering him incapable of controlling and swaying the development of the situation like he could at the outset.

Xi Hongxuan still did not know where the problem lay, but based on his businessman's instinct, he had already discovered his current plight in which he was turning around in circles like a man under a spell<sup>2</sup> had everything to do with Shen Zechuan.

They had been working together in cahoots to this date, but other than killing Xi Gu'an to get his hands on the Xi Clan's keys, the sweetness of every benefit Xi Hongxuan has had a taste of in all that had happened afterwards had been fleeting. Only Shen Zechuan had truly scaled to greater heights with power firmly in hand.

Xi Hongxuan was sure that he had been made a fool of, but he still had a look of sincerity on his face. It was as if he admired Shen Zechuan to the point he worshipped the ground Shen Zechuan walked on, while at the same time, feared him to the point he dared not take any action.

Qiao Tianya pushed the door crack open and cast the light from the oil lamp inside. Shen Zechuan's exposed wrists were clean. With his side bathed in the light from the lamp, he looked no different from the way he appeared in the daytime as he said politely, "After you, please."

Xi Hongxuan inwardly breathed a sigh of relief.



Thanks to Alex for the consultation services!

#### Footnotes

1. 易子而食 refers to dire situations during wartime or famine that people exchange children for food (or eat them as food).
2. 鬼打墙 a specific phenomenon in superstitions where people find themselves lost in the evening or dark and circled back to where they started, as if a ghost had built a wall that kept them from walking straight.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 82 : DEBT COLLECTION



Translated with: [Lin](#)<3



The Xi residence was located in an inner street of Qudu, slightly to the south. In comparison to the Pan's and Fei's residences, its total land area was significantly smaller. It was also near Prince Qin's Manor during the reign of Emperor Guangcheng. The Xi had special permission, but the first few clan heads had much foresight and did not dare build their mansion beyond what was permitted in the regulations. The interior architectural style of the residence was more the style of Juexi, while the building structures such as pavilions and terraces were all average and common.

Xi Hongxuan was on tenterhooks the entire journey back, but once he heard the sounds of horse hooves come to a stop, he knew he was home. Not daring to be careless, he bunched up the hem of his robe, which had been soaked until it was wrinkled, and hurried off the carriage, where he saw Shen Zechuan standing before him sizing up the Xi's Residence.

"It's an old mansion." Xi Hongxuan's tone was light and relaxed as he tried to keep up with his normal behavior. "Even though we keep saying all these years that we want to renovate it, we never had the time. Come over in a few days when the weather gets warmer to take a look at the blueprint too."

Yet, Shen Zechuan turned his gaze towards the house next door. Those green glazed tiles at that end were obviously standard specifications<sup>1</sup> of a prince's residence. But the lush trees covering the vermilion walls only made it look eerie.

Xi Hongxuan followed his gaze over and said, "That's the Prince Qin's Manor. Prince Qin suffered from tuberculosis and passed away from his illness a year before the former emperor's ascension to the throne. This residence then fell into disuse. It'll probably be bestowed upon someone as a reward in the future."

"It looks even more imposing than Prince Chu's Manor." Shen Zechuan did not shift his gaze away.

“Of course.” Xi Hongxuan raised his thumb. “The current emperor was not a child favored by Emperor Guangcheng. At that time, the Crown Prince, Prince Qin, and the former emperor were the most outstanding ones among the imperial heirs. A pity the Crown Prince committed suicide at Zhao Zui Temple, Prince Qin passed away of illness in his residence, and the former emperor lingered on his deathbed...” He suddenly smiled. “Otherwise, how could the current emperor have had the chance to sit on the throne? Prince Qin was also quite the pitiable one. He initially had a close father-and-son relationship with Emperor Guangcheng during Emperor Guangcheng’s last few years, and Emperor Guangcheng often came here. But someone in the manor under him used his influence to commit violence and beat a few villagers to death. Consequently, a lawsuit was lodged against him, and Emperor Guangcheng punished him by putting him under house arrest in this residence. It was during that time Prince Qin contracted tuberculosis. Emperor Guangcheng even made a special trip down for a visit. No one knew what they talked about, but they eventually parted on bad terms, and from then on, Prince Qin fell out of favor. That punishment to self-reflect behind closed doors dragged on and on, keeping him locked up until his death.”

Shen Zechuan tucked this piece of information away in his mind, but he had no wish to discuss it with Xi Hongxuan. When Xi Hongxuan saw that he had no interest in continuing the topic, he raised his hand to wave away the servants who were swarming over to them. He said, “Although this residence of mine is not as big as the residences of princes and aristocrats, there’s still some way to travel. Lanzhou, my body is extremely weak, and I stink to high heavens. It’ll be faster if we take a ride in the small sedan.”<sup>2</sup>

The servants from the Xi’s residence rushed to prepare the sedans. Xi Dan was originally the household steward, but he did not dare to show himself now, and it was instead Xi Hongxuan’s eldest sister-in-law who came out to greet and welcome them.

Xi Hongxuan loved this woman, or at least he said so himself. He had repeated countless times to Shen Zechuan that he wanted to kill Xi Gu’an because of the hatred he bore Xi Gu’an for seizing his wife away by force. But then, his expression was indifferent as he watched that woman descend the stairs. He did not ask for her to help support him either, and simply dismissed her in a perfunctory manner as he took his seat in the small sedan.



Shen Zechuan lifted the curtain with a finger and saw it all clearly. Qiao Tianya, who was following outside the sedan, wanted to speak, but Shen Zechuan gave a slight shake of his head to stop him.

The small sedans entered the Xi's residence and made several turns before arriving at the courtyard where Xi Hongxuan usually stayed. His courtyard was different from others. It was not overly decorated, and the long corridor was connected to an office with wide-opened doors and windows, as well as a row of brightly lit lanterns. The sound of abacus within, mingled with various local accents, proved to be particularly noisy. There was a tea table erected under a mat awning on the open ground before the front hall, and seated and standing underneath the awning were the various shopkeepers and bookkeepers who had come from all over Dazhou.

At the sight of Xi Hongxuan, this motley crew of people all stood up and crowded around him. Those who were here to report expenses, prepare stocks, demand payments, and send greetings mobbed him all around, creating a din.

Xi Hongxuan first bowed to the crowd in a greeting, then said, "This humble one has only just returned. Look, with how stinky I smell, I won't be able to do any work. There's no need for any of you to be anxious. Wait here with peace of mind and take turns to go into the office on that end one at a time. As for me, I had merely headed out these few days for some fun. It's nothing of importance. Our business will naturally continue as usual. Oh, as for the shopkeepers here to demand payment, there's no need for you to fret as well. When has the Xi Clan ever missed our deadlines and defaulted on our debts? As long as you have the memorandum with you, I will pay back all substantiated claims in full!"

Xi Hongxuan hurriedly held Shen Zechuan firm as he pushed aside the crowd and called for the attendants to hurry over and serve tea and attend to them. He cupped his hands to those people the entire way before he managed to lead Shen Zechuan to a relatively quiet hall at the back.

"Lanzhou, take a seat first. I'll go wash up a little and have a change of clothes before I return!" Xi Hongxuan shook his dirty robe and instructed the servants to prepare the food and wine.

Shen Zechuan took his seat and drank the tea. By the time the wine and food to go with wine were served, Xi Hongxuan had returned too. He was dressed in a brand new dark reddish-brown silk robe. He took his seat and personally poured wine for Shen Zechuan.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting!” Xi Hongxuan touched the flesh between his neck and let out a cheeky chuckle. “Home is still where I feel comfortable. That cell is so awfully damp. I feel so refreshed all over now that I’m done washing up. Here, Lanzhou, drink up! You really did not show mercy this time. A few more days locked up in there, and I’ll be dead meat for sure!”

“It won’t go as far as that.” Shen Zechuan said with a smile, “That was just to intimidate you. I won’t deal you such a vicious blow for the sake of our friendship.”

“You really caused me so much grief!” Xi Hongxuan groused with a bitter smile. “The state of my back looked to be in a frightfully bad state. I’ll still have to call for a physician over to take a look at it later. Say, wouldn’t it do for you to just tell me outright if you lack that four million? Aye, you just had to go around in such a big circle!”

Both men chatted merrily over wine, showing no signs of the mutual hostility an hour earlier when they had been at daggers drawn with each other.

The wine was excellent, as were the dishes. It was only when Xi Hongxuan was almost done eating that he wiped his mouth with a hand towel and spread his arms apart to sprawl back on the chair. He said, “It’s not like I’m unwilling to give you the keys you want. But Lanzhou, you can’t have your cake and eat it too. If I return Qi Huilian to you, then I’d lost something to fall back on, so I can’t hand the keys over to you on top of him.”

Shen Zechuan, who did not eat much, set down his chopsticks and said, “I’ve done you a disservice in this matter too. But Second Young Master, there are some matters which I didn’t make up myself. Go make some inquiries out there, and you’ll know that Wei Huaigu truly doesn’t harbor good intentions and has no wish to help you out of your predicament at all.”

“I know they all have their own ulterior motives.” Xi Hongxuan wiped away the fine beads of sweat. “But since you were able to get me out of prison to another place, it means that the imperial court didn’t hand down that much of a punishment on me. This was His Majesty’s idea, right?”

“His Majesty went to great effort to protect you, so the prison can’t overstep their authority to investigate you. Now that you have been temporarily suspended from your post and have returned home, you won’t

be able to carry out your duties in the Bureau of Evaluations.” Shen Zechuan changed the topic. “I’ve already sent you back home. The issue of the keys can be re-negotiated, but I want to see Qi Huilian now.”

Xi Hongxuan threw aside the hand towel and smiled as he rubbed his stomach. He said, “As for the keys, we have to discuss and come to an understanding now. Lanzhou, you’ve never conducted a business deal before, so you aren’t aware of the ins and outs of it. It’s not the slightest bit simpler than being an official. Holding those keys will allow you to transfer out the silvers, but those are deadweight silvers. If you take them out, you will sooner or later come to spend it all clean. So why not put it inside and let me continue to take care of the business? Isn’t it wonderful to let your money beget more money for you? However much you need in the future, all you have to do is to just give me a number.”

He sat tight in his chair. The earlier din had already disappeared without them realizing it. The windows and doors in his hall were all wide open, and the weeping willows outside shrouded in the color of ink looked like a row of hanged ghosts cramming at the windows looking in. The endless night was still and quiet, and the candle flame blazed a little. Those servants that had been waiting upon them all seemed to have vanished. It was as if both of them were the only ones left.

Shen Zechuan slowly leaned back in his chair and said, “How the situation has changed. After stepping out of that prison cell, the Second Young Master has indeed toughened up.”

“I’m satiated after having had my fill of food and wine, and I’m not hurting anymore.” Xi Hongxuan looked at Shen Zechuan and pointed to his own head, “And, I’m still sober. I’m telling you, it’s not a choice between Qi Huilian and the keys; your only option is to take Qi Huilian away. As long as you give the nod, I will give him to you immediately.”

Shen Zechuan took his time. The little bamboo fan slid out from his sleeve pocket, and he grasped it for a moment to weigh it up. He said, “That’s not what we discussed earlier.”

Xi Hongxuan answered in a low, muffled voice, “The world of business is ever-changing at a rapid pace. Earlier, you held me by the balls, and now, I’m the one who has you by the balls. The issues under discussion naturally have to change following this shift.”

“What if I insist on both?” Shen Zechuan smiled.

“Then it will all come to naught.” Xi Hongxuan patted his belly. “Let me offer you a piece of advice, Lanzhou. Don’t be that greedy son of a bitch. As the saying goes, be content with your lot. You have already taken away four million. I won’t pursue it further. This is already enough for a gesture of goodwill, right?”

“Before the money has been delivered into my hands, it does not count as having taken it.” Shen Zechuan did not divulge to him the part where these four million taels would be split into two portions to be transported through the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path. Instead, he said, “It’s not an easy journey to make either. You know it better than I do.”

“I have the channels for escorting the goods. No matter how competent Jiang Qingshan is, he can’t keep an eye down there all the time.” Xi Hongxuan had already gained the upper hand. “I can think of ways to get the money to you. I said it before, and I’ll say it again. Lanzhou, I’m willing to give you these four million. But you have to tell me the truth. Are the three incidents of collapse, flooding, and epidemic your doing?”

“Of course not.” Shen Zechuan said. “I’ve long told you the honest truth. For this matter, you have to ask Xue Xiuzhuo. I can see you keeping a tight grip over these keys, so I won’t insist on it. As you’ve said, we cannot do without the other if we want to join forces. Now, can you give me Qi Huilian already?”

Xi Hongxuan pushed his chair aside to get up and say, “I’ve long gotten someone to go get him. You have been waiting for so many days, there’s no need to fret over waiting a little longer now.”

With his rotund potbelly, he took some steps to aid digestion. Looking as if he was considering something, he eventually walked his way to the door and strode a step out, where he shouted, “Where’s the man?”

The servant outside whispered something in reply.

Not hearing it clearly, Xi Hongxuan continued down the stairs. He took a few more steps once he had descended. The courtyard was dead silent. He suddenly jerked around and bellowed, “Shut the doors!”

All at once, the wide-opened doors of the hall were shut tight, and the windows were secured with slabs of planks amid the sounds of “thud”. In the blink of an eye, the hall was completely sealed. Amidst the rustle of the night wind, which sent the grim willows swaying, several figures gradually materialized out of the night to lay siege to the hall.

Xi Hongxuan gritted his teeth in hatred as he ripped off his mask and said, “Shen Zechuan! You still want back Qi Huilian? How insatiably greedy of you, just like a snake trying to swallow an elephant! For treating me like a fool to push around, I shall take your life tonight!”

He retreated a few more steps back.

“Drag over that double-crossing Xi Dan, who bites the hand that feeds him!”

Xi Dan had already been securely bound up by the others. On seeing him, Xi Hongxuan first gave him a kick to the face and sent him toppling over to the ground before he stomped violently on him.

“The audacity of you to sell your master out for money! Despicable bastard, rotten piece of shit! You forgot that I have your parents in my hands. I shall have your whole family follow him to the grave tonight!”

His eyes were already blazing with hatred as he spoke.

“Drag the Eldest Mistress up here too. Does she really think I don’t know she’s addicted to hooking up with this lowlife behind my back? Xi Dan, with that pea-sized gut of yours, you would never dare to betray me. But lust is like a blade hanging above your head.<sup>3</sup> Who can you blame if you let someone get a handle against you and ended up involved in the whole sordid affair of betraying your master for money?! Scum!”

Xi Dan was kicked until he rolled all over the ground and howled in pain, while that Eldest Mistress, whose legs had turned to jelly, was flung before Xi Hongxuan, where she wailed and pleaded ceaselessly.

Xi Hongxuan let her hug his thigh as he looked at her and said grimly, “Do you know he wanted to harm me? You know, and you still want to follow him. Were you already planning how to make your escape to somewhere far away with him? I’ve never treated anyone better in this life than I treated you. I put in a hundred percent of my love and handed over eighty percent of my life. And this is how you treat me.”

With a pair of red eyes, Xi Hongxuan hauled up the Eldest Mistress.

“Xi Gu’an snatched you away, and I snatched you back. I give you the same honor and prestige you have always enjoyed, and give you gold and jade so you never lacked for nothing. I hold you in both hands like my most precious treasure. You... oh, you!” Xi Hongxuan was so consumed by hatred that his heart was dripping blood. “Leave with him. I’ll send you both on your way tonight!”

Xi Hongxuan shoved her down coldly and spat, then said with a fiendish smile, “Draw your blades! Mince up these heartless and ungrateful creatures, and we can save on the dishes to go with the wine tonight! This Second Master has the money!”

He fished out large quantities of gold and silver ingots from his bosom and sleeves and dropped them to the ground, where they rolled with a clatter. Amid the sound of money colliding against each other, Xi Hongxuan staggered a few steps and burst out laughing with tears streaming down his face until his laughs gradually gave way to sobs.

“All beings in this world are driven by benefits. I have money. So why bemoan the lack of someone true to me? For money, one can kill their closest kin, their flesh and blood, their beloved!” Having thrown away all his gold and silver, Xi Hongxuan raised both of his arms high and shouted himself hoarse under the glint of cold steel, “Do it! I’m here to collect my debt!”

The crowd promptly drew their blades, and snow-white light flashed.



Thanks Alex for burning brain cells with Lianyin. \_(:3 丿 ∠ )\_

Footnotes



- 1.
2. 小轿 Small sedan chair typically carried by two people instead of the usual four or more.
3. 色字头上一把刀, literally, only the word lust (色) has a knife or blade above it. (referring to the radicals that make up the words 色, i.e. 𠂔(a component form of 刀 which means blade) above 巴 to form the character 色. i.e., lust can lead to bitter consequences.



## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 83 : SCENERY OF SPRING



Translated with: [Lin](#) & [Rie](#)<3



Overcast clouds shrouded the moon, giving rise to flickers of ghostly apparitions. The scraping sound of blades being unsheathed was just like the sound of silk being ripped apart in the wind, the tearing of which spelled the pressing sense of danger of an imminent peril. There were three taps of the bamboo fan in the hall. Shen Zechuan remained calm and composed as he held the pot to pour himself another cup of wine.

“You’re right.” Shen Zechuan picked up the wine cup. “We indeed have scores to settle tonight.”

Xi Hongxuan lowered his arms and watched with cool detachment as the crowd swarmed towards the hall. He said, “Clever as you are, if you had been willing to comply obediently with the arrangements, you wouldn’t have needed to suffer as much.”

“The moment you enter Qudu, you’re just like a caged bird in a pavilion, unmindful of the spreading blaze and danger ahead. You’re really an unfortunate and a fortunate one. Back then, you fought the waves for a fighting chance at life, and for that, I toast you.” As Shen Zechuan spoke, he slowly poured the wine over the ground.<sup>1</sup> “You and I both understand the principle that those trapped in prior predicaments are also the ones most unlikely to be obedient—because people who obey, nine out of ten, will not hold out until Heaven opens its eyes and lends them a hand.”

“I fought against the battering of waves, and you are also fighting against the same. The lives of everyone in the world are worthless. Shen Zechuan, I toast you too! You survived in spite of all the torture and torment back then, but tonight, you are going to fail miserably, like a boat capsizing in a drain, haha!” Xi Hongxuan laughed derisively, then abruptly turned indifferent, “Between you and me, only one may live.”

“You’ve taken your bath and drank your wine.” Shen Zechuan tossed away the wine cup gently and rose to face the doors. He lifted his hand and grasped the hilt of Yang Shan Xue, his thumb pressing down against that



white pearl as he laughed softly, “Do you really not intend to tell me Qi Huilian’s whereabouts before you go on your way?”

The flame in the courtyard abruptly intensified. Xi Hongxuan turned his head for a look; the residence was already up in flames. He bellowed, “Don’t bother contending with him! Whoever can take down his head, I’ll reward said person with two hundred taels of gold and silver!”

The doors and windows instantly broke apart as numerous shadows pounced like wolves. Shen Zechuan’s blade had already left its sheath. He took two steps forward, and blood went splattering along with the movement of his blade. The long blade that was Yang Shan Xue seemed to be forged from ice and cast of snow as its blade slit open men’s throats. It was so fast that there was not a stain of blood on the edge of the blade even as the blood droplets spattered over the windows’ paper.

Yang Shan Xue was the same as Langli Blade. They lay low in this Qudu collecting dust, restrained by their sheaths to become the waist ornaments of refined young masters. But give them the chance to be drawn out of their sheaths, and one would be able to catch a glimpse of the bloodthirsty savagery of the blades and their masters from those cold glints.

The tongue of flames came licking in a fury, and in a blink of an eye, half of the Xi’s Residence was engulfed in a sea of fire. Qiao Tianya leaped up the rooftop and dashed along the ridge to kick over the incoming killers with swift flying kicks before he hooked himself upside down and flipped atop the central hall. He stood on the roof and flashed Shen Zechuan’s gold lacquered authority token.

“The Imperial Bodyguards are investigating a case on imperial orders. The Xi Clan assembled more than a hundred gallant men from the martial fraternity for a private gathering right under the Son of Heaven’s nose. Our investigations have unearthed the presence of criminal fugitives and outlaws still at large among them. Xi Hongxuan’s intention is no small matter. For this, he ought to be executed!” Qiao Tianya said in a clear and loud voice. “This case pertains to the incident in which the Son of Heaven was placed in harm’s way. Anyone caught involved will be taken into custody at the imperial prison. The Red Cavalry<sup>2</sup> has already surrounded Xi’s Residence. You people’d best surrender without a fight!”

“Don’t listen to his nonsense!” Xi Hongxuan shouted. “I’m the Son of Heaven’s friend, one who has been through life and death with him. The Imperial Bodyguards harbor the intent to murder loyal ministers to cover up

their crimes. Those who aid me tonight are all upright heroes! You will all follow me to the palace gates tomorrow morning to receive your rewards!”

That burning loft collapsed with a thunderous crash. Xi Hongxuan did not retreat a single step amid the waves of heat as he stared closely at the figure in the hall.

“That eunuch faction has only just been eradicated. His Majesty advocates freedom of speech, and what he hates the most are treacherous officials like Shen Zechuan who want to abuse his power to deceive the masses and lord it over all! Gentlemen, the one who kills him will be a famous hero with his meritorious deeds recorded in history for ages to come!”

Qiao Tianya secretly spat. This Fatty Xi’s eloquence was truly outstanding. If they could not gag that mouth of his, then he could even make black out to be white! Qiao Tianya promptly kept away the token and leaped down, where he drew his blade to face the enemies head-on.

The sheen of blood stood out against the blaze in the courtyard. Up ahead, the scene was already in chaos, with shouts and cries everywhere as shopkeepers, bookkeepers, and servants ran haphazardly all around. The formation of Red Cavalry outside moved swiftly, having already blocked off all the gates.

A strapping figure suddenly stood out from the hall. Xi Hongxuan looked on indifferently. That body leaned back, as straight as a ramrod, and toppled over onto the stairs, the blood on its neck gushing forth incessantly. Shen Zechuan withdrew his blade and returned it to his sheath, then strode over the corpse’s arm and walked down one step at a time.

Xi Hongxuan suddenly burst out laughing. He laughed until he shook all over. He said, “I still can’t compare to you. By using this reason to kill me, even His Majesty won’t dare to blame or censure you.”

Shen Zechuan inclined his head to survey that raging fire and said, “You aren’t originally meant to die this early.”

Xi Hongxuan looked up at the sky and let out a long sigh. He was extraordinarily calm; those merry laughs and furious curses had all become a thing of the past. He said, “Whether I die early or later, I’m still being played for the fool in your hands. It’s too fucking much of an aggrievement! But it’s of no loss to me to lose to you. Shen Zechuan, I concede defeat. At the same time, I can’t take it lying down. A hundred forges to temper steel<sup>3</sup>—do you think you have already reached that stage?

The reason I meet my end tonight is because I underestimated my enemy. However, there are plenty of people in this world who see you as the thorn in their side. They are all lined up in a queue waiting for you. You may kill one, then another one, but you will never be able to kill them all. How lamentable...”

He gazed silently at the night sky.

“You and I were not born to be favoured. Things that are readily available to the others are yet things you and I have to fight for with our lives. The prejudice between children born of the principal wives and concubines is deeply rooted.<sup>4</sup> How absurd is it for me to be clearly born of the principal wife, yet live a life worse than the sons from the other clans born of concubines? My life is worthless, and yours, even more so. You want to charge ahead, to fight, to seize. But who exactly will succeed or fail in the days to come?” Xi Hongxuan spread his arms open, as if he was asking Heaven. At the same time, it was also as if he was asking Shen Zechuan, “There is no end to strife. Who exactly will fail or succeed in the days to come? Will you be able to secure your victory once I’m gone? You kill the others, and the others kill you. Haha!”

The sounds of Xi Hongxuan’s laughter were wild and unbridled. He suddenly crouched down to pull out the blade from the corpse on the ground and stumbled his way closer towards Shen Zechuan.

“I’m a man of the Xi Clan. In this life, I’ve triumphed thrice over Xi Gu’an; I’m no less inferior to him! It’s my parents who were blind! I placed my love in the wrong person, and exhausted all my love and hatred. I—” Xi Hongxuan brandished the blade to slit his own throat. Hot blood spurted over Shen Zechuan’s body. The blade tumbled to the ground, and he pulled at Shen Zechuan’s sleeve as he slid down to his knees along with the blade, slurring his words as he completed the last of his words with a forced smile, “... shall wait, wait for you... on the path to the underworld...”

Shen Zechuan watched Xi Hongxuan fall at his feet. Warm blood trickled down his fingers. He stood in silence for a very long time against a backdrop of roaring fire, then lifted his hand to shake off the droplets of blood.



The Xi residence was burned to ashes, and the Imperial Bodyguards brought the remaining survivors in the Xi’s Residence into the Imperial Prison. Shen Zechuan had Xi Hongxuan’s deeds – in which he amassed

hired hands and resisted arrest – all recorded in a memorial which he submitted to Li Jianheng to make his report when he met with the latter personally.

Li Jianheng was greatly shocked, but there was irrefutable evidence of Xi Hongxuan gathering men in his estate, and the Imperial Bodyguards had thoroughly checked the backgrounds of these people through the Ministry of Justice. This matter was handled so impeccably with no loose ends that even the imperial censors could find no fault with it.

Wei Huaigu was the most slick and sly. On seeing this, he promptly hinted to his pupils to first denounce Xi Hongxuan as a treacherous villain who had poisoned the Son of Heaven's mind and led him astray, before decrying Xi Hongxuan for putting His Majesty in harm's way; the collapse of the Ouhua Pavilion was actually entirely staged by himself. The Wei Clan really went all out to absolve themselves of blame. Such was the state of affairs when the tea had cooled after the company had left.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, even when Ge Qingqing brought men to search up and down the streets and alleys of Qudu and examine all entry and exit documents, they still never managed to find Qi Huilian and Ji Gang.

"They are definitely still in Qudu." Shen Zechuan closed the work documents on the desk. "He has the intention to use Teacher to threaten me. Sending them out of Qudu – if he did – would only make it harder for him to control and manipulate them."

"Teacher is a scholar, but shifu is a worthy opponent with few equals." Qiao Tianya said, "I've already sent men to secretly search for them these days. The search would surely throw up something."

Shen Zechuan said nothing.

Seeing Shen Zechuan deep in his own thoughts, Qiao Tianya was about to take his leave when Shen Zechuan called out to him, "Since there is no other business tonight, I'll make a trip to the Plum Blossom Residence. There are many matters to be discussed. You should leave first and wait for me there. Ask Gu Jin who are those in the batch of people Xiangyun Villa sold to Xue Xiuzhuo."

Qiao Tianya uttered an acknowledgment and took his leave. When he stepped out the door, he saw a few people resting in the courtyard. There were all seniors in the Imperial Bodyguards of fourth grade and above. Among them, there were even a few whose ancestors had been bestowed with titles and properties, and who could don python robes<sup>6</sup> and carry

Xiuchun blades.<sup>7</sup> Ge Qingqing had led his men to rest on the other side. Although everyone was an Imperial Bodyguard, Qiao Tianya could make out the subtle split into cliques among them.

Shen Zechuan had advanced through the ranks too quickly within the last six months, which inevitably made others green with envy. Furthermore, with his close proximity to men in power on all sides, he had taken over the mantle of the Northern Judge,<sup>8</sup> which could be considered to have established him as the top dog in the upper echelon of the Imperial Bodyguards for real. The web of connections between the men was as convoluted as a labyrinth; everyone, even if picked at random, was of privileged background and title. When the new replaced the old, it was customary for them to swap pointers with one another. It was only because Shen Zechuan had been too busy with his official duties that he had yet to draw close to them. But once the busy spring farming season had passed, everyone was bound to see each other one way or another during their subsequent missions.

Qiao Tianya's heart sank slightly. He let down the curtain and left ahead of Shen Zechuan.

Xiao Chiye had yet to return from the military drill grounds at Mount Feng, and only Gu Jin was still at the Plum Blossom Residence. Qiao Tianya drank half a cup of wine with him and made some inquiries into the matter of Xiangyun Villa.

"A total of sixteen people of similar ages. All of them were young boys and girls below the age of twenty." Gu Jin and Qiao Tianya sat on the railing at the bottom of the veranda. The weather was fine today, with the sight of green buds and sprouts filling their visions. He said, "As for their specific backgrounds and origins, I have already told Tao-zi to write them out and hand them over to the young master. Your master will be able to see it a little later. However, this is not an easy matter to investigate. These people are a motley crew, like a jumbled cluster of grass. There are no other similarities between them other than their ages."

"Doesn't this already illustrate the problem?" Qiao Tianya picked up that little porcelain cup that was half the size of a typical cup and drank up the wine. He frowned as he savored the taste of it. "The harder this batch of people is to investigate, the more important they are. This wine is pretty good, but why use it with such a cup? It's not even the size of my finger."

“Drinking holds you up from your work. If you reek of wine when the masters return later, you’re bound to get scolded.” Gu Jin did not dare to drink as liberally as he always did these few days after having received a dressing down from Xiao Chiye the last time. He simply sat for a moment. The patrols in the Plum Blossom Residence were under his charge, so he left just a short while later and let Qiao Tianya have fun by himself.

Qiao Tianya sat alone on the veranda and drank his wine as he appreciated the sight of spring. There was no one around, and he enjoyed himself nonetheless. He remembered that his zither was still here; thus he thought of taking it out to play. He rose to his feet and made a detour carrying the tray in hand, passing through branches that looked like green mist when he suddenly heard the zither. Qiao Tianya followed the sound in search of it. He did not charge out hastily, but instead brushed aside the green mist and took a peek out of the corner of his eyes.

The long walkway was facing the natural sunlight, and sitting underneath was a brightly illuminated man who was sitting cross-legged. This man’s entire head of black hair was adorned with an aged wooden hairpin. He was not wearing a crown, and he was wearing a sky-blue wide-sleeved robe with a *zhaowen* bag<sup>9</sup> hanging from his waist.

Qiao Tianya could not get a clear look at his face; all he could see was him idly plucking away at the strings. He would play a tune, then stop. A music score was laid out beside him. He was pondering it over when an gray-white kitten suddenly sprang onto his back and threaded its way around the sides of his neck to fish up locks of his hair with its paw to play with.

This man carried the cat down and tucked it in his sleeve, his mind still on the zither. Qiao Tianya recognized the zither as his own. He stepped forward slowly and gradually came to see this man’s face as his angle shifted.

The willow catkins of the fourth lunar month in spring drifted, while the green velvet buds all hung out to dry under the resplendent sunlight. This man was fair. Unlike Shen Zechuan’s icy fairness, which looked as though he was immersed in frost, this man seemed more like a smooth white jade placed under the sunlight of spring. He did not have Shen Zechuan’s cutting-edge sharpness, nor did he have Shen Zechuan’s breathtaking allure. But he was in a class of his own—ethereal, and unforgettable.

Qiao Tianya used to be a young master of a family of officials. In this moment, he recalled a poem his eldest sister-in-law had previously recited.

Such is the mountain of rocks like jade; as is the forest of pines like jadeite.

His unrivaled beauty, one of a kind; second to none, a man divine.<sup>10</sup>

Both of them had not even conversed with one another, and Qiao Tianya already knew who he was.

“Truly the epitome of a man of leisure.” Qiao Tianya strode up the railings and set the tray down on the ground. “No need to keep looking at the score for this tune. If you’re keen to learn, I can teach you.”

This man lifted his eyes to look at him. He laughed and said, “I think of wine, and the wine comes. I seek the tune, and the tune appears. Buddy, you’re truly my lucky star.”

“The springtime landscape in this residence is excellent. A pity no one appreciates it. It’s fate that I get to encounter you while enjoying the sights of spring. And it’s still fate that I get to listen to this melody. Bosom guests are hard to come by in this world. I’m no good at anything except playing the zither well. If you miss the opportunity that is me, then there will be no one else who is up to teaching you.” Qiao Tianya poured wine for himself while standing. After drinking a cup, he tilted his chin at the man. “So, are you learning or not?”

“Serving one’s teacher is akin to serving one’s father.”<sup>11</sup> This man put down the zither and dangled his jade pendant to tease the cat. He said in a composed and unhurried manner, “I can acknowledge you as my teacher, but to be someone’s teacher, you must first convince the person.”

Qiao Tianya stroked his slightly stubbled chin and said, “I, Qiao Tianya, never lie. Acknowledge me if you’re willing to believe me. Else, forget it.”

This man loosened his grip on the jade pendant and looked at Qiao Tianya again. After a while, he smiled and said, “I believe you.”



By the time Xiao Chiye returned to the Plum Blossom Residence, it was already dark. It was only when he dismounted that Chen Yang remembered and said as he led the horse, “Master, they said a few days ago that Young Master Yao has returned. Although he avoided the banquet, he will call on us to pay us a visit.”

“He’s a hard one to track down. Who knows when his interest for a visit will come calling?” Xiao Chiye took off his dusty and sweat-soaked outer robe and strode through the door to enter. “If he comes, tell the kitchen to prepare some light dishes for him. He has been with Secretariat Elder Hai long enough that he has grown accustomed to it and hardly consumes meat.”

Gu Jin came out to them, then followed Xiao Chiye inside. Xiao Chiye stroked Meng, who was on his shoulder, and said, “Bring in some white meat and fresh water. It’s tired out today too—is my man here?”

Gu Jin nodded and said, “He arrived a little less than an hour ago. He’s currently handling official affairs in the study.”

Xiao Chiye asked, “Has he taken his meal?”

Gu Jin replied, “No. His Excellency specially told the kitchen that he’d wait for the Young Master to return before having dinner together.”

Xiao Chiye looked at him as he turned his thumb ring around. Gu Jin got the hint and averted his gaze, not daring to stare at Xiao Chiye further. But Xiao Chiye’s mood did indeed take a turn for the better. Before he entered the room, he took off Langli Blade and tossed it to Gu Jin.

“Give the sheath a wipe.” Xiao Chiye pulled up the front of his clothes to take a sniff of the scent on his own body. “Send it in in a while. When it comes to sharpening the blade, I still ought to do it myself. Have someone keep an eye on the serving of dishes. There will be a lot going on tonight, but the water must be heated up enough. Where is Qiao Tianya? Have him take his Master’s python robe to the laundry room and scent it with incense before the morning court. That’s all for now. You may go.”

Gu Jin acknowledged his command and withdrew, and Xiao Chiye pushed the door open.

Shen Zechuan had been inside listening for quite a while. He dipped the brush in ink without lifting his head and merely said, “How virtuous. The Second Young Master is truly a man after my own heart.”



Bless Alex♥

Footnotes

1. In Chinese customs, rice wine or tea is poured onto the ground (usually in front of an altar or tombstone) as an offering to the



deities or in honor of the deceased.

2. 缙骑 *tiqu*; subordinates of the Imperial Bodyguards. They are mounted cavalry of the Imperial Bodyguards that wear red uniforms and are commonly guarded escorts of an official's retinue or entourage.
3. 百炼成钢 to be tempered into steel; i.e., to toughen up by going through many hardships or setbacks
4. Children in those days were classified according to whether they were a lawful or common child. A son of lawful birth (嫡子) was born by the legal first wife (this was the wife who has been officially married into the family, also known as a *zhengshi* (正室)). They also had higher social status and often received better treatment compared to the son of common births (庶子) born by concubines.
5. 人走茶凉 literally "the tea gets cold when the people leave"—feelings are gone when the people have left, i.e., people no longer fawn upon those who have fallen out of power.
6. 蟒衣 (or 蟒袍) "python (or mang) robes" were embroidered robes bestowed by the Emperor to officials with merits during the Ming Dynasty. It was a sign of honor and favor for officials who were granted the privilege of wearing a "python robe".



- 7.
8. 绣春刀 *Xiuchun Blade* is the blade of the Imperial Bodyguards during the Ming Dynasty.
9. 镇抚 Judge of the Imperial Prison, which specialized in using torture to suppress corrupt officials. During the Ming Dynasty, there was a Southern and Northern Prison (镇抚司) subordinated to the Imperial Bodyguards. The Southern Prison was in charge of interpreting military laws and managing military craftsmen while the Northern Prison was responsible for cases entrusted by the Emperor.

10. 招文袋 a small bag hung at the waist for keeping documents or money.
11. 积石有(如)玉，列松如翠。郎艳独绝，世无其二
12. From the Tune of Master Whitestone 《白石郎曲》 by Guo Maoqian (郭茂倩), a Song dynasty poetry anthologist. (T97 use 有 which is has\* jade but original is supposedly 如 which is like\* jade)
13. These lines describe a man whose beautiful appearance is difficult to describe in words. Jade and pine are often associated with a beautiful man, and they are used here to compare to the beauty of a male Adonis. No one else in the world can compare to his supreme beauty. The keywords here are his unique and unparalleled beauty.
14. 事师之犹事父也 from “Lü’s Spring and Autumn Annals on Learning” 《吕氏春秋·劝学》，a compendium of the philosophies of the Hundred Schools of Thoughts, compiled around 239 BC under the patronage of Qin Dynasty Chancellor Lü Buwei.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 84 : WEALTH



Xiao Chiye was conscious of the fact that he was reeking of sweat after having ran around the military drill grounds for the entire day, so he did not go around to the other side of the table but instead took his seat on this side. There were stacks of case files on the table, some of which were sealed with the Ministry of Justice's memorandum slip. From the time indicated on top, they were all from a very long time ago.

"You're investigating old cases." Xiao Chiye put up one hand on the back of the chair and picked up the little bamboo fan that Shen Zechuan had set on the table to fiddle with. "Just the Imperial Prison's cases alone took you half a month to investigate. Why are you even looking at the cases from the Ministry of Justice now?"

"There was a vacuum in the imperial prison in the four years before the former emperor ascended to the throne." Shen Zechuan looked at the files. "At that time, Ji Lei had Pan Rugui as his backing, so it's unlikely he would muck around to the point where he did not have a single assignment. But the imperial prison did not leave any case records behind, proving that many cases of that time could still uphold the standard judicial process of the Three Judicial Offices' Joint Trial. Ji Lei could only follow behind the Ministry of Justice running odd jobs for them."

"What I mean is." Xiao Chiye exerted a little force on two of his fingers to use the fan to block Shen Zechuan's view of the files and lifted his chin. "What are we looking into the old cases for?"

"It was also here we previously discussed the case in which Zhongbo's troops were defeated." Shen Zechuan set down the brush. "I spoke of 'befriending a distant state while attacking one nearby'.<sup>1</sup> Do you still remember?"

Xiao Chiye withdrew the fan and rose to his feet. He sidestepped the table and walked towards the inner side of the bookshelf. After a while, he emerged, carrying a scroll of a map. Shen Zechuan pushed away the documents on the table, and Xiao Chiye tossed out the scroll to spread it out on the table. It was an extremely detailed military topographic map.

"This is a treasure of mine I stashed away for special occasions." Xiao Chiye used the fan to draw a circle around the location of the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo. "I naturally remember all that you've said. You're

referring to the fact that someone used the Biansha Cavalry to knock out the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo, which lies close to Qudu. This is ‘attacking a nearby state’. Then, the Hua Clan fell into decline, and the Empress Dowager was forced to marry Hua the Third to Qidong. This is ‘befriending a distant state’. If we put these two together, then we can see that it’s to take away Libei’s powers by subtle means, rendering it powerless so that Libei would be caught in a predicament where it has no support nearby and no assistance from afar.”

“But the time such a game plan needs is too long, and the variables are countless. If the other party wants to ensure that every chess move he makes is without error, then he has to remain in a position where he can view the entire game.” Shen Zechuan rose and slid his finger from Zhongbo on the map to Qudu. “He has to be here. The former emperor reigned for eight years, which is too short to hatch a plot for the defeat of the Zhongbo’s troops. The time has to be pushed forward. Many things have happened during Emperor Guangcheng’s reign in the era of Yongyi, and these incidents have more or less influenced the direction in which the situation moved. He has to be somewhere within. I’m thinking of using these old cases to find some clues.”

Xiao Chiye looked at the map and said, “It’s hard to get a full view of it just from the files alone. You have to find someone who was involved, or someone who knows the details.”

Propping himself up, Shen Zechuan looked aside at him and said, “I don’t have such a person.”

Xiao Chiye returned the fan to Shen Zechuan and said, “On the contrary, I do have a candidate to recommend... but, what are you going to bribe me with?”

Shen Zechuan smiled and grasped the other end of the fan, but he did not take it away. Instead, he simply looked at him in this way and said, “Let me guess. The one you want to recommend to me is Yao Wenyu, right?”

“He’s a member of the Yao Clan. He would indeed know better of the many incidents that had occurred during that period. What’s more, he later went on to acknowledge Hai Liangyi as his teacher. Hai Liangyi has successively served in an official capacity in the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Personnel. He would, of course, know the details best.” Xiao Chiye pulled the fan closer. “Or, do you not care to meet him?”

"I've long heard of his name." Shen Zechuan said. "Whether he truly has the capabilities or is simply all form and no substance, I will know after meeting him. I do want to meet him. But when will he come? After today, I'll be tied down with work for the latter half of the month."

"Everyone else is queuing up to present their visitation cards<sup>2</sup> to him so that they can meet him. Which of them has such the prestige as His Excellency Shen?" Xiao Chiye said with a smile.

"He is like the banished immortal<sup>3</sup> who has fallen from Heaven, not meant for me to use. So even if I rack my brain and try every means possible to play up to him, it'd be a futile effort." What Shen Zechuan said was the truth. He had indeed heard of Yao Wenyu, but if they were to put this man together with Xue Xiuzhuo, he would rather choose Xue Xiuzhuo. This was because what they were doing was secular work; there were simply too many sordid matters down here. So even if one were to praise such an otherworldly divine being to the skies, he still did not have the inclination to woo said person over to their side.

Scholars were basically and practically useless.<sup>4</sup> Being an official was no less carefree than the courtesan prostituting herself in a brothel. Flattering those above you and trampling those under you; ingratiating yourself with another; taking a beating with a smile—each one of these acts was an art in itself. That Hai Liangyi did not get Yao Wenyu to descend to this mundane world was already enough to get a glimpse of Yao Wenyu's temperament. Who could bear to hold an immortal down in the quagmire? Just let him remain free and happy as he always had been.

But Xiao Chiye thought differently. However, he was in no hurry to voice it out and only said, "I'm merely a casual acquaintance of his. He has friends all over the world, but those who can truly sit with him for a chat are few and far between. His courteous but distant exchange of pleasantries is just the same as yours. You can just meet each other briefly and make an impression on each other. Should a need arise in the future, you'd be able to make each other acquaintances."

Hearing him put it this way, Shen Zechuan did not turn it down further. Xiao Chiye would not recommend a person for no rhyme or reason. Shen Zechuan made a mental note of it, planning to get Qiao Tianya to free up some time later to meet him first.

Xiao Chiye had spoken with Shen Zechuan as soon as he entered. It was extremely hot at the moment. The sweat he had worked up riding the

horse on the way here had yet to dry up, and the sky outside had already gone dark. Seeing as his temples were still wet, Shen Zechuan said, "Go take a bath and have a change of clothing. By the time you come out, you'll just be in time for dinner. We can discuss the other trivial matters later."

"Virtuous." Xiao Chiye lifted his leg to push aside the chair and suddenly bent over to hoist Shen Zechuan over his shoulder again. "Being considerate in words is only considered half of it. Let's bathe together. We get to save time, economize effort, and conserve water."

Shen Zechuan lowered his hand, wanting to correct the position of the brush that had been knocked askew. But Xiao Chiye had already taken a stride out to walk away. The hot water at the back was prepared pretty fast. Once the curtain was pulled down, it remained there for close to four hours. No one dared to interrupt the flow of firewood throughout. Chen Yang, being the most tactful, could read the situation best. Seeing as Xiao Chiye was about to take a bath, he instructed the kitchen to prepare the ingredients for the main dishes first, since there was no hurry to cook them as yet.

Shen Zechuan understood one thing, which was that he could starve anyone but not Xiao Chiye. Xiao Chiye could not endure it the slightest. He would place all those days Shen Zechuan had owed him inside, demanding his repayment as he held him in his grip. He was full of vigor and energy, and whatever bit of capability Shen Zechuan had simply could not be compared to Xiao Chiye's diligence and thirst for learning.

"I know it all." Xiao Chiye reached a hand out to rub Shen Zechuan's right earlobe and clung close to Shen Zechuan's ear to say, "There's no hurry to discuss Xi Hongxuan's matter tonight. You've been getting Ge Qingqing to scout around lately; are you looking for Ji Gang-shifu? The Imperial Army is keeping guard at the gates on our end. If there is an anomaly with the comings and goings, I'll send someone to notify you."

Shen Zechuan reddened from the rubs. He propped his back against Xiao Chiye's arm and closed his eyes to catch his breath, exposing his fair neck before him. His entire chest was heaving.

"Other than this." Xiao Chiye fastened the earring for him. "This Second Young Master will not talk about anything else tonight."

Shen Zechuan leaned forward, and the waves built up, layer by layer. He had a feeling of having a full stomach and on top of this, he tasted the pleasure and thrill of extreme abandon. It threw his consciousness into

chaos, making him murmur vague words under his breath, so much that Xiao Chiye, hearing him, went numb all over.

Between them, there was no putting away the wine cups after taking a tiny sip, only making merry to their hearts' content.<sup>5</sup>

The undisguised desire was what they sought from the other. Both men needed that headlong rush of when they held each other. Every worry they had could all be washed away into oblivion by this extremely harmonious and passionate coupling. They never whispered sweet-nothings in the most intense moment, when the surge of lust and desire for love interweaved. Instead, they replaced them with kisses in unspoken agreement; the impassioned it was, the more they had to kiss.

The water in the bathroom splashed all over the ground, and the steamy water vapor covered all remaining light from the window. The night was so deep, so quiet, that other than Shen Zechuan's voice, Xiao Chiye could not hear anything at all. He threw himself entirely into it, leaving nothing behind.

By the time Xiao Chiye finally had his fair share, he had already lost all track of time. He brushed away Shen Zechuan's thoroughly soaked hair and caressed Shen Zechuan's wet cheeks. Shen Zechuan lifted his fair neck high, hooked him closer, and licked his lips wet.

Xiao Chiye had yet to pull out. He kissed Shen Zechuan in this position and picked him up.

Shen Zechuan let him kiss as he reached out his fingers to feel his way to the messy discharge. He rubbed it all on Xiao Chiye's body until he was utterly exhausted and drained.



After they were done, Shen Zechuan ate a little porridge and got stuffed several more mouthfuls of steamed twisted rolls by Xiao Chiye. He had already changed into a clean inner garment. With Xiao Chiye's robe draped over him, he watched Xiao Chiye eat his meal.

Xiao Chiye had an astonishing appetite lately. Shen Zechuan did not know what he was doing over at the military drill grounds at Mount Feng, but he keenly sensed that Xiao Chiye was not in a good mood today.

"Go sleep on the bed." Xiao Chiye lifted his head to glance and Shen Zechuan and said, "You'll catch a cold if you lie prone here."

Shen Zechuan moved a fish over and grasped his chopsticks to pick out the fish bones. He was indeed tired to the point he was dozing off, but he

still took his time to say, “The repair and renovation of the military drill grounds have only just concluded, and there are enough funds to cover the costs. Looking at your expression though... is someone playing dirty tricks?”

Xiao Chiye ate for a moment with a calm expression before he said, “I want to add the blunderbuss<sup>6</sup> to the Imperial Army’s arsenal.”

Tough.

Shen Zechuan instantly knew the reason for his displeasure today.

At present, the blunderbuss was only allocated to the Eight Great Training Divisions. This stuff was valuable, and the Ministry of War would not assign it out easily, much less assign it to Xiao Chiye. Xiao Chiye had long set his eyes on them. The Eight Great Training Divisions had consigned this batch of bronze blunderbuss to their arsenal, where they had been sitting idly all this while. He had taken a few out to play with the last time, and it was from that time onwards that he started harboring the intent. But Xiao Chiye knew that this request of his would definitely hit a wall at the Ministry of War. Even Li Jianheng himself had no say in this matter, because it was of great significance, and the power to decide lay firmly in the hands of the Grand Secretary of the Grand Secretariat—Hai Liangyi.

Shen Zechuan thought for a moment. He held out the fish meat with his chopsticks to Xiao Chiye and said, “This thinking of yours in letting the Imperial Army test the waters in preparation for Libei’s Armored Cavalry is too obvious. Considering the current situation in which they can’t set you free, Hai Liangyi will no doubt disagree.”

Xiao Chiye did not like to eat fish because he was too impatient to pick out the fish bones, but now that he tasted it, he found it to be still acceptable. He ate as much as Shen Zechuan fed him and only said when the chopsticks were set down, “Even if he doesn’t agree, I’ll still think of ways to get my hands on them. Libei has military craftsmen. With the blueprint in hand, they should be able to copy it, like drawing a tiger with a cat as a model.”

As long as they had the blueprint, everything else would be a breeze.

“It’s just that this blueprint is not easy to get our hands on.” Shen Zechuan rinsed his mouth from Xiao Chiye’s hands and thought for a moment before he continued, “Hai Liangyi keeps a pretty tight watch on this thing.”



But Xiao Chiye was determined to have it, and the reason he had to have this thing was something Shen Zechuan understood the best.

Hua Xiangyi was about to marry down to Qidong soon. Qudu's strategy of "befriending a distant state while attacking one nearby" was already beginning to take shape. Libei must make corresponding adjustments as soon as possible. The Libei Armored Cavalry was not an invincible army. The reason it remained infallible was that its two successive commanders-in-chief were resourceful and adaptable to changing circumstances. If the Qi Clan really fell out with Libei because of the marriage alliance, then, other than considering strategies to deal with the Biansha Cavalry, Libei would also need to consider tactics to deal with the Qi Clan's infantry.

"The Minister of War, Chen Zhen, and Kong Qiu come from the same hometown. With this layer of connection, he could also be considered an official under Hai Liangyi. This man has some friendly relations with my father. He wouldn't necessarily even do my eldest brother a favor in the past. And now that it's come to me..." Recalling the displeasure of yesterday, Xiao Chiye paused for a moment before he merely said, "... There got to be another way somehow."

Once Xiao Chiye had finished his meal, Shen Zechuan extinguished the lamp. Both men lay on the bed, sharing a pillow.

Shen Zechuan had a plan in his mind and spoke up, "It'll be hard to go through Chen Zhen. Since he is from the same hometown as Kong Qiu, then it means he's from Qidong. Between Qidong and Libei, he would already have an inherent bias towards one. Blunderbuss... The Imperial Bodyguards might have the blueprint."

Xiao Chiye pulled him over for an embrace. He closed his eyes and said, "Xi Hongxuan has only just died, and those keys have already become a masterless gold mine. Everyone is watching you now; they are all dying to rip you apart to search for them. And you just happen to incur your colleagues' jealousy and envy at present. You need not bother with this matter—Look here. This Second Young Master has a way."

Shen Zechuan did not answer. Instead, he smiled.

Xiao Chiye slowly opened his eyes and said, "Those two million taels of silver will not enter Libei. I've already spoken to my eldest brother. The money will stop at Cizhou. You can take out these silvers anytime you go back there. You can't even play for nuts with four million taels. This Second Young Master wants to give you even more."

They were clearly trapped in Qudu, yet the way he said it was so genuine and sincere. Perhaps Xiao Chiye had told lies in the past, but he would not lie at this very moment. He was like a wolf pup collecting and hoarding up the stars, wanting to stuff it all to Shen Zechuan like that entire jewelry box of pearls and jade earrings. More often than not, he carried it out in action than to voice it with words.

On hearing this, Shen Zechuan suddenly looked back and said, “Actually, it’s not just four million. Xi Hongxuan had indeed kept his keys securely hidden away. But he’s no sage. It would be inevitable for him to divulge a word or two here and there to people close to him after hearing some pillow talk. The clandestine love affair between his eldest sister-in-law and Xi Dan had gone on for quite some time. Both of them were actually tricking the secret out of him all along... Sixty eight keys, thirty of which I know of...”

Meanwhile, Xiao Chiye, who was so poor that he was on the verge of selling his residences, was a little shamed into anger. He turned over to block off Shen Zechuan’s mouth, biting him until Shen Zechuan gasped lightly for breath.

“Xiao’Er.” Feeling the pain, Shen Zechuan was resentful. “You’re—”

Xiao Chiye pinched his chin to stop him from voicing it out. Both men toppled into the bedding, trading peremptory kisses.

The wind outside the room came and went, leisurely and carefree, sending the wind chimes under the eaves tinkling.

Ding Tao just happened to be on the rooftop feeding that plump sparrow of his. He had kept the sparrow in his sleeves, fishing it out from time to time to take a few looks at it. It was at this moment he heard the sound of the pillow being pushed off inside the room. He held the sparrow, wanting to stretch his head out for a look, but not daring to. Looking around, he saw his various *gege* each in their own respective daze. He gulped and said, “I, I, uh... I guess I’ll tell you a story. My father previously wrote it in the book. There was this...”

Qiao Tianya and Gu Jin kept their voices down and said evenly, “You shut up.”



#### **NOTE:**

This is the combined version of the original, uncensored version and

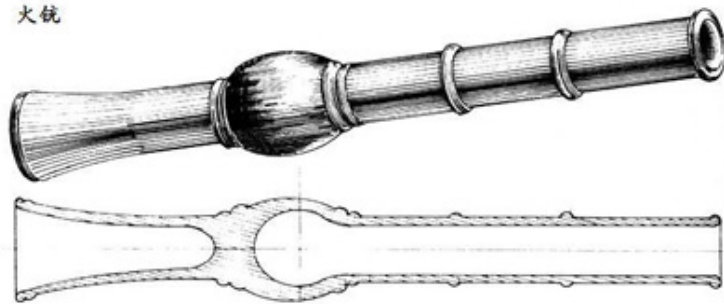
revised, censored version.

**Special Thanks to:** [Eggy](#), [Yunyun](#), [Lin](#)

**Footnotes**

1. 远交近攻 “Befriend a distant state; attack one nearby” from the Thirty-Six Stratagems (三十六计). This was in chapter 50.
2. 名帖 (also 拜帖), a name card (or visitation card) written on paper or wood used by officials, nobles, or distinguished people to notify the other party of their visit. It would usually indicate his name, position, and so on. It’s like a name card in the modern world.
3. 谪仙 literally, an immortal banished (to live on earth); refers to a wayward genius
4. 百无一用是书生 Because in traditional times, the scholars could not really do any practical work.
5. 浅尝即止 stop after scratching the surface; do something cursorily.
6. 酣畅淋漓 make merry/indulging and drink to one’s heart’s content. (° 5 °)

火銃



7.



8.

9. 火銃 Huochong, or blunderbuss (according to baidu), or sometimes known as a hand cannon, is a tube-like projection firearm. The Huochong gun was an important invention as the Ming Dynasty was creating weapons to defend themselves from attackers.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 85 : ASSIGNMENT

Translated with: [Lin](#) & [Rie](#)<3

With such a great misfortune befalling the Xi Clan, and with Xi Hongxuan having no children to take over the mantle, the shops in the various localities all temporarily suspended operations. The shopkeepers sent letters to Qudu, ready to set up a mourning hall in their old home and to discuss plans for the future.

Sitting on the chair, Shen Zechuan instructed, “This journey is a far one to make, and you’re also bringing along womenfolk. I don’t feel reassured. Xiaowu, lead a few of our men to escort this Elder Brother Xi there.”

Xi Dan understood the meaning in Shen Zechuan’s words. Afraid to doubt him, he hurriedly kowtowed to show his gratitude.

“There’s only the Eldest Mistress who can head the Xi Clan now.” Shen Zechuan glanced at the account books before him and said, “Pay some attention when you go back. Other matters are of no rush; stabilize the current situation first. Don’t lose your head. The deal we had discussed a few days back can be temporarily set aside as well. Once you obtain the keys, keep a low profile, and check the money vault’s entryways. A man’s wealth is his own ruin by rousing greed in others. Now that you have to look after such a big business and also manage the money vault, you’re bound to encounter some trouble.”

Xi Dan naturally understood that he could only bank on Shen Zechuan for protection now. He was a smart man who, having followed Xi Hongxuan, knew best to assess the situation. Going all out to work for Shen Zechuan was precisely to prevent himself from being regarded as a sacrificial chess piece to be discarded by the latter.

“With such guidance from Master, this lowly one dare not be sloppy. I’ll do my best to stabilize the business for Master when I return to my hometown.”

“Xi Hongxuan trusted you that much all because you have the capabilities to speak of. He was overbearing and domineering in the past,

and was only willing to get you to work on the accounts. But it's different now, and I'm giving you the chance to show your mettle." Shen Zechuan set the account book aside without looking at him. "Be honest in your work and play by the rules, and there will be plenty of chances for you to be in charge in the future. But if you deceive me, even by just one word, then I will claim this tongue of yours."

He said it lightly and breezily, but Xi Dan felt chilled to the marrow on hearing it. He hurriedly kowtowed again, not daring to look at Shen Zechuan further.

It was noon after Shen Zechuan dismissed Xi Dan and when Ge Qingqing returned. Ge Qingqing entered and removed his blade, and the errand-runner at the side came over to serve him tea, which he downed in one gulp.

"No one." Ge Qingqing pulled out a chair and sat down. He said, "All the Xi Clan's residences in Qudu have been thoroughly searched. There's no sign of Teacher and shifu whatsoever."

Shen Zechuan said nothing as he leaned against the chair in silence with a displeased expression.

"Could they be in a manor outside the city?" Ge Qingqing wiped his sweat. "The Xi Clan has many manors out there too. Who knows, he might really have hidden them outside."

"Shifu isn't Teacher. It has been so long. He would surely think of a way to come back and see me. But he didn't." Shen Zechuan's heart sank. "This shows that he's trapped somewhere; he can't come back."

Ji Gang was not Qi Huilian, who was too weak to truss even a chicken. There was almost no one who was his match in Qudu. Perhaps there was a highly skilled expert among the men from the martial fraternity whom Xi Hongxuan had hired with a large sum of money. But now that Xi Hongxuan was dead, this group of martial artists should have already scattered and fled, busily dodging the pursuit of the imperial court. So, where in the world would they care about the detainees?

"Call Fei Sheng over." Shen Zechuan said, "I have a mission for him."

Ge Qingqing was momentarily stunned, after which he said, "These people... Will he be willing to take it on?"

"Since he is registered to serve in the imperial prison," Shen Zechuan raised his eyes, his gaze cold, "then there is no 'unwilling' for him to speak

of. If these people cannot be useful to me, then leaving them around will only lead to disastrous consequences in the future.”

The Imperial Bodyguards had no lack of talents, but those like Gu Jin, who could scout everywhere and anywhere with just a pair of eyes and ears, were few and far between. This Fei Sheng was a son of common birth born of a concubine. He was an assistant commander, one who inherited his father's original post in recognition of his meritorious services. This person was the most outstanding in conducting searches, but he was previously one-upped and overshadowed by Qiao Tianya. He hung on until it was finally the eighth year in which he could be considered for promotion, and made many trips to Marquis Helian's place of the same clan. He initially thought himself to be the one to assume the position of Northern Judge. Who would expect Shen Zechuan to appear out of nowhere? The latter completely severed his future prospects, keeping him stagnant in his original post to await orders.

Fei Sheng was different from Ge Qingqing. He knew more about the circuitous official circles than Ge Qingqing, who came from an impoverished family background. He could even strike up a conversation with Han Cheng, who was his superior, and he could be considered half a disciple of Han Cheng. So, he was not like Ge Qingqing and the likes who had a former friendship with Ji Gang—he totally did not give a damn about Ji Gang. At present, he was a heavyweight in the Imperial Bodyguards, one on mutually antagonistic terms with Shen Zechuan. When Shen Zechuan was at the height of his glory a few months earlier, he had lain low and did not face Shen Zechuan head-on. But friction had been gradually building up in recent days.

Shen Zechuan had wasted too much time examining old cases, and half of that time was wasted on these people. They heeded only half of the instructions he handed down to them, and they were sloppy in their search and gathering of the case files. On his end, Shen Zechuan had been unable to match the records to the reign and had to personally make a trip to the Ministry of Justice before he could put it all in order.

The atmosphere between both sides was already beginning to get explosively belligerent. Ge Qingqing knew they were capable, but he still choked with resentment to be compared to them in such a manner. Yet, he also understood he was inferior to them. Finding the men was now the top priority, so he did not object and rose to go call Fei Sheng.

Ge Qingqing lifted the curtain and walked out to see Fei Sheng in another room drinking wine and playing the finger-guessing game with others. He stood beside the door and said, "Assistant Commander Fei, please make your way to the central room. His Excellency is calling for you."

It was as if Fei Sheng did not hear him as he stepped on the chair and shouted as he played with the others. For the entire room of people to be creating such a ruckus in broad daylight was truly a display of impropriety and disrespect.

Ge Qingqing had never flared up or lost his temper at the others. He had been tagging along on missions with his old man ever since he was young, and he had seen all sorts of people. He knew how to take care of others, and he had a sense of propriety. He could make the acquaintances of even the squad commanders standing guard and errand-runners below him in rank. No matter how uncomfortable he was at present, he would never at this time pull a long face and show his displeasure at the other party. As such, he strode through the door and grabbed the wine jar on the table to personally pour a cup for Fei Sheng. He said courteously, "It's nothing major, and it's not a mission on His Majesty's order either. It won't take up that much time."

Tossing the peanuts, Fei Sheng said, "If it's not His Majesty's order, then just get one of the subordinates to go. What does it say of him to be singling out someone like me with rank and authority? That doesn't make sense, does it?"

"His Excellency naturally has his own arrangements. Whether you take it up or not can be negotiated." Ge Qingqing poured a cup for himself and clinked cups with him. "It has been hard on the various comrades to be checking the old cases these few days. Assistant Commander Fei has worked hard and achieved much. Here's a toast to you. Men of capabilities are always overworked. Please go."

Fei Sheng did not care to work for Shen Zechuan. He also boasted of being Shen Zechuan's senior, so Shen Zechuan was not qualified enough to order him around. But when all was said and done, they had to work together. He had no reason to create a scene without good cause; it would not sound good either, if news of it were to make its way to Han Cheng.

Fei Sheng drank this cup of wine and smiled insincerely at Ge Qingqing. Without even answering him, he took his own authority token

from the table and turned around to leave.

Left behind and given the cold shoulder, Ge Qingqing set down the wine cup and cupped his hands to the surrounding Imperial Bodyguards – each of whom wearing various expressions on their faces – and left too. The moment he retreated out, his own men also stood up.

Ge Qingqing wiped his mouth and said, “Why are you all standing up? There’s no need for formalities between us brothers. Sit.”

Xiaowu, who was of similar age to Ding Tao, could not refrain from wearing his heart on his sleeve. He said in anger and resentment, “Look at his eyes growing on top of his head. He walks like a tyrant, all so overbearing and puffed up with his own importance that he has no fear karma might hit him hard in the face someday.<sup>1</sup> What kind of an honorable man is he, acting all like a snob? Bah! Qing-ge, why do we even put up with him? Remove his token and drag him out, then cover him with a sack and bash him up. See if he still doesn’t learn to behave himself!”

Ge Qingqing rebuked, “What insolent remarks are you spouting? If news that we beat up our own people gets out, we will be making a mockery of ourselves!” He looked at every one of them and continued, “We are all attending to official duties together. We mustn’t leave any misunderstandings or unhappiness festering. Otherwise, how can we all look out for each other when we are on a mission? Since they look down on us, then we’ll work harder to prove ourselves.”



Fei Sheng lifted the curtain to enter and sloppily paid his respects before the table. He still reeked of wine, the smell strong enough for Shen Zechuan to catch a whiff of it from where he was across the table.

Without lifting his head, Shen Zechuan said, “Drinking on duty is punishable by a deduction from your salary, yes?”

Seeing that Shen Zechuan did not get up, Fei Sheng pulled the chair over. But before his ass could touch the chair, Shen Zechuan looked at him.

Shen Zechuan unhurriedly let out a smile. “Sit.”

Fei Sheng could not tell what he was up to. He sat down and asked, “What can I do for your Excellency, since you are looking for me?”

Shen Zechuan replied, “There’s an assignment that no one else can do except you.”

Seeing as he had something to ask of him, Fei Sheng could not help but relax. He touched the pipe in his sleeve pocket and started to put on airs,



first saying, "Is it a prison assignment? If it's an order from the Commander-in-chief, then pass me the official paperwork and I'll be able to work on it."

Shen Zechuan tapped away the excess ink on the brush tip and said, "It's not a prison assignment, and it's not an order from the Commander-in-chief."

Fei Sheng struck the flint and bit down on his pipe as he laughed and said, "Then it's Your Excellency's order? I can do it, but I still have a mission to keep track and record of late. Isn't this just in time for the fourth month? I have to keep an eye on the price fluctuations of Qudu's daily necessities of firewood, rice, oil, and salt."

The so-called "keep track and record" was to have the Imperial Bodyguards record all minor and major matters in a book, including the prices of grains, rice, noodles, and tea; these were to be reported to Li Jianheng and Hai Liangyi whenever necessary. But this assignment did not have to be personally carried out by Fei Sheng. He was a fourth-grade assistant commander, and the only assignments in which he could be dispatched out were for arrests and fieldwork. By putting it this way, he was, in truth, not planning to take on the assignment.

"Why use an ox-cleaver to kill a chicken?<sup>2</sup> Having you do that is simply a waste of talent." Shen Zechuan said.

"I am a person of mediocre ability to begin with. I cannot be compared to such a naturally talented hero like Your Excellency. You are already a third-grade Vice Commander at such a young age, and His Majesty looks upon you favorably. What's more, you are a man of elegance and poise." Fei Sheng blew out puffs of smoke. "Men like us can only do some lowly work to muddle our way through. We don't dare to dream of anything else, and we don't dare to be one either. Wait for a few days. I'll have free time only after a few days."

Shen Zechuan said, "This assignment cannot wait."

Fei Sheng moistened his dry throat and half-leaned over to look at Shen Zechuan to say, "Then what can I do? Each matter has its own priorities. I have to finish the task at hand before I can take on your assignment. This is the rule set by Ji Wufan back then, and I can't break it. So, you'll have to wait."

Shen Zechuan, having received that smoke right in his face, looked at how fearless his expression was and knocked the ashes away to the edge of

the table. Capitalizing on his status, and thinking that Shen Zechuan could not keep him under control, Fei Sheng slid the chair away and prepared to bid him farewell.

Shen Zechuan suddenly extended his fingers to tack a slip of paper before Fei Sheng and said, "I can wait. But can the Assistant Commander wait? This year is your promotion year. But coincidentally, the Provincial Administration Commissioner of Juexi, Jiang Qingshan, is about to enter the capital to report for work. Surely you understand the Grand Secretariat's intent by having Jiang Qingshan enter the capital at this point in time. He will be going to Zhongbo to be the person-in-charge, and this person lacks an Imperial Bodyguards Inspector-General by his side... So, is Assistant Commander Fei still busy?"

Jiang Qingshan was a Provincial Governor who was outstanding in his governance of the area within his jurisdiction, having forged ahead and turned Juexi into Dazhou's granary. Libei's and Qidong's army provisions all came from him. This person was someone whom even Xiao Jiming and Qi Zhuyin could not afford to offend. Working for him meant that there would be nothing to worry about one's future prospects. Fei Sheng could not advance any further in ranks. He had to find external help. But because he was a son of common birth born of a concubine, he could not get to play together with all the bona fide direct descendants born of the principal wives like Han Jin, Fei Shi, and Pan Lin. Without that layer of connection, he could not make his way up through the ranks. Being stuck in this position made him feel shitty all over. Otherwise, he would not greet Shen Zechuan with such biting sarcasm and mockery.

Fei Sheng hurriedly extinguished the pipe and rubbed his palms at the sides of his legs. He bent over slightly and said to Shen Zechuan with a smile, "Look at me, not knowing what's good for me! What assignment? Tell me."

Shen Zechuan said, "I want you to turn over the entire Qudu to search for two men."

"Search openly, or..." Fei Sheng looked at Shen Zechuan and gradually cottoned on. He said, "That's easily done. I'm good at this. Give me their descriptions, Your Excellency. Five days. I'll definitely find them for you!"

Shen Zechuan lowered his voice and said, "I'm only giving you two days."

Fei Sheng looked at the slip of paper, clenched his teeth, and accepted!



### Footnotes

1. He literally said, “he walks like a crab, so very sideways (横), unafraid that he’ll hit the door on his way out someday!’ Walking sideways (like a crab) refers to someone being domineering and tyrannical or riding roughshod over others.
2. i.e., 杀鸡焉用牛刀 a small job does not require a big operation or a great talent

# QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 86 : FORMER RESIDENCE



Translated with: [Eggy](#)<3 (Author's Notes)



Hua Xiangyi and Qi Shiyu's wedding was scheduled to take place on the eve of the Grain in Ear<sup>1</sup> in the fourth month. The Ministry of Rites had already submitted the drawn-up process to the Empress Dowager. The internal affairs of the palace were numerous and complex, so when it came to such a major affair, the key government offices could not afford to be lacking in personnel.

Fuman originally thought himself to be the perfect candidate for the position of the Directorate of Ceremonial Seal-holding Director. He had the qualification and experience, having attended the Eunuch School<sup>2</sup> and having been in charge of managing the affairs in the Grand Secretariat and Mingli Hall. Plus, he had Xiao Chiye to vouch for him. As such, he was even more discreet and cautious as he attended to his official duties these days.

Unexpectedly, when the imperial edict was issued, the Seal-holding Director turned out to be Fengquan and not him. Fengquan was young, and he had little experience to speak of. He had never studied in the Eunuch School. What's more, he was a junior eunuch who was already over the usual age when he entered the palace. His connection to the former Pan Rugui and Ji Lei was one that could never be severed clean. To let him take on this post that was comparable to that of an "inner minister"—Fuman really did not know if he should cry or sigh.

"The promotion of an outer court official depends on his family social standing, place of origin, and teacher or master he tutored under. I thought the promotion of us inner court eunuchs would be exempt from this hurdle of family background and status. But, damn." Fuman set down the teacup and let loose a long sigh. "Who knew that we still can't cross this hurdle after all!"

"What family background does he have?" Xiao Chiye listened to Fuman's grouches and said as he leisurely drank his tea, "He's only

benefiting off his elder sister's glory."

"Your Lordship, why is it that I don't have a sister?!" Fuman slapped his knee and lamented.

Xiao Chiye snorted a laugh and said, "If the seal isn't available, there's still the brush. The Brush-holding Director also manages the Eastern Depot. Old Fu, by letting him take the lead at the head of the pack, you'll get to escape the spittles of imperial censors."

"His Majesty's current treatment of me can't be compared to the former emperor's treatment of Pan Rugui, and the Eastern Depot isn't as influential as the Imperial Bodyguards." Fuman hesitated, then said, "Your Lordship, looking at how favored Her Ladyship Mu is at present, if she were to give birth to an imperial heir in the future, then wouldn't Fengquan secure this position completely? Never mind if he is one who knows his place. I fear that he harbors an ulterior motive and ends up breaking the imperial court's laws and throwing the state into chaos. Wouldn't that make him the second Pan Rugui?"

Fuman had to greet Fengquan with a smiling face in the palace, but in truth, he was jealous and sickened of him. Fengquan had Mu Ru as a backer. If Fuman, who had been supplanted by him, wanted to stand up to him as an equal in the Directorate of Ceremonial, he had to win over the outer court officials.

"He is young, and he still has to rely on you for many matters. You often move around the Grand Secretariat, and you are a known figure to the Grand Secretary. If one were really to compare, he is merely a lad who usurps what is others'. He is no one worthy of mention." Xiao Chiye comforted him in his manner, then said, "With us looking out after each other from within and without, we needn't fear him. How is it going in the palace lately?"

"Second Young Master Xi is dead. His Majesty still thinks of the tune he had yet to complete and felt sad for a few days." Fuman turned sideways to look at Xiao Chiye. "But Your Lordship, while I was serving tea to the various excellencies in the Grand Secretariat, I inferred from Minister Wei's words that he still wants to investigate the Xi Clan's accounts. The Xi Clan caused such a big commotion at the harbor, and there is no head of household this time. Such a big business may be likened to a piece of fatty meat—it's a gold mine. They are all eyeing it!"

“Isn’t his family still alive?” Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan had discussed the follow-up plans for the Xi Clan. Those keys had fallen into Shen Zechuan’s hands, and in Xiao Chiye’s eyes, these were Shen Zechuan’s trousseau. Biding his time, he said, “Xi Hongxuan’s eldest sister-in-law, and Xi Hongxuan’s various cousins are all skilled in managing the business, and they have not committed any crimes. By investigating their accounts for no apparent reason, Minister Wei would be accused of hitting a man when he’s down.”

“His Majesty didn’t agree. But the Grand Secretary seems...” Fuman moved his arm onto the table and said to Xiao Chiye, “... seems to have the intent to pursue the accounts too.”

Hai Liangyi naturally has his own considerations. The Xi Clan had too much silver hidden away. Rather than let the remaining few clans divide it up among themselves, they might as well take that money into the state treasury and let the imperial court manage it. But this meant that Hai Liangyi had to fight with the noble clans head-on.

“The key is still His Majesty.” Xiao Chiye thought for a moment and said to Fuman, “His Majesty is a wise ruler, and he’s the most particular about benevolence and righteousness. It was only just last month that he granted a general amnesty. Wouldn’t raiding and confiscating the Xi Clan’s properties and possessions for no rhyme or reasons this month run contrary to the original intent of the amnesty? His Majesty is also hesitating himself. Old Fu, Fengquan will no doubt go along with Minister Wei for this matter. If you go along too, then it will instead look like you’re blindly going along with the flow. Why not use the opportunity while you are serving His Majesty to tell His Majesty in detail that it is inadvisable to go ahead with this matter at present?”

The gears turned in Fuman’s head. He said, “Won’t this offend Minister Wei?”

“Whether inside or outside the palace, there is only one master, and that is His Majesty.” Xiao Chiye smiled. “Pan Rugui was powerful and influential too, but he did not throw in his lot with the emperor. I’m not at all surprised that he ended up executed. Besides, how can Mingli Hall tolerate tongues wagging? How would he, Wei Huaigu, know of the words you say to His Majesty? His Majesty likes people who are sentimental. You don’t have to persuade for the sake of persuasion. Just mention it in passing.”

“I shall listen to Your Lordship’s advice.” Fuman was all smiles, looking warm and affable. “In any case, this money won’t land in our pockets. We all might as well not want it!”

“The Ministry of Revenue has been tabulating the Imperial Army’s accounts for the medicinal herbs used at the Zhao Zui Temple for quite a number of days. How’s it? Have you heard anything of it?”

“It’s been done and has already been submitted to His Majesty’s desk. Nothing is wrong.” Fuman knew that Liang Cuishan, from the Ministry of Revenue who was entrusted to handle this account, had been nominated by Xiao Chiye, so he said, “His Excellency Liang is truly something to sort out and keep the accounts in such clear order. He could even answer readily and smoothly when the Grand Secretary quizzed him about it. Looks like he’s on his way to a promotion too!”

Thus, Xiao Chiye asked no further. When Fuman was leaving, Chen Yang gave him the new tea from Hezhou they had prepared in advance. Fuman’s hands sank when he received it, and so he knew that there was something inside. He pretended to decline it, and it was only after Chen Yang repeatedly persuaded him that he finally accepted.

The next day, when the court was dismissed, Xiao Chiye waited outside Mingli Hall for himself to be summoned. Shen Zechuan was there too. Both men stood an appropriate distance away—not too far, not too close.

“There are people everywhere probing into the Xi Clan’s properties these few days.” Xiao Chiye removed Langli Blade and handed it to Shen Zechuan, taking the opportunity when Shen Zechuan received it to hold down his hand slightly. “Your Excellency ought to move fast soon.”

Shen Zechuan seemed to have something else on his mind. On hearing him, he lifted Langli Blade and said, “Yeah, he has already left Qudu and is rushing back with the coffin in tow. There should be news next month.”

“Hai Liangyi is not the same as the others. He has made up his mind to take the Xi Clan’s family properties into the state treasury. No matter how fast your man rushes, he will still lose the advantage of the first strike.” Xiao Chiye found Shen Zechuan a little distracted; thus, he released his grip.

Shen Zechuan’s palm sank. Barely able to hold up Langli Blade, he said, “... No matter how fast he is, he still has to play by the rules and follow procedures.”

Xiao Chiye cast a glance at Mingli Hall's corridor and asked, "What's wrong?"

Shen Zechuan replied, "I'm looking for someone. Shifu is missing."

Xiao Chiye said, "As long as there is no passage document issued, he is still in Qudu. The Eight Great Training Divisions would not dare to let people in and out without authorization during the epidemic. And the Imperial Army took over the patrol after the epidemic. If Ji Gang-shifu has already left, I should have news on my end."

"I'm also guessing that he's still in Qudu." Shen Zechuan paused for a moment. "Xi Hongxuan only did what he did to take Teacher away. Shifu went along for the sake of protecting Teacher. He shouldn't have been held up for this long. But if Teacher is still in danger, then Shifu definitely won't be able to leave on his own."

"Xi Hongxuan is already dead." Xiao Chiye turned his eyes slightly to look at the other end. "Time to get someone to check that gentleman's house."

Shen Zechuan followed Xiao Chiye's gaze. On that end, Xue Xiuzhuo, dressed in official robes, was approaching them together with Jiang Qingshan.

Xue Xiuzhuo was plain in appearance, but he had a scholarly and refined bearing. He was not the same type as Kong Qiu, Cen Yu, and the likes. He was gentle towards the others, making it likely for the others to form a favorable impression of him. On the contrary, Jiang Qingshan was not what one would expect. The formidable heavyweight of Juexi from the rumors actually looked younger than his actual age.

Both of them drew close, and the four men greeted each other.

In the past, when Jiang Qingshan came to Qudu to report on his work, he had only seen Xiao Chiye from afar at the Banquet of A Hundred Officials. As for Shen Zechuan, it was his first time meeting him. But his heart was not in this, so he was neither warmhearted nor pretentious towards them.

"Many old cases were closed this year, and it's all thanks to the contributions of Assistant Minister Xue and the various excellencies from the Ministry of Justice. His Majesty will surely lavish you with praises today when we meet with him." Xiao Chiye said to Xue Xiuzhuo with a smile.



Xue Xiuzhuo smiled too, shaking his head slightly as he said, "It's all due to His Excellency the Minister's perceptive and wise judgments that the cases could be closed. I merely assisted him from the side. How is it considered a contribution? On the contrary, it's Vice Commander Shen who straightened out and put those disorganized case files into order again. It has indeed been hard on him."

Shen Zechuan looked at Xue Xiuzhuo and said, "The imperial prison has an archive I can check. These matters are something that even a common clerk would be able to handle."

Xue Xiuzhuo's expression betrayed nothing. Other than Jiang Qingshan, the other three were all feigning civility. Jiang Qingshan seemed as though he did not want to get involved. He merely stood at the side and said nothing.

Fuman lifted the curtain and came out to call out their names. Only then did the four men move together into Mingli Hall. As Shen Zechuan strode in, he instantly caught sight of Fengquan, who was serving at the side beneath Li Jianheng's dragon throne. Both men's eyes met, and Fengquan smiled.



Fei Sheng prided himself on being number one when it came to conducting searches. There had never been a person he could not find. Yet, there was still no trace of Ji Gang and Qi Huilian even after he had gone through the entire Qudu these two days.

Ge Qingqing had followed him all the way. When he saw that Fei Sheng had now lost his arrogance and had been silent all this while, he asked, "Is there a possibility that they have been taken out of the city?"

Fei Sheng was serious when he was attending to official duties. Not looking at anyone, he squatted at the bottom side of the Xi Clan's burned veranda and said, "Unlikely. Since one of them had extraordinary skills, then it is only by taking them down on the spot that would ensure no traces will be left behind. For this kind of matter, the more the commotion, the easier it is to be exposed."

Ge Qingqing took a few steps back and surveyed this mansion with spacious halls and extensive gardens. He said, "But if he had hidden them at home, then how could it have escaped the searches of our brothers? We have long done a thorough search of this residence."

“Although I have never befriended or associated with Xi Hongxuan, I have heard of his temperament.” Fei Sheng rose. “He was suspicious by nature. So the more important things were to him, the more he would have kept them close to him. Because he did not trust others. Since these two men are so important, he would definitely not put them in a place far away from him...”

Fei Sheng’s voice gradually trailed off. He climbed up along the scorched wall and pushed aside the various branches to look over next door.

“That’s Prince Qin’s Manor.” Ge Qingqing climbed up after him and crouched down to look inside.

“Deserted for many years...” Fei Sheng jumped down and took a few steps into the painted corridor, where he saw the paint at the top had already peeled off. It was all gray and drab all around, covered thick with cobwebs. He used his Xiuchun Blade<sup>3</sup> to pick off the cobwebs and tried pushing the doors with paper seals.<sup>4</sup>

“That’s right. It has indeed fallen into disuse for many years.” Ge Qingqing looked around. “You suspected he hid them here?”

As soon Fei Sheng touched the door, he knew something was wrong. He said, “A decades-old manor, yet the seals are merely covered in dust. Something’s fishy!”

He took half a step back and abruptly kicked the door open.



#### Author’s Notes:

I saw someone question the need to keep considering the issue of ingots transportation instead of using banknotes outright. I’ll explain it here so that those with the same question can also understand the reasoning behind this.

Because I did not define banknote banks in my setting. If such a setting were to exist, then it must be able to contain Xi clan’s wealth and completely be beyond the imperial court’s control. It’d be considered as a self-made entity by the merchants, and therefore, it must have a high credit rating to ensure that the banknotes issued under its banner can be used. Four million taels is no small sum. Even if they were converted into banknotes, they’d still be subjected to inspection during transportation. The banknotes would also need to be protected against humidity and fire hazards. Most

importantly, because they are not officially issued by the imperial court, there is no guarantee that its usage across the various lands of Dazhou will be problem-free. As an example, for this amount of money to come out of the Juexi, it must be converted to banknotes at the banks in Juexi, but once it reaches Zhongbo or Libei, it remains a question of whether or not the banknotes can be exchanged for the same value.

If the setting were to include official banknotes, then events such as the defeat of Zhongbo troops, corruption amongst government officials, power struggles among political factions, and the emptying of the state treasury during the era of Xiande have resulted in the Ministry of Revenue being unable to audit their own accounts clearly. They would have even less capacity to issue and distribute official banknotes and paper currency. The issuance and distribution of such have strict requirements for the notes' materials as well as a standardized credit limit. So even if banknotes were used, there is also no way a few banknotes could net four million, given the limit on credit. If we were to consider using denominations of one tael, five taels, ten taels, and so on, the transfer of four million banknotes could only resolve the issue of weight. Subsequently, if the imperial court were to have a change of sovereign, or if the Xi Clan were to be brought to ruins, then whether or not these banknotes will depreciate in value or render void will also prove to be another source of headache as well.

Actually, there is an aspect of the Xi Clan's setting. I'm not sure if everyone has noticed. It's that the Xi Clan controls the salterns and copper mines. The copper mines mean that they can mint their own copper coins, as long as they have a firm grasp on the relative purity standard of Dazhou's copper currency... This is the fundamental reason they can pit themselves against the rest of the Eight Great Clans. Besides, isn't the large amount of silver warehouses in their possession also an indication that they have, in fact, already been mining silver in private and have the potential to manipulate the flow of silver in the market?

Of course, these are a few words from whatever little information I have on hand. Because I'm not familiar with the know-how in this field, I'm not comfortable with blindly adding in the setting of banknotes and

banks. In the case of silver, it makes more sense to only consider the relative purity standard of silver.

Many areas are problematic if we were to probe deeper into it, so thank you for your tolerance and understanding! As a result, today's chapter isn't much, sorry! But now that today's matter has been dealt with, we will return to our old schedule tomorrow.

Thank you for reading.

### Footnotes

1. 芒种 Grain in Ear, the 9th of the 24 solar terms, which marks the end of the grain-growing season and is the last chance for sowing.
2. 内书堂 Eunuch School was established in the palace to train young eunuchs to be literate. This was a deviation from the ancient principle that eunuchs were forbidden to learn to read and write.



- 3.
4. 绣春刀 Xiuchun Blade is the blade of the Imperial Bodyguards during the Ming Dynasty.



- 5.
6. Strips of paper used for sealing doors, windows, etc, for example, on a property confiscated by the government.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 87 : IMPERIAL HEIR

Translated with: [Lin](#)<3

The door panel fell to the ground with a loud “thud”, strewing accumulated dust all over. Fei Sheng covered his nose and mouth and strode in to check all the corners, not missing a single one.

This was the former residence of Prince Qin. Although it had fallen into a state of disrepair for years, one could still get a glimpse of its former opulence and grandeur. Fei Sheng lit the candle he carried on him, extinguished the lighter,<sup>1</sup> and headed into the inner chamber.

“The bed-curtain and beddings are all new.” Ge Qingqing lifted the drape and looked at the bed.

“There were still people staying here a few days ago.” Fei Sheng stopped beside the table and pushed aside the teapot cover to reveal the residual tea stains within. “They drank spring tea from the Baimazhou Prefecture of Juexi. Looks like Xi Hongxuan did not treat them shabbily.”

Ge Qingqing saw the bloodstains when he inspected the bed, and his heart began to pound. He lifted the entire quilt, then took a sudden step back.

Hidden under the quilt on the bed was a putrid-smelling corpse with obvious signs of livor mortis. This person had obviously been dead for a few days. Fei Sheng held up the light to inspect the corpse.

“This person was strangled to death.” Fei Sheng pointed to the corpse’s throat. “It was crushed outright.”

“There are bloodstains.” Ge Qingqing said. “He had wounds inflicted with a blade before he died.”

“Not only that. Look at his neck. There are two sets of strangulation marks, which means that the first time did not kill him. How could those men Xi Hongxuan hired from the martial fraternity alone be capable of forcing the shifu into such a corner?” As Fei Sheng spoke, he used his blade to prop up the corpse and slowly turned the body over. “There’s no anomaly with the livor mortis; so he shouldn’t have been poisoned. The gashes on

his back are in such a mess. Obviously, a layman who knows nothing of swordsmanship had haphazardly hacked away at him. The blade missed the vital points; that's why he chose to choke him to death. They should have joined forces to kill this man. I suspect the shifu was injured. It's likely he was too physically weak, and the Teacher had no choice but to take up the blade himself as a last resort."

The more Ge Qingqing heard, the more alarmed he was. He said, "Since the corpse could be laid out in such a neat and orderly manner, does it mean that Teacher and Shifu have not reached the point of panic yet? As long as..."

"It's possible that the corpse was laid out by others." Fei Sheng surveyed the place again. "There are no traces of a fight here either... I think Shifu was injured and did not have the means to display his prowess with ease, that's why he needs Teacher's help. But their second transfer was definitely not arranged by Xi Hongxuan, because none of those martial artists he hired from the martial fraternity would dare to set themselves against the Imperial Bodyguards for just a bit of money. Whether or not this corpse is one of the martial artists remains to be seen. If it isn't—"

Fei Sheng's words came to an abrupt halt. He was willing to work for Shen Zechuan because he was eyeing the lucrative post. If this matter was not a personal grudge, then it was going to involve court strife. He did not want to put himself right in the middle of it, so he did not finish the second half of his words—If it wasn't a martial artist, then this kind of highly skilled expert could only come from the imperial palace, and this corpse was possibly from the Imperial Bodyguards themselves.

Ge Qingqing understood his concerns. Both men fell into a silent stalemate. This house was creepy and eerie, so continuing to stand here like this was not an option.

Fei Sheng retracted his blade and said, "They are most certainly in Qudu. Each of the officials' residences and princes' manors has specialized bodyguards to stand guard. Their doors are tightly shut, and there are secret passages built inside. It's simply too easy if they want to hide a few people. Sorry, this humble one is unlearned and of little talent. I can only search this far for His Excellency Shen!"

With that, he cupped his hands to Ge Qingqing and stepped out the way he came in. He mounted his horse and headed back to turn in his report.

From where he was in his spot, Ge Qingqing saw that trail of blood drag all the way to the ground. So he followed the blood trail and knelt while propping himself up on the ground to look under the bed. It was even darker beneath the bed, and there seemed to be something there. Ge Qingqing reached out to fish it out, but it turned out to be a handful of ashes. Ge Qingqing blew away the ashes, leaving only a fingernail-sized piece of paper in his palm.

It was the remnants of handwritten notes that Qi Huilian had not thoroughly burned away.



Shen Zechuan closed his eyes. Sandwiched between his fingers was the piece of paper that had been burned yellow. There were only a few words remaining on it, yet these were words he was the most intimately acquainted with.

Qi Huilian's handwritten notes touched upon quite a number of matters. They were all treatises on contemporary politics they discussed back then in Zhao Zui Temple. Every little thing he had taught Shen Zechuan, and every inside story about the eunuchs he knew when he served as Grand Mentor, were all in the notes. During the epidemic, Qiao Tianya had transferred them all to store in the loft for Qi Huilian to safekeep personally.

To prevent the information in them from leaking, Qi Huilian had his own way of reading them. What treatise it was and how to read it were all something he had thought over himself during his spare time at the temple. If one were to read them in the usual order, quite the number of matters would appear to be just a jumble of words, much like the ravings of a lunatic—totally incoherent and incomprehensible.

But, he burned it. Was it because he was forced by circumstances, or because he was worried that the one detaining him would be able to read it?

Qiao Tianya, who had been leaning against the wall, involuntarily straightened up when he saw Shen Zechuan stepping out. Shen Zechuan swiftly walked down the steps and said, "Prepare the carriage."

Noting that it was already getting late, Qiao Tianya knew where he wanted to go. The inconspicuous and common horse carriage set off and circled twice on Shenwu Street before reaching the Plum Blossom Residence.

“Where is His Lordship?” Shen Zechuan got off the carriage and asked.

On seeing his solemn expression, Ding Tao did not dare to play around and replied honestly, “His Lordship has just gone out to invite that Eldest Master Xue for a drink. He will return later. Your Excellency, do you need me to go and call His Lordship back? It’s just a few streets away.”

For Xiao Chiye to invite Xue Xiuyi for a drink at this moment, he must also be trying to probe deeper into Xue Xiuzhuo. The Xue Residence was not an easy one to investigate. It was far more convenient to have an insider like Xue Xiuyi around than to send someone to grope around in the dark for clues.

Shen Zechuan walked into the courtyard and said, “You just need to tell him that I’ll be resting here tonight. Tell him to come back after he’s done drinking. Don’t stay out all night. But also tell him there’s no hurry; there’s no need for him to rush back immediately. Xue Xiuyi is not an easy one to dismiss at will.”

Ding Tao uttered an acknowledgment and left. Qiao Tianya followed Shen Zechuan and asked, “Why the sudden hurry?”

“Xi Hongxuan didn’t trust anyone, but he trusted Xue Xiuzhuo.” Shen Zechuan headed up the stairs under the dim light from the lantern. “That last time Xi Dan defrauded him, he rather suspected Xi Dan than to suspect Xue Xiuzhuo. He always had to ask about everything. Having gotten hold of Teacher this time, he no doubt wouldn’t dare to act on his own.”

Before his death, Xi Hongxuan was so sure that Shen Zechuan would lose. Why? He must have known something that Shen Zechuan still did not know as yet. Xi Hongxuan’s promotion to the Bureau of Evaluations was on Xue Xiuzhuo’s suggestion. He heeded Xue Xiuzhuo’s advice that much—Why would he?

Shen Zechuan suddenly paused in his steps and stood where he was.

The Xue Clan had already been on the decline for a long time. Xi Hongxuan would never comply and put himself at the disposal of a down-and-out person. He would also never be that easily won over by anyone. They came to associate with each other through the solidarity between fellow students. Because both clans were related by marriage in the previous generations, they had ties of kinship and friendship between them. But, what did Xue Xiuzhuo use to maintain his hold over Xi Hongxuan? Xi Hongxuan put profit before anything else. He could even kill his dear blood



brother on a whim. It was impossible for Xue Xiuzhuo to gain his trust of such proportion with just that flimsy bit of blood relationship alone.

Shen Zechuan started to grow apprehensive for no reason. He looked at the eaves. The shadow was like a threatening beast, baring its fangs and brandishing its claws. It had already bitten half of his body between its sharp fangs. Clues that he could not pry apart clearly were just like the dense clusters of water weeds that, along with the colors of the night, entangled and tied down his hands and legs, giving him an inkling of the danger.



When Xiao Chiye saw Ding Tao come in midway through his drinking session with Xue Xiuyi that he had invited the latter to, he knew that Shen Zechuan had returned to the residence. As he socialized with the other man, he gave Ding Tao a slight nod to indicate his awareness of it.

Xue Xiuyi was half-drunk again. He wanted to call a few prostitutes down for company. But Xiao Chiye said nothing of this, so he did not dare to call for them rashly. Still grabbing the wine cup, he said to Xiao Chiye even as his wine-induced hiccups persisted, "He... Xue Yanqing! That batch of fledglings he is raising in the residence, he specifically put them in a big courtyard, and even habitually hire... hire, hire a teacher to set up some kind of private school... If you ask me, he doesn't seem like he's raising prostitutes."

"Is that so?" Xiao Chiye downed several cups of wine, showing no sign of being drunk. Beside him, Chen Yang filled Xue Xiuyi's cup to the brim again. Xiao Chiye casually clinked cups with him and said, "Then why did he buy those batch of people? There has to be a reason."

"There's something odd about Xue Xiuzhuo!" Xue Xiuyi drank several mouthfuls of wine and continued, "If not for Your Lordship's reminder, I would not have noticed... The people he bought are similar in age, but they are all good-looking, with boys and girls both pleasing to the eye. I know there are quite a number of people in the imperial court who are into males. Each of those male prostitutes on Donglong Street is all delicate and supple. They are no less inferior to real, real women! Is he thinking that the ones sold outside are unclean, and that would easily open himself up to gossip and ridicules, so he had to raise a batch on the sly for future connection building?"

Xiao Chiye did not listen to him prattle on. He toasted him and said, "Then he's going to have to put in a lot of time and effort. Those popular and known male courtesans on Donglong Street only got to where they are today because of patrons spending cold, hard cash on them. He bought both boys and girls. Is the teacher he hired only teaching the boys?"

"That's the odd thing!" Xue Xiuyi's drunken state was an ungentlemanly sight to behold. He lowered his head for a moment and finally stopped the hiccups before he said to Xiao Chiye, "Your Lordship, he let those girls learn music, chess, calligraphy, and painting.<sup>2</sup> I know why; which man wouldn't like a pretty lady as a study companion? Yet he let those boys study essays on current affairs."

Xiao Chiye's eyes swiftly turned to look at Xue Xiuyi. He repeated, "He let those boys study essays on current affairs? Just that alone?"

Xue Xiuyi shook his head hard. He extended his finger and said, "He set up a small school in that courtyard. Occasionally, he would go there to teach them himself. Your Lordship, do you know what he taught? They were all proper classics. Just the previous day, he was teaching these boys... contemporary politics!"

\* \* \*

Xiao Chiye returned home very late. He saw that the room was still lit, and so he knew Shen Zechuan was still waiting for him. Chen Yang dismissed the attendants serving them, leaving only a few of them guards to stand watch over the courtyard.

As usual, Xiao Chiye stepped inside. There was only a glazed lamp lit inside. Shen Zechuan was before the small table, looking at the cases. He had already removed his crown, and was draped with Xiao Chiye's large robe, looking as he always did before he retired for the night.

Xiao Chiye leaned over to press down on Shen Zechuan's back and tilted his head to kiss his earlobe. He said, "Leave a note if something's the matter. It's the same discussing it tomorrow morning upon waking up."

Shen Zechuan uttered an acknowledgment and turned his head to look at him.

Xiao Chiye got up, removed his blade, took out his outer garment, and sat cross-legged beside Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan's fingertips pinched the page of the book, but he did not turn it over. He said, "Some things have to be discussed in person; it can't be clearly explained in just a word or two."

Xiao Chiye finally relaxed and undid his clasps. He said, "Let's take turns. You first or me first?"

Shen Zechuan looked at him for a moment, but Xiao Chiye did not pull him closer, so he raised his fingers to help him undo the clasps. After thinking for a moment, he said, "There are many things I have yet to wrap my head around. You go first."

Propping up his elbow on the small table, Xiao Chiye flipped out another book from the cabinet at the side and handed it to Shen Zechuan. As the latter read it, he said, "Of the batch of people Xue Xiuzhuo bought, the eldest is eighteen years old, and the youngest is fourteen. Boys and girls, both mixing in one courtyard. The only thing they could be said to have in common is that they are all good-looking."

"Eight Great Cities. Zhongbo. Juexi." Shen Zechuan's fingertip followed the names. "He didn't look at their place of origin when he bought them."

"This might be to obscure the truth so that others would have nowhere to start checking even if they wanted to." Seeing Shen Zechuan come to a sudden stop at a certain spot, Xiao Chiye moved in closer for a look. "You've seen this name before?"

Shen Zechuan looked at that name and said, "Ling Ting... I've heard this name before at Xiangyun Villa."

"They are all Xiangyun's people." Xiao Chiye said. "She likes smart and sharp children; that's why she used 'Ling' as a surname and changed all the names of these fledglings."

"You had a drink with Xue Xiuyi earlier tonight. Did he say anything?"

"He said something strange." Xiao Chiye paused for a moment. "He said Xue Xiuzhuo bought this batch of people back to the residence, where the girls learn all those stuff the brothels teach, while the boys attended proper school. Xue Xiuzhuo hired a teacher for these boys. There's not only essays on current affairs from the Imperial College but also discourse on contemporary politics."

Shen Zechuan pondered it over and said nothing.

Xiao Chiye said, "If he wants students, he could have picked them from decent households. There are plenty of people from the Imperial College who want to formally acknowledge him as their teacher. Yet, it is in such a way to teach the boys he bought back from the brothel. Even if these people really accomplish something in their studies, they still can't join the ranks

of officials due to their lowly status. So what's in it for him? Unless he intends to raise a bunch of in-residence hangers-on.”<sup>3</sup>

“Xue Xiuzhuo...” Shen Zechuan seemed to be drifting away, lost in his thought. He listened to Xiao Chiye's words and swiftly organized his thoughts. “If he wants to keep hangers-on, there are better candidates. You and I missed out a point earlier. Xue Xiuzhuo and Xi Hongxuan are on good terms. It's not like Ouhua Pavilion can't afford to give him the batch of brothel fledglings he wants, isn't it? Yet, he specifically used money to buy them from Xiangyun Villa. This shows that he had his sights all along on a certain someone among that batch.”

The images in Shen Zechuan's mind flashed past. Although he did not have Ding Tao's photographic memory, he kept every single matter and every single word from his past interactions with the others in his mind to mull over. He remembered them all; he would not forget any details.

“As long as the blood of the Li Clan runs in him, he's the imperial heir.”

Grand Mentor's Qi words were like a thunderbolt that cleaved apart the current muddle in Shen Zechuan's mind. Once he thought of this phrase, he thought of many more. He abruptly straightened up in his kneeling pose, and his sleeves flipped over and messed up several pages of papers on the small table.

“The former emperor...” Shen Zechuan grabbed hold of Xiao Chiye's arm. His voice gradually calmed as he said, “The former emperor reigned for a little more than eight years. His chronic illness went uncured, and he had no imperial heirs; the only one who got pregnant was Imperial Concubine Wei. During the Nanlin Hunting Grounds incident, the Hua Clan rebelled. Hua Siqian had the guts to make his move that night precisely because of the child in Imperial Concubine Wei's belly. But after that night, when we returned to the capital, Imperial Concubine Wei was already thrown into a well to drown. At first, I suspected you, but then later on, I suspected it to be a long-time minister from Hai Liangyi's side. They did it to completely sever the noble clans' wishful thinking and let Li Jianheng ascend to the throne smoothly. That's why they struck first to gain the upper hand and killed off Imperial Concubine Wei. But now that I think about it, there's something wrong with this assumption. Even if Imperial Concubine Wei was with child, there was still no knowing if it was a boy or a girl,<sup>4</sup> so there was no way they could pit the child against Li Jianheng, who already

had the support of Libei. To Hai Liangyi, killing Imperial Concubine Wei is an unnecessary move.”

“Going further back, Emperor Guangcheng was on the throne before Emperor Xiande. The Crown Prince of the Eastern Palace slit his own throat in Zhao Zui Temple because of the rebellion case. At that time, the Imperial Grandson was still an infant. If he didn’t die, he should be twenty-six years of age this year. However, this case was jointly handled by Ji Lei and Shen Wei. Ji Lei, in order to defect to Pan Rugui back then and show his loyalty, would surely not dare to be too sloppy and careless. So it’s even more unlikely for him to leave such a big source of disaster behind. In that case, then the one in this world who can still claim to be an imperial heir could only be—”

Xiao Chiye grasped back Shen Zechuan’s icy cold hand and continued in a deep, lowered voice, “The eldest is eighteen, and the youngest is fourteen. If it’s truly the imperial heir, then the only one who can match the timeline is Emperor Guangcheng. The Eastern Palace was massacred in the era of Yongyi. For nearly a decade after that, no imperial concubine was able to give birth to an imperial heir right under the Empress Dowager’s watchful eyes. Although Emperor Guangcheng was suffering from an illness at that time, he wasn’t ill to the extent he was weak and frail. Unable to break free from the Hua Clan’s hold over him, he could only think of a way outside the palace.”

“Other than me, the only one who knew that Ouhua Pavilion had been hollowed out beneath to be filled with jars was Xue Xiuzhuo. The collapse case was an attempt to kill Li Jianheng, and this is the part I haven’t been able to figure out. Assuming now that he really has an imperial heir in hand, then everything else makes sense. He killed Imperial Concubine Wei, then tried to kill Li Jianheng.” That hidden unease of Shen Zechuan was becoming more and more distinct.

Xiao Chiye was also daunted by this out-of-the-blue conjecture. He said, “If that is truly the case, then the imperial heir is among that batch of people.”

Both men faced each other. Shen Zechuan kept his voice down and said, “This imperial heir—”

“Must not live.” Xiao Chiye pinched Shen Zechuan’s chin and closed the distance between them. His gaze was deep and grave. “Lanzhou, we cannot let a single one of these people live.”

He spoke slowly. His intent to kill was like a raging wave buried in these depths. Both of them thought plenty in this very instant. What was the implication of the imperial heir? It implied that everything in the present will all turn passive. Would the noble clan who had the imperial heir in their grasp be easily defeated? Think about the Empress Dowager, who had ruled behind a screen<sup>5</sup> for as long as twenty years. The Li Clan she had in her control could only become her puppet. The power and influence of political factions formed of the aristocratic clans would surely rise again, and Hai Liangyi would once again be beaten back into a disadvantageous position!

All of a sudden, the sound of knocking rang out from the other side of the door, breaking the heavy atmosphere between both men.

Xiao Chiye said, "Speak."

Qiao Tianya said with slight urgency, "Master, the man who has been hurrying all night to catch up with Xi Dan is back."

Shen Zechuan stood up at once, gathered his clothes together, and opened the door. Qiao Tianya quickly stepped aside to create a path for him. Shen Zechuan looked at Ge Qingqing, who was kneeling on one knee in the courtyard, and went down the steps. He said, "What's wrong?"

"Your Excellency." Ge Qingqing looked up. His voice was hoarse and shaky. "Xi Dan opened the Xi Clan's money vault, but it has already been emptied out."

The leaves on the branches in the courtyard rustled in the wind as the trees abruptly inclined their heads to look askance at Ge Qingqing. Moonlight smeared the ground white, as if paving it with a thick blanket of frost. In the dead silence, Shen Zechuan turned his head back a little and said to Xiao Chiye, "Er-lang, we've been played for fools by him."

His tone was soft and gentle, but it made the entire courtyard of guards all lower their heads.



Footnotes



- 1.
2. 火折子 a kind of lighter used in the old times. It's small and portable, and to use it, you can just blow at it until it lights up.
3. 琴棋书画 Also known as the Four Arts (四艺), which are the accomplishments of a well-educated scholar of the old school
4. 清客 hanger-on, or literary retainers, of the rich and powerful (said of writers, artists, etc. who are patronized as status symbols by rich and powerful people)
5. It was typically the males who had the rights to the throne. A girl typically would not pose that much of a threat than a boy would.
6. 垂帘听政 literally to hold court behind a screen or curtain. A practice in ancient China, where the Empress or Empress dowager was allowed to preside over the imperial court without actually being seen by her subjects since women were prohibited from politics. This would usually be done by a child emperor's mother, who would serve as regent and rule in place of the emperor.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 88 : IMPERIAL PRECEPTOR



The refreshing breeze came blowing gently, and the chilly night made one cold with fear.

Xiao Chiye's earlier intent to kill was largely dispelled by this "Er-lang". He stayed silent for a long while, bathed in this pleasant coolness as he calmed himself.

Shen Zechuan looked back again at Ge Qingqing. Without looking the least bit flustered, he said, "Transporting this many silvers is not something that can be achieved in a short time. No matter how thorough he is, he can't deceive the entire world. Gather some men tonight to head out of the city. First, head to Qinzhou and make detailed inquiries along the way. Record down all the business transactions of the major goods in the past two years from Juexi to the Northeast, then send someone to give me a detailed account."

Ge Qingqing had been heavyhearted with worries after receiving the news. But when he saw how unperturbed Shen Zechuan was, he could not help but feel a little relieved and composed himself too.

"Chen Yang." With his robe hanging off his shoulders, Xiao Chiye motioned, "Take them to the Interpreters Institute<sup>1</sup> in Qudu first. Get a batch of medium-grade horses and affix their tags to the official writ of arrest for the notorious bandit leader. Say that the bandit is on the run in Juexi. It's not convenient for the Imperial Army to head out of the city to pursue and apprehend him; thus this task is entrusted to the Imperial Bodyguards. I'll personally make a trip to the Ministry of War and the Ministry of Justice tomorrow morning to submit a report."

The city gates were already closed, and they could not leave the city arbitrarily. The Imperial Bodyguards were also involved in the important tasks of conducting raids and arrests of criminals, and they usually had to report to the Ministry of Justice and Chief Surveillance Bureau whenever they had to leave the city for fieldwork, then waited for the official approval in reply. By doing this, Xiao Chiye was giving Ge Qingqing a reason to take the men out of the capital and to excuse him from being subsequently called to account by the Ministry of Justice.



Ge Qingqing immediately left upon getting his order. Chen Yang threw on his robe and led the way, and both men left the residence ahead of the others.

Xiao Chiye led the flimsily-dressed Shen Zechuan back by the hand. When he stepped through the door into the room and saw that Shen Zechuan was still deep in thought, he said, "What happened to Teacher is no doubt connected to Xue Xiuzhuo. But since he's willing to transfer him away, that means Teacher is still of use to him. He won't act rashly and kill Teacher. There are too many secrets hidden in the Xue's Residence. I have to think of a reason to get a special search-and-arrest warrant from His Majesty."

"To deploy the Imperial Army, it has to be a major case where the evidence is irrefutable. So we still have to rely on the Imperial Bodyguards for the probe today." Shen Zechuan did not sit back in his original seat. He knew that resting would prove to be hard tonight, seeing as it was already late, so he poured himself a cup of strong tea. However, he only took a sip and gave the rest to Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye drank it all and said, "Xue Xiuzhuo is cautious in everything he does. He would not even accept the 'ice respect'<sup>2</sup> those officials outside the city offered him upon their return to the capital. In all the time during his tenure as the Chief Supervising Secretary, the imperial censors from the Chief Surveillance Bureau all regarded him as the most uncorrupted official. He rarely gets impeached. So I'm afraid it'll be hard for even the Imperial Bodyguards to find a reason to investigate him."

"Investigating him openly with great fanfare will inadvertently alert the enemy." Shen Zechuan fiddled with the teacup and deliberated it over the bitter aftertaste of the tea. "He's out in the open, while we are hidden in the dark. As long as we keep the pawn Xue Xiuyi concealed, we are still the party on the offensive. Matters outside the palace is not an issue, but we have to be even more careful when it comes to affairs within the palace. His intent to kill His Majesty has already been ignited, and he has the help of Mu Ru and Fengquan. He knows every one of His Majesty's moves and actions like the back of his hand. Under the circumstances, we have no option but to guard against him."

Xiao Chiye thought for a moment, then said, "Didn't Fengquan just become the Seal-holding Director of the Directorate of Ceremonial? Given his service record, he will surely incur censure from both inner and outer

courts. Fuman, whose rank is beneath him, is itching for a fight, while Hai Liangyi detests eunuchs. Fengquan's power and authority now that he has assumed the post of the Seal-holding Director cannot be compared to Pan Rugui's during the latter's time in power. Get him trapped both on the inside and outside where he is unable to fend for himself, and he won't have the spare capacity to deal with anything else for Xue Xiuzhuo."

"It's also of pivotal importance to secure His Majesty's position." Shen Zechuan said. "No word regarding the imperial heir must get out."

Ever since Li Jianheng's ascension, he had been castigated much by the imperial censors. What's more, he had met with mishaps and dangers one after another. He did not have an outstanding track record of political achievements, and his reputation among the commoners was not comparable to that of the former emperor. If the matter of the imperial heir were to leak, it would no doubt unsettle public sentiment. No matter which way one were to look at it, it would not be conducive to maintaining stability.

"Regardless of whether it's a real dragon or a fake dragon<sup>3</sup> in Xue Xiuzhuo's hands." Xiao Chiye pressed against his thumb ring and stared at the glazed lamp. "The emperor of Dazhou can only be Li Jianheng. Even if a crown prince is to be designated in the future, it can only be Li Jianheng's son."

The Xiao Clan was now a notch above the Hua Clan, and they had managed to preserve their power. Xiao Chiye, secured in his position, was steadily making his moves, while Xiao Jiming, over in Libei, was solid in his defenses too. They pitted against the noble clans in Zhongbo and Qidong on the sly. The fight was not that intense, because there were the outspoken ministers Hai Liangyi and his people to act as an intermediary and mediate between them, managing with some difficulty to prevent the infighting between the two tigers<sup>4</sup> from deteriorating further. But then, Hai Liangyi's greatest protection was Li Jianheng. Li Jianheng was willing to trust him and respect him; he knew of his unyielding loyalty. That's why he had not immediately turned to the Empress Dowager for support in this tug-of-war. Furthermore, Li Jianheng was willing to lay out all the major and minor affairs of the imperial court on the table to discuss with Hai Liangyi. This was the fundamental reason why Hai Liangyi could secure his position in the Grand Secretariat as the Grand Secretary after the move into the new reign.

The person Li Jianheng was not important. But after he ascended to the throne, “Li Jianheng” became crucial. He was in the center of all the covert and overt attacks. And he was the cage the three sides jointly used to restrain the other. He was also the dagger the three sides jointly used to attack the other.

Now that Xue Xiuzhuo had already surfaced, Shen Zechuan could not help but wonder – even as he looked for a breakthrough – if there was another person behind Xue Xiuzhuo.



There was a drizzle a few days later, when Xue Xiuzhuo had the day off.

He was wearing a sky blue fine-woven silk robe as he paid a formal call on Qi Huilian at the small building he was in. Qi Huilian took large bites of his meal and did not even cast a glance at him.

Xue Xiuzhuo did not sit at the table, and the bow he made was a protocol observed by pupils. He saw Ji Gang sitting before the window polishing a stone, and so he said to those in attendance, “Elder Ji has yet to recover from his injuries and should avoid spicy food. Go and get the chef from Duanzhou to cook up the dishes again.”

“No need for the trouble.” Ji Gang blew away the dust and said in a quiet voice, “I’m not eating.”

Xue Xiuzhuo did not say a word, and the attendant withdrew to give the chef his instructions. The Xue Clan was a prominent clan of the City of Jincheng, and they were not used to the local tastes of Zhongbo. This chef from Duanzhou was someone he had hired specifically for Ji Gang.

The drizzle outside the building came pitter-pattering amongst the apricot blooms in spring, and the pink and white in the courtyard were all beaten to mud by the rain. Having eaten and drunk to his fill, Qi Huilian wiped his mouth and rose to look at the bleak scene in the courtyard. He said, “No need to waste that effort. Ji Gang is extremely obstinate. If he says he’s not eating, then it means exactly that. Just get them to prepare some steamed buns and pickled vegetables for him to allay his hunger.”

Xue Xiuzhuo smiled, “I can’t be so irreverent with both elders in my house as guests.”

“Then open the doors.” Ji Gang carved a nose and eyes for the stone. “We can go back ourselves.”

Without a change in his expression, Xue Xiuzhuo said, "There's a chill in the spring air lately. Seeing as Vice Commander Shen still has nowhere to settle down, how would he be able to provide proper accommodation for both elders?"

"Drop the pretense. Just say that you're keeping us in captivity." Qi Huilian walked a few steps, and the iron chain on his ankles clanked along with his movements. He said, "I've been taken prisoner my entire life, and I'm almost reaching my end. I'm old, and he's disabled. What are you trying to do by holding the two of us old, weak, sick, and disabled men captive in your hands?"

Xue Xiuzhuo personally bent over to pick up the chopsticks Qi Huilian had pushed aside to the ground. Wiping it with a handkerchief, he said, "Mister is a brilliant man of great stature in the past. You originally would have enjoyed the posthumous honor and glory of being enshrined and worshiped by the Imperial Ancestral Temple after death. A pity you threw in your lot with the wrong person, and ended up feigning insanity in Zhao Zui Temple for twenty years. Today, I would like to ask of Mister to be the Imperial Preceptor once again. Firstly, it can make up for Mister's regret for not being able to witness the Crown Prince's enthronement ceremony back then. Secondly, it can redress the injustice and grievance Mister has suffered and allow Mister to begin afresh in the imperial court; you can return before the eyes of the masses in a dignified and aboveboard manner. Aren't these two reasons sufficient enough? I am a person who respects and admires Mister."

"Be the Imperial Preceptor again." Qi Huilian took a step backward, dragging the iron chain along with him. A laugh escaped his throat. "You want me to be the Imperial Preceptor again? Such arrogance! The world is now at peace, and the current emperor is rightfully legitimate. He has that Hai Renshi to watch over him and assist him, so why do you still need me, Qi Huilian? I'm crazy and silly. There's no way I can assume an important post!"

Xue Xiuzhuo set down the chopsticks and said, "Mister ended in such a situation only because Mister was slandered. During the reign of Yongyi, the Empress Dowager took control over the state affairs, which turned the law and discipline of Dazhou's imperial court upside down and caused corrupt officials to run amok. It was the same during the reign of Xiande. Hua and Pan colluded with one another and stirred up troubles in Qudu, the

Eight Cities, the entire Dazhou, bringing untold suffering to the common folk of the various lands. Then, the troops of Zhongbo suffered a defeat, and it was a scene of desolation and despair in the Six Prefectures as victims and refugees swarmed all over, and bodies of the starved littered the roads. Mister spent an idle twenty years in Zhao Zui Temple, yet you have lost your drive and heroic spirit now that you have come out. Have you even lost the will to compete and emerge victorious against Hai Liangyi?"

Qi Huilian turned around and held on to the window to look at the rain pelting the apricot blossoms. After a moment of silence, he said, "It's true that I wanted to compete with Hai Liangyi twenty-five years ago to determine who was the better one. We both took the same imperial examinations. He was so unremarkable, while I ranked first in the imperial civil examinations at the provincial, metropolitan, and palace level.<sup>5</sup> I was complacent in my youth and did not know how to navigate the official circles. I ended up framed and demoted out of the capital. Too ashamed to face my elders in Yuzhou, I fell depressed for several years. Later on, Hai Liangyi was promoted, and he rose in ranks. Yet, the Crown Prince did not take him as his teacher, but welcomed me back to Qudu from Yuzhou. And so, I became the Grand Mentor of the Eastern Palace. At the same time, I assumed the post of Minister of Personnel. Hai Liangyi lost to the name Qi Huilian his entire life. But he is a gentleman. When the Crown Prince slit his own throat, he was condemned by all. Only Hai Liangyi believed that there was still hope in him—that he was not beyond redemption. Just for this alone, I cannot be compared to him. Between us, there is no superiority or inferiority, only mutual appreciation. But alas, Heaven is blind. Even though we share the same path, we still cannot work together. I've been trapped for twenty-five years. You're right. At present, I no longer have the will nor desire to compete with him."

Xue Xiuzhuo fell silent too, leaving only the sound of rain and of Ji Gang carving and polishing in the room. The rain intensified, and the apricot blossoms fell in an even more chaotic manner to form a blanket of fragmentary pink among the muddy water.

"In this lifetime, I've only taught two people, and both times, I imparted all the knowledge I have learned over the course of my life to them. I thought too highly of my talents and was unwilling to make do, and it was precisely of this conceitedness that I caused such great harm to my first student." Qi Huilian gazed at that dirty water with pieces of petals, as if

he was looking at his own down-and-out half of his life. He said, “I, Qi Huilian, am not an immortal after all. Two students are enough. As for the others, I’m not up to teaching them.”

Ji Gang burst out coughing violently. He covered his mouth with a handkerchief and grumbled, “Close the windows!”

Qi Huilian shut all those scenes outside and looked back at Xue Xiuzhuo. He said, “That’s all I have to say. Don’t pester me! Leave. Don’t stay and get in the way.”

Xue Xiuzhuo did not move. His appearance did not resemble Xue Xiuyi; he did not even look to be a noble clan’s descendant. He lacked the same kind of haughtiness Pan Li and Fei Shi had. His identity as a son born of a concubine had given him a lot of grief the past decades, and it subsequently polished him into a person of unobtrusive but sophisticated elegance.

“I admire Mister’s talents and learning, and I look up even more to Mister’s philosophy on the world. I have come thrice to this small building to beseech Mister to come out of obscurity to return to officialdom all because I understand Mister’s aspirations. Mister, Hai Liangyi is indeed a lofty gentleman, but a gentleman has never been able to co-exist for long with a man with petty interests. The current emperor is not given to accepting guidance from the classics, and he doesn’t have the benevolence to treat worthy men and men of virtue with due respect. He is merely a straw everyone grasps on to as Dazhou teeters on the brink of collapse. There is no way he can be a wise and virtuous ruler. How much strength and energy does Hai Liangyi still have left in him? To entrust the safety of the state entirely on him alone is a complete reversal of hierarchy and an overlook of the more important issues at hand.”

Qi Huilian said, “To begin with, it’s the ministers’ duty to assist the sovereign in governing the state. Hai Liangyi is doing his best to save the situation from declining and to mediate between the various parties. He’s a loyal subject. Don’t tell me you still want him to be a traitor, one who replaces the Li Clan and brings about a regime change?”

“The conflict between those from the noble clans and those of humble backgrounds has been going on for hundreds of years. To get rid of this age-old societal ill, one must have the determination to commit oneself irrevocably and fight to the very end.” Xue Xiuzhuo rose to his feet and said, “If Li Jianheng can’t do it, there are still others. Dazhou is the empire

of the Li Clan. As long as the Li bloodline still exists, then it's only reasonable to have a change in person in order to tide over this crisis."

Qi Huilian's point of view was at odds with him. So he merely treated him as a noble clan descendant abusing his power for personal gains and refused to engage further in a conversation with him.

Xue Xiuzhuo stood in silence for a moment before he said, "Mister and I are also both kindred spirits on the same path. It's a pity Mister doesn't believe me. But I still have to tell you that Shen Zechuan is a vestige of evil who drags out his feeble existence nursing his hatred. There is nothing else in his heart; he merely exists for revenge. He acts with viciousness, and he is narrow-minded. He is poles apart from the Crown Prince. Mister teaches him with the heart and mind of tutoring a sovereign, and this is no different from helping a villain commit evil. Even if he makes great achievements in the future, he still won't be a good master."

Ji Gang slammed down his carving knife without warning and glared furiously at Xue Xiuzhuo. He said, "How much do you understand Chuan-er? You people keep calling him a vestige of evil, but the way I see it, all of you are the insatiably greedy vestiges of evil! Shut your trap and leave!"

Xue Xiuzhuo bowed and said, "I'll be waiting, should Mister have second thoughts."

He exited and left after letting down the curtain.

Xue Xiuyi was wandering outside the courtyard when he saw Xue Xiuzhuo walking back from afar. He cradled the umbrella close and made his way to the veranda, only to bump into the students who had been dismissed from school.

These students, who came from the brothel, paid their respects to him. Xue Xiuyi tossed the umbrella to the maidservant behind him and looked at them one at a time. The maidservant said, "Is this the path for you people to walk on? How impertinent of you all to get in the way of the Eldest Master!"

The students hung their heads down and retreated. A girl of seventeen or eighteen stood behind them. Xue Xiuyi noted that she was extraordinarily good-looking, so he tugged her sleeve frivolously and said, "Are you one of the chicks Yanqing bought back? What's your name?"

This girl cast a glance at Xue Xiuyi without answering. Xue Xiuzhuo just happened to approach from the other end to block Xue Xiuyi. He said

with a smile, “Did Eldest Brother just come back? Let’s return to the courtyard. The rain is heavy. Careful not to get drenched.”

Xue Xiuyi slapped his hand away and said impatiently, “I know!”

Xue Xiuyi took a few steps and heard the students behind him pay their respects in unison and addressed Xue Xiuzhuo “Teacher”. He turned his head back again for another look, only to see that girl earlier looking right back at him with her head inclined to the side.

Her gaze showed no fear or trepidation. Even after Xiu Xiuyi discovered her looking at him, she did not avert her gaze. Instead, she looked at him until Xue Xiuyi could not help but turn his head around first.

The wind and the rain pelted his face. Xue Xiuyi shivered and hurried away with his arms wrapped around himself.



Thanks to [Alex](#) & [Suika](#) for the consultation!

#### Footnotes

1. 会同馆 Interpreters Institute, which was devoted to oral communication and the hosting of foreign envoys.
2. 冰敬 Literally, ‘Ice Respect’ (or paying respect with ‘ice’ during summer) is one of the objectionable practices of ‘Three Respects’ during the Qing Dynasty, along with ‘Coal Respect’ and ‘Departure Respect’. ‘Ice Respect’ refers to the bribe money officials outside the capital used to bribe the officials in the capital during summer.
3. The dragon is the symbol of the emperor. Here it refers to the supposed imperial heir, who would be next in line to the throne if (a childless) Li Jianheng goes kaput.
4. From 一山不容(藏)二虎, literally no two tigers can exist in the same mountain. i.e., two rivals cannot co-exist in the same place.
5. 三元 “Triple Yuan”. In the Ming Dynasty, the imperial examination system was split into three phases: the provincial exam (乡试); metropolitan exam (会试); and the palace exam (殿试). The titles for the top scholars in each exam were known as the Jieyuan (解元), Huiyuan (会元), and Zhuangyuan (状元). These three are known as the “Triple Yuan”. So a Triple Yuan Top Scholar is one who came first in all these examinations.





## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 89 : THUNDER



Ge Qingqing had been out of the capital for a little less than half a month. The Xi Clan's money vaults that were opened one after another all turned up empty, but the good thing was that the stores in the various regions could be managed by Xi Dan. Coupled with the four million silvers he had gotten earlier, Shen Zechuan did not end up totally empty-handed with nothing to show for.

The two million that had been transported via the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path in the fourth month had already arrived at Cizhou. When the letter was delivered back to Qudu, it was directly handed over to Shen Zechuan right from Ding Tao's hands.

Shen Zechuan wiped his sweat. Before he opened it, he waved to Xiao Chiye, who was similarly drenched in sweat. Xiao Chiye took off his clothes and went inside to take a bath. He said from the other side of the screen, "Just read it out to me."

Shen Zechuan read out the letter. Xiao Jiming had been brief and concise in his message, which was that the silver had arrived in Cizhou without a hitch, and the army provisions for Libei's Armored Cavalry this summer and autumn had also arrived at the warehouse.

"Jiang Qingshan was transferred to Zhongbo to take up the post of the Provincial Administration Commissioner of Zhongbo. Then was this batch of army provisions prepared by someone else?"

Xiao Chiye took a quick bath. As he wiped himself, he said, "It was jointly prepared by the Assistant Administration Commissioner of Juexi, Yang Cheng, and the subordinated Vice Prefects along with the various Juexi Vice Magistrates. They are all old hands under Jiang Qingshan's command, and they are the fastest when it comes to the past preparation of the military provisions."

Shen Zechuan set down the letter on the desk. He wanted to say that since it had not been through Jiang Qingshan's inspection, then the military provisions should still be properly inspected before distribution. But he thought the better of it when it came to his mind that Xiao Chiye was not managing Libei's military affairs. Xiao Jiming should know the ins and outs of this matter; there was no need for an outsider like him to interfere, so he dropped it and did not bring it up again.

Xiao Chiye draped on a dark-colored wide-sleeved robe over his inner garment. He could hold his own against these solemn colors. Even with it hanging loosely over his shoulders, he cut an imposing figure. He drank a cup of tea that had gone cold when he came out and said, "Gu Jin went to the Xue Residence to check it up last night. Teacher and Shifu are most likely detained in one of the lofts."

"Common places aren't able to trap shifu." Shen Zechuan touched the brush. "I want to see it for myself."

"If someone as vigilant and wary as him were to discover it and transfer Teacher and Shifu to another place, then we will be looking for a needle in a haystack." Xiao Chiye removed the crown for Shen Zechuan. "I've already called for men to take turns to keep the periphery of the Xue's Residence under surveillance. We have to think of a safer method."

"There's still one thing I can't figure out." Shen Zechuan let Xiao Chiye comb his hair for him. That clumsy back and forth was not at all like the Second Young Master. "How exactly did he empty out the Xi Clan's money vaults? Ge Qingqing did not find out anything in Qinzhou either."

Xiao Chiye cast a glance at Shen Zechuan in the mirror and said, "Can't figure it out? I already did."

Shen Zechuan looked at him.

"We know that four million silvers you got are all subjected to inspections at the various regions' checkpoints as long as they are transported through a trade route, regardless of whether it was by land or water. He must have this concern too, so there's no point checking the trade routes." Even as Xiao Chiye spoke, his hands did not remain idle. He weaved a little braid the width of a finger for Shen Zechuan and slowly continued, "The governmental posts Xue Xiuzhuo holds in successive order are all important positions. A Chief Supervising Secretary audits the accounts in the various regions, and when it's close to the Banquet of A Hundred Officials, he no doubt has to have dealings with the Transport Office. The Transport Office is responsible for the management of the local taxes paid out to the imperial court. It can't get any more convenient for him to enter and exit Qudu if he smuggles the silvers in between."

Suddenly enlightened, Shen Zechuan asked again, "Then where did he hide them? Although the Xue's Residence is larger in scale than the Xi's Residence, it's not of a real heritage as the Yao Clan. Even if he dug into the ground, he can't hide that much money."

“That depends on how exactly he wants to use them.” Xiao Chiye released his fingers, and Shen Zechuan’s black hair cascaded down like water. It was soft to the touch, and totally lacking in aggressiveness. He pressed down on Shen Zechuan’s shoulders from the back, and both men appeared in the mirror. He said, “His hometown is in the City of Jincheng, and down south is the Prefecture of Hezhou. Hezhou’s waterways are developed and are dominated by the Yan Clan, who have business dealings with the Xi Clan’s boats in the harbors of Juexi. Now that he has kicked off Xi Hongxuan, he will have to find someone who can play around with money as well as Xi Hongxuan if he wants this money to start moving once more. And this person is none other than the Yan Clan of Hezhou. So, my guess is that he most likely entrusted these silvers to the Yan Clan of Hezhou.”

Shen Zechuan had never been to Hezhou before. All he knew was that the Yan Clan of Hezhou was very capable. They were not like the Xi Clan where legitimate sons born of the principal wife ruled the roost. What they counted on was capability, regardless of whether one was a son of lawful birth born of the principal wife or a son of common birth born of concubines. During the first year in the reign of Xiande, the Yan Clan made a fortune trading in tea in Hezhou. They rarely went near Qudu other than to pay tributes. Shen Zechuan knew very little of them.

“Second Young Master’s braids are all so prettily done.” Even as Shen Zechuan was thinking, he did not forget to look askance and poke fun at him, “Truly an erudite man of many talents.”

“This Second Young Master has braided many a number of them.” Xiao Chiye teased him. “Aren’t Lang Tao Xue Jin’s little braids pretty? I was the one who braided them all.”

Shen Zechuan said, “I put all my heart and soul into saving up the betrothal gift for you. Yet you regard me as Lang Tao Xue Jin?”

Xiao Chiye lowered his body and jested to the mirror, “A horse, hm.”

There were all sorts of expressions in Xiao Chiye’s eyes. Pressing against Shen Zechuan like this made Shen Zechuan remember the debauchery of the last time they rode the horse on a rainy night. His smooth neck no longer had those love bites, yet it had already learned to blush when Xiao Chiye whispered into his ears.

Shen Zechuan lifted his chin slightly, completely exposing the arc of that exquisite, jade-like neck. It was like a crescent moon in the dim light;

not that sharp, and innately smooth and lustrous. He softly asked, “Am I?”

Xiao Chiye fell under his spell. He kissed the corner of Shen Zechuan’s eye, then stared at the man in the mirror and said with a smile, “Would I bear to? You’re the master of me. I only want to take you riding.”

Shen Zechuan’s anxiety that had persisted for days on end dispersed some. When he smiled, it carried with it a hint of seductive allure that even he himself did not notice.



The temperature in Qudu suddenly rose in the fifth month. They had not even enjoyed the refreshing coolness of spring to their hearts’ content when that summer heat came assailing them in the faces. The subordinate officials could not take sedans as they went about their tasks, so each of them lifted their robes and fanned themselves. They were drenched in sweat as they entered and exited the various office compounds, with the blazing sun already causing their lips to peel and faces to redden.

Liang Cuishan had only gotten some free time after receiving a succession of promotions owing to his audits of the Imperial Army’s accounts. He was now working under Pan Lin, the Vice Minister of the Ministry of Revenue, handling the task of auditing the various regions’ taxes.

Pan Lin was now overwhelmed with gratitude towards Xiao Chiye. This was because not two days after he returned home the last time, Li Jianheng really granted his father, Pan Xiangjie, a pardon for his offense. He was not banished to the frontier; instead, he only received a salary suspension pending observation and was excluded from this year’s inspection.

Xiao Chiye had never recommended and vouched for Liang Cuishan for promotion in public, but they were all astute people who knew that Liang Cuishan was someone Xiao Chiye had recommended before the emperor. So even though Xiao Chiye did not give any prior notification, Pan Lin still took good care of Liang Cuishan, sparing him from Wei Huaigu’s reproach.

“It’s the grand wedding of Hua and Qi next month. We have to familiarize ourselves with the processes the Ministry of Rites sent over, and the various expenses all have to be clearly calculated in case we can’t give a flawless answer when the Empress Dowager asks about it after the wedding

banquet.” Pan Lin drank the green bean soup. He was so hot that his back was thoroughly soaked.

Pan Lin was much younger than Liang Cuishan. But he joined the imperial court earlier, and his rank was high, so even if Liang Cuishan did not address himself as “this humble subordinate” before him, he had to address himself as “this pupil”.

Liang Cuishan was feeling hot too. But they were in the office compound, and they had to pay attention to officials’ etiquettes, so he could not strip off his robe as he liked; otherwise, he would be chastised if he were to encounter the imperial censors from the Chief Surveillance Bureau. He dabbed his forehead with a handkerchief and said with a nod, “This humble subordinate shall heed Your Excellency’s instructions. I will not dare to forget a single amount in this account.”

Pan Lin gave him a few more instructions on the other matters. He still had to go to the Ministry of Rites to verify some details, so he stepped out to get on the sedan and left.

Having owed a debt of gratitude to Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye for their recognition and appreciation of his worth, Liang Cuishan never dared to be shoddy in his work and so promptly set about reconciling the accounts. He sat for only a moment when he heard someone outside barging in.

It was midday at present, and there were not many people around. Liang Cuishan hurriedly went down the steps to greet the person. Seeing as this person was an unfamiliar face, he asked, “Brother, who are you looking for?”

This person was sweating profusely as he shoved an entire document to Liang Cuishan. He said, “This humble subordinate is an official from the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path Postal Relay Station! Your Excellency, this is an urgent report dispatched from Juexi’s Prefecture of Baimazhou the night before. It comes with the authentication tally from the Provincial Administration Commission of Juexi. This is a matter of extreme urgency!”

Northeast Provisions Bridle Path!

The moment Liang Cuishan heard this name, he knew it was a major matter which concerned Libei. He accepted the stuff and said in an urgent voice, “Why deliver it to the Ministry of Revenue? All the matters from Libei are considered military reports and should be delivered to the Ministry of War!”

“This is an urgent report dispatched from Baimazhou.” This person said. “It bears the tag of the Ministry of Revenue! Your Excellency, please present it to the Minister’s desk quickly. The consequence of delaying this express relay report is not something you and I can bear!”

Liang Cuishan promptly headed inside with the document under his arm and hurried over to the place, only to turn up empty. But while he did not see Wei Huaigu, he saw Wei Huaigu’s attendant. The attendant accepted the stuff, but took his time and told Liang Cuishan to go back first, saying that there would be arrangements made for it later.

Liang Cuishan intuitively sensed a problem. How could an express relay report be handled so flippantly? They were clearly stalling for time! His heart pounded hard as he retreated out. But instead of returning to the office compound, he turned around, lifted his robe, and ran to where the Imperial Bodyguards were on duty.

It was scorching hot all the way there. Liang Cuishan was panting hard when he arrived. Without even daring to drink a mouthful of water, he hurried into the courtyard and requested to see Shen Zechuan.

“What’s the matter?” Qiao Tianya led him in. “Why did Your Excellency run all the way here?”

“It’s an urgent matter!” Liang Cuishan could hardly care to explain to Qiao Tianya. When he saw Shen Zechuan upon entering, he hurriedly said, “Your Excellency! This humble subordinate has something to discuss with you!”

Shen Zechuan got Qiao Tianya to serve the tea. Setting aside his official affairs, he said with a fixed gaze, “What’s wrong?”

Liang Cuishan did not dare to sit. He exerted himself to take a breather and said, “This humble subordinate received an express relay report dispatched from Juexi’s Prefecture of Baimazhou earlier at the Ministry of Revenue’s office compound earlier. It concerns the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path! This humble subordinate delivered the report to the top, but never got to meet His Excellency the Minister. This stuff is inextricably connected to Libei. Your Excellency, I fear something has happened to the military provisions sent to Libei last month!”

Shen Zechuan immediately rose and said, “Head over to the Imperial Army’s office compound and inform His Lordship of this matter! Take my horse. Say that the Imperial Bodyguards is on official duty and spur the horse all the way there!”

The military provisions concerned Libei's war affairs this year. If Wei Huaigu was indeed delaying reporting this to the higher-ups, then there must have been a slip-up somewhere that he alone could not shoulder the responsibility for. Although the preparation for the military provisions was handled by the Prefecture of Baimazhou in Juexi, the overall inspection had been carried out by the Ministry of Revenue.



This sweltering heat was abnormal. It was only the beginning of the fifth month, yet it felt just like the Great Heat.<sup>1</sup> The sun was still scorching at midday, and by the afternoon, the weather had turned overcast and windy, looking as if a rainstorm was fast approaching.

Wei Huaigu had sat on the chair for an entire hour. His back was already soaked through. He felt dizzy, having already finished reading that postal relay report much earlier. Several times, he wanted to speak, but he could not bring himself to say a word. Eventually, he steeled himself, abruptly rose to his feet, and said, "Prepare the sedan! We're going into the palace!"



Xiao Chiye had not even dismounted yet, and the bean-sized raindrops had already come pelting down. Meng stopped on his shoulder. Just as he was about to enter the city, he saw Qiao Tianya galloping towards him.

Qiao Tianya had not reached him when Ding Tao also came spurring his horse over from the other end. He tumbled off the horse's back and said in a quivering voice, "Your Lordship! Something bad has happened! We received a military report earlier, which says that the Hanshe Tribe had trespassed into our territory the day before yesterday and encountered the Hereditary Prince on the eastern mountain range. The Hereditary Prince—"

Ding Tao's tearful voice rose.

"The Hereditary Prince is severely wounded. We've been defeated!"

Qiao Tianya abruptly reined in his horse. Sudden thunder detonated in the sky, blasting apart the darkness cast by the billows of gloomy clouds. Rainwater came pouring down in torrents. Xiao Chiye was still on his horse. For the first time, he had on a dazed expression, as if he did not understand what Ding Tao meant.

In nearly thirty years since Xiao Fangxu established the Libei Armored Cavalry, Libei had never suffered a defeat. Even when Xiao Jiming led his troops of light cavalry<sup>2</sup> to pursue and attack the Hanshe Tribe for several



hundred *li*<sup>3</sup> in the past, he had been able to retreat from the desert unharmed.

Xiao Chiye had never thought that his eldest brother would be defeated.

Never.



#### Footnotes

1. 大暑 12th of the 24 solar terms, from end July to beginning of August, the period when the heat is greatest.
2. Lightly armed and lightly armored men on horses.
3. 里 *li*, an ancient measure of length, 1 *li* = approx. 500m.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 90 : VETERAN GENERAL



Heavy rain splashed on the water puddles. Xiao Chiye's horse had already dashed its way to the palace entrance. Red silk umbrellas emerged one after the other from the small sedans, all of them sheltering important ministers of third-grade and above.

The Minister of War, Chen Zhen, made a special point of being a tad late to wait for Xiao Chiye at the foot of the vermilion steps leading up to the palace hall. When he saw Xiao Chiye coming forth in the rain, he said, "Ce'an, listen to me. There is no army in this world that is invincible. A defeat is a teacher that will guide one towards another victory. Jiming has been fighting with the Biansha's Hanshe Tribe for years. He's also human."

Chen Zhen, who had some friendly relations with Xiao Fangxu, spoke abruptly without preamble. Yet, Xiao Chiye understood what he meant.

Xiao Chiye nodded at him with an expressionless face. He ascended the stairs together with Chen Zhen and proceeded to wait outside Mingli Hall to be summoned in. The rain soaked his shoulders, and it was in this way he stood there, shunning even the faintest of light from the lanterns.

The umbrella at the back suddenly shifted to shield Xiao Chiye. Shen Zechuan held up the umbrella and stood side by side with him. Standing next to each other with both of their red robes drenched by the rain made them look like demonic fiends of the rainy night.

About a moment later, Fuman lifted the curtain and paid his obeisances to the group of court officials outside and called out to summon them in. Hai Liangyi went in first, followed by the various ministers from the Grand Secretariat. Then it was Xiao Chiye's turn. Even Shen Zechuan himself could not follow him in.

Xiao Chiye did not move. He remained fixed in position for a spell and looked at Shen Zechuan. There were too many subliminal emotions contained in this gaze. In this very instant, he turned from a valiant and vicious hound into a lone wolf that had strayed from the pack.

Shen Zechuan wanted to caress Xiao Chiye's cheeks. But he could not do so at this moment. They stood still for a long time under the shadows of this forbidden palace's walls, wearing shackles invisible to the eyes.

Xiao Jiming was severely wounded, and there were no other valiant generals within Libei's borders. This was an indication that after tonight, Qudu must appoint a new general to Libei to take over the mantle from Xiao Jiming. But this person would not be Xiao Chiye.

Qi Zhuyin's remarks a year earlier turned out to be prophetic. She warned Xiao Jiming that the Libei Armored Cavalry needed a new general. Owing to the excessive concentration of military power, the Libei Armored Cavalry could only take after the surname Xiao. Once the banner of the Xiao Clan fell, the constitution of the Libei Armored Cavalry would be greatly undermined, making it hard to sustain their glory.

The Grandson-heir, Xiao Xun, was only six years of age. If Xiao Jiming was out of the picture, then the Libei Armored Cavalry's only successor was Xiao Chiye, who was in Qudu. However, Qudu would never release him, not unless the Princess Consort of the Hereditary Prince, Lu Yizhi, entered the capital with Grandson-heir, Xiao Xun, to replace him as hostages in this power struggle.

In acting willfully, Xiao Chiye had been merely counting on his powerful connections, much like a fox exploiting the tiger's might. But at this moment, he once again plunged into a ravine where he could not act on his own volition. The thought of going home roared like mad in his heart. But all he could do was to gaze like this at Shen Zechuan. Other than Shen Zechuan, no one else would understand.

"Your Lordship?" Fuman urged him on in a whisper.

Xiao Chiye moved his feet and entered.



"The Ministry of Revenue assigned officials over for a check before the military provisions were escorted via the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path. Since there was a problem, why didn't the Ministry of Revenue report it?" Cen Yu was the first to take issue with it. He did not even have time to write the memorial and simply stepped forth to interrogate Wei Huaigu outright. "When the express relay report arrived at Qudu, it was delayed for an entire two hours! If we issue the recall order now, we have to brave the rain to speed all the way there on a route that isn't easy to navigate. By the time it arrives at Libei, it would have already been four days later! Wei Huaigu, you're going to get people killed!"

Wei Huaigu said nothing. He was just like a statue tonight as he knelt on the ground in a daze without even disputing a word.

The moment Xiao Chiye entered, the hall fell silent. The veteran ministers either hung their heads low or held their foreheads. The sound of the rain outside was noisy, but the suffocating heat inside was even worse.

“Ce’an.” Li Jianheng made as if to speak when he saw him, but then he hesitated. Eventually, he merely said, “Take a seat.”

Xiao Chiye did not sit. He bowed and said, “This humble subject has only just dismounted and does not know the details. What happened in Libei?”

“What the hell? Such a major matter, and nobody told the Marquis!” Li Jianheng flung the memorial. “Wei Huaigu, you tell him yourself!”

Wei Huaigu lowered his head and said without looking at Xiao Chiye, “Something went wrong with the military provisions that were transported to Libei last month. According to the relay report of Yang Cheng, the Assistant Administration Commissioner of Juexi Provincial Administration Commission, these military provisions have been mixed with moldy substances. It was distributed after arriving at Libei, and subsequently, thousands of people fell ill the night before.”

Who would still dare to look at Xiao Chiye in the eye?

The Xiao Clan fought wars at the frontier. And they had performed a tremendous meritorious service five years ago in coming to the emperor’s rescue. The Biansha Hanshe Tribe was the toughest of the lot to battle against, and the entire northeast area was guarded and defended by Xiao Jiming alone. They imprisoned the Xiao Clan’s youngest son in Qudu, and yet they let his battle-scarred eldest brother, who fought hard with his sweat and blood, eat moldy and rotten grains! So how would they still dare to look Xiao Chiye in the eyes at this time?

Without turning a hair, Xiao Chiye said, “The military provisions were prepared by the Provincial Administration Commission of Juexi. Yang Cheng knew there was a problem. Why did he wait until the military provisions arrived at Libei before he dared to mention it? He’s the Assistant Administration Commissioner of the Southwest, and he has no grudge or enmity with Libei. Why would he risk his head to do something like this? The officials from the Ministry of Revenue triple-checked the military provisions, and the official reports that were sent back all stated that they were new grains from last year. But now, they have all become old and moldy grains. They are all minor officials of low grade. Why would they do that? The military provisions arrived at Libei via the Northeast Provisions

Bridle Path, and the Libei Armored Cavalry steward supervising the granary also had to check before distributing them. The multiple layers of arrangements involved for such a large batch of moldy goods to make its way into the mouths of the officers and soldiers at the frontier pass this easily can only be described as methodical.”

The more he spoke, the more his words increased in gravity.

“The Libei Armored Cavalry has guarded the pass for thirty years, and the troops deserve punishment for their defeat. But I’ll only say one thing to everyone present here. A minor defeat of Libei is a loss for our Xiao Clan, but a major defeat of Libei is a crisis for Dazhou. For several years, the Hanshe Tribe has been pacing back and forth around the Hongyan eastern mountain range. What they are waiting for is an opportunity. When the troops of Zhongbo were defeated, the Hanshe Tribe deployed their horses to launch an assault. They brought the cavalry of the rest of the eleven tribes and fought their way right outside the gates of Qudu without any letup. It has just been a mere five years, and the page has already been turned on the tragic massacre of the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo. We have yet to avenge our national humiliation, and we are going to allow our own people to add another strike to it?”

The moment Xiao Chiye said his piece, the color drained from the faces of everyone present. He was blunt in his words. He had come here tonight to raise hell and take someone to task for this matter. Someone played dirty tricks on the military provisions, and they want to dismiss him with that same old trick of bureaucratise? No way. He *would* go all out on a killing spree, and he *would* pursue this case relentlessly. Everything else be damn; he wasn’t going to play nice with any of them!

“The military provisions were adulterated, with new grains substituted with moldy ones. It’s no doubt inextricably connected to those at the bottom of the supply chain who resell the grains at a profit. A few years earlier, Zhongbo was in short supply of grains, and many merchants who stockpiled the grains made a killing from this. It’s just that I never expected there to be officials and merchants still in collusion with one another to do such unconscionable deeds in spite of strictly enforced laws in place nowadays.” The Minister of Justice, Kong Qiu, said. “If we can’t carry out a thorough investigation of this matter, there we will not be able to give the various generals of Libei an explanation. This humble subject requests a Joint Trial by the Three Judicial Offices with the Imperial Bodyguards to launch a

search and investigation from Baimazhou to Qudu. We must get to the bottom of the matter!”

“Not only that. There’s another matter that needs to be urgently attended to.” The Minister of War, Chen Zhen, cast a glance at Xiao Chiye and said, “The military provisions for Qidong Five Commanderies similarly comes from Baimazhou. We must dispatch an urgent report immediately to Commander-in-chief Qi. This batch of grains should not be distributed further down the line!”

“How are we going to make up for the shortage?” Xiao Chiye’s tone was icy. “These two batches of military provisions are the entire hoard amassed last year from the three great granaries of Juexi. Now that you are recalling them and rendering them useless, how is the military provisions shortage going to be filled? And from where are you going to supplement them? If the shortage cannot be filled within five days, Libei and Qidong will have to fight wars on empty stomachs. It’s a question of feeding hundreds of thousands of people.”

“Borrow and transfer from Huaizhou, Hezhou, and Cizhou. The receipts for the loans shall be borne by the imperial court. This matter is critical. The state treasury can’t take out that much money at such short notice to buy. We can only promise to exempt these three prefectures from taxes for approximately two years.” Hai Liangyi said in a steady and unhurried voice.

“It’s only with all the grains from the thirteen cities that Baimazhou was able to afford these two batches of military provisions. The three prefectures the Grand Secretary mentioned cannot be compared to it. Besides, these three prefectures are separated and far away from one another.<sup>1</sup> Preparing and coordinating the grains to be escorted and transported will also take up several days.”

“Tell Qi Zhuyin that Qidong’s military provision is reduced by half this year. They still have military fields to sustain them, so they still have extra resources. Hezhou leads straight to Qidong, while the grains from Cizhou and Huaizhou have to be transferred tonight.” Although Hai Liangyi was still sick, he was still clear-headed in his arrangements. “The Hereditary Prince is wounded. It’s inadvisable for him to remain for long at the frontline. And the Prince of Libei is ill and is similarly indisposed to head out for war. Chen Zhen, draw up a name list of commanding generals and

hand it to me an hour later. Within three days, Qudu must send a capable officer to Libei to take over its military affairs.”

Hai Liangyi took charge of the situation and gave the final word. There was no doubt that Wei Huaigu would not get away this time. Xiao Chiye did not intend to let him off. He did not directly go straight for him at this juncture only because the redeployment of the commanding general was a far more important issue at present.

Wei Huaigu was behaving a little oddly tonight. He kneeled where he was, never once explaining to vindicate himself even after a long time had passed.



Mingli Hall’s side room was brightly illuminated, and the officials who had withdrawn from the court all gathered here. Hai Liangyi could not bear cold winter nights, so Kong Qiu draped an overcoat over him. He gathered the coat around him and gestured with his hand to motion for everyone to take a seat.

“I will send the impeachment memorial to the Grand Secretariat tomorrow.” Cen Yu said. “Just how many incidents have the Wei Clan been caught up in? His Majesty is mindful of showing mercy, so Wei Huaixing’s incident the last time did not implicate Wei Huaigu, and he wouldn’t admit his fault for what happened with the public ditches back then. And what about the military provisions this time? He can’t escape blame for negligence and dereliction of duty!”

“Being an official in the imperial court has nothing to do with one’s familial background and standing. When it comes to attending to official duties for the sovereign, don’t keep using a person’s surname to find faults with others. If he makes a mistake, then impeach him if you must.” Hai Liangyi had yet to drink a drop of water tonight. He looked at Xiao Chiye and said, “The Hereditary Prince has been leading the troops for several years. Since he was able to kill his way out of the heavy siege and return to Libei, his life is not in any danger. There is no need for Your Lordship to be anxious. If there is anything in shortage in Libei, Qudu will work through the night to allocate and transfer it.”

Xiao Chiye had already understood what Hai Liangyi meant. To maintain the status quo, Hai Liangyi would not let Xiao Chiye return to Libei, no question about it. Xiao Jiming was defeated, but he was not dead

—and even if Xiao Jiming died, Xiao Chiye still could not return home, because there was still Xiao Fangxu.

“There are countless decent generals in Qudu, but those who can adapt to Libei are few and far between. The Hongyan eastern mountain range is close to the desert, and we are about to head into the Great Heat<sup>2</sup> period in the sixth month. The frontier is brutally hot. I’m afraid it’ll be unsuitable if we dispatch an officer who was born in the southwest.” Xiao Chiye sat on the chair, facing an entire room of veteran ministers, yet he was extremely calm. He reacted quickly, to the point he could be described as unassailable. He preemptively examined the case of the military provisions and told Hai Liangyi that it was fine to deploy a new general to Libei, but it had to be someone who came from Libei or Qidong; he did not want an armchair strategist who was all talk and no action.

Hai Liangyi nodded approvingly at Xiao Chiye. At this point in time, one should indeed not be swayed by personal feelings and act impulsively for private gains and power. It was an indisputable fact that Libei lacked a commander to lead the troops. A deputy general who was skilled in warfare like Zhao Hui was formidable too, but they were all men whom Xiao Fangxu personally taught. They were originally meant to take on the tasks to coordinate and assist. It was fine for them to lead a troop of soldiers to outflank the enemies, but it was not enough to convince the masses if they were to lead Libei.

But ever since the reign of Xiande, Dazhou had been faced with a dearth of able generals. Of the Four Great Generals, other than Zuo Qianqiu, the rest all had their own important duties to attend to. The abundance of talents further down were all high-ranking military officers from Qidong. They were all core members of the warfare squad whom Qi Zhuyin single-handedly trained from scratch. It was Qidong’s military affairs that they were familiar with. To lend out any of them to Libei was easier said than done. Besides, the Qi Clan was about to enter a marriage alliance with the Hua Clan. If a Qidong’s general were to manage Libei’s military affairs temporarily, then this would break the status quo again, resulting in one clan rising in dominance and making it hard to hold them in check.

Who to assign?

Even Hai Liangyi’s head hurt to think about it!



As they burned with anxiety inside, Fuman, who was outside, suddenly hurried in and said, “Your Excellencies, look who’s here?”

Xiao Chiye turned his head aside and suddenly rose to his feet. The entire hall of people followed suit and stood up too. Hai Liangyi stepped forward to greet and welcome the person personally.

The man who took off his overcoat revealed his white hair, greeted Hai Liangyi, and then looked at Xiao Chiye.

“This humble one raced through the night to hurry over to Qudu and to seek an audience with His Majesty for no other reason than the matter of Libei.”

There was a lump in Xiao Chiye’s throat as he said, “Shifu...”

However, Zuo Qianqiu did not make conversation with him. Instead, he said to Hai Liangyi with a smile, “It has been many years since I last saw the Grand Secretary. I hope you are still in good health?”

Hai Liangyi heavily gripped Zuo Qianqiu’s wrists and said, “As old as Commander Zuo may be, can you still serve the country?”<sup>3</sup>

Zuo Qianqiu let out a long sigh and answered, “Although I am not how I once was back in the prime of my life with this aged face and gray hair, I still have the strength to draw a bow and shoot. There’s no need for the Grand Secretary to worry. My purpose for coming here this time is to: firstly, temporarily stand in for Jiming to manage Libei’s military affairs; and secondly, deliver a message from Xiao Fangxu.”

The entire room of people listened with rapt attention.

Zuo Qianqiu looked at Xiao Chiye with a deep, profound gaze and said resolutely, “The might of the Prince of Libei has reverberated like a tiger’s roar through Hongyan Mountains for more than ten years. His son has been defeated, and as his old man, he wants to personally reclaim victory from Amu’er<sup>4</sup> of the Hanshe Tribe.”

The rain thundered, and the gyrfalcon let out a long cry as it circled among the dark clouds of Qudu. Ten millions of *li*<sup>5</sup> away, the military flag of Libei flapped in the wind. Among the thick and heavy ink-colored rain, Xiao Fangxu, who had not stepped into the battlefield for decades, put on his armor and hung up his blade to lead the troops out to battle.

The wind swept up Xiao Fangxu’s cape, and he took off his incongruous bamboo hat.

“Amu’er.” Xiao Fangxu’s voice was deep. He raised his arm in the rain to let out the raptors of Libei, and laughed aloud into the wind, “Libei has

drawn a demarcation line in the east, so what are you people trespassing over for? I've told you decades ago that Hongyan Mountain is the turf of my Libei Armored Cavalry!"

His voice reverberated through the rain. The armored cavalry behind him cloaked under black armors drew out their blades in unison, their thick, oppressive might like a creeping behemoth opening its eyes in the rainy night.



Special thanks to [Suika](#) and [Alex](#) for the consultation! Muacks!

#### Footnotes

1. For map, you can refer to the [glossary](#)
2. 大暑 12th of the 24 solar terms, from end July to the beginning of August, the period when the heat is greatest. Note: the months in the novel are based on the lunar calendar which is why it was translated as fourth, fifth, sixth month instead of just May, June, July, etc. For example, the Great Heat period in 2021 on July 22 is based on the Gregorian solar calendar, but it's June 13 (sixth lunar month) on the lunar calendar. For more info, you can check [this](#) out.
3. Adapted from 廉颇老矣，尚能饭否，from 《永遇乐·京口北固亭怀古》 a poem by Xin Qiji, a poet and military leader during the Southern Song dynasty. Literally, "Lian Po is old, but can he still eat/make a living?" (in implication, he's asking if he can still serve the country.) Lian Po is a famous general of the State of Zhao who repeatedly emerged victorious over the States of Qin and Qi.
4. For foreign names in this novel, we decided to go with hanyu pinyin for the time being due to unfamiliarity with the language involved and to avoid mistranslations with the actual names in its original language. If we do get official subtitles someday, we will replace it in the translation (the same goes for titles). Until then, please bear with us. \_(:3 丿 ∠)\_
5. 里 *li*, ancient measure of length, 1 *li* = approx. 500m

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 91 : LIBEI



Zuo Qianqiu came just in time, leaving no chance for Qudu to send out a new general. “Thunder Sinking the Jade Stage” was known far and wide for his military achievements. He was the great general after “Silver Spear of Snow Pass”, Feng Yisheng, and he was also Xiao Jiming, Qi Zhuyin, and Lu Guangbai’s senior. It had been many years since he left Tianfei Watchtower. He had no private troops. Plus, he was also a child from a humble background that Ji Wufan, the Imperial Bodyguards Commander-in-Chief during the reign of Yongyi, adopted. He had no family background to get in the way. His willingness to come out of obscurity to lead the troops was something Hai Liangyi could not ask for more.

As Zuo Qianqiu waited for Li Jianheng to summon him, he stood with Xiao Chiye under the eaves to watch the rain.

“This entire journey has been a rush, so I didn’t bring any message for you.” Half of Zuo Qianqiu’s overcoat was wet, all because he had never stopped the entire journey to rest except to change horses. He slowed his tone and said, “Jiming has already returned to the camp, and a military medic has been arranged to take care of him... Don’t worry.”

But Zuo Qianqiu omitted the extent of Xiao Jiming’s injuries. Xiao Chiye partially lowered his head, then asked after a moment of silence, “What injuries?”

Zuo Qianqiu gazed out into the rainy night and said, “There are some words that you and I can only say while standing here. Jiming’s food had been tampered with. Even Zhao Hui fell for the trap. The squad of soldiers dragged their sick bodies to the battlefield and just happened to encounter Amu’er,<sup>1</sup> who is the toughest of the lot to battle. Jiming received three slashes. It was Zhao Hui who tumbled off his horse and carried him on his back while leading the ten or more remaining soldiers to break out of the siege.”

Xiao Chiye clenched his fists.

There was darkness in Zuo Qianqiu’s eyes as he said with a cool head, “Jiming has fought battles in the past while bogged down with ill health. He fought for so many years. He may seem to be fine on the surface, but in truth, he’s already plagued by old ailments. This time, he could be said to

have hurt his constitution. Using this opportunity to let him rest for half a year will permit him to recuperate and build up his strength again.”

That might be the case, but Zuo Qianqiu had taught the two brothers, and he could not be any clearer about their temperaments. Xiao Jiming was soft on the outside but tough inside. He did not inherit Xiao Fangxu’s extraordinarily strong and healthy physique, nor had he inherited Xiao Fangxu’s uncompromising hard-nosed approach. Whatever he lacked, Xiao Chiye had it all. Perhaps someone else might be jealous, but Xiao Jiming cherished his family. He had the Princess Consort of Libei’s compassion and benevolence ingrained in his nature, so he had never harbored the thought nor intent to trample upon his younger brother. He saw himself as a sanctuary for them and did all he could to self-heal his own wounds. All these years, he never uttered a cry of pain. Lu Guangbai repeatedly said before that he was human, but at the same time even as he retained his human desires, he forced himself to become the guardian of Libei.

Still, it was Xiao Jiming’s half-a-lifetime of honor and glory that the military defeat this time destroyed.

It was at this moment Xiao Chiye abhorred his cage to the max. His wounds, as he struggled against his shackles, hurt the more he ground against them. They had already turned bloody. His gaze followed the raindrops and landed upon the ground, where the water puddle bore the weight of his silent agony. He braced himself and calmly said, “The meals in the military are all prepared by our own in-house errand-runners. *Dage* consumes the same food as the common soldiers. Harming him means harming thousands of men in the camp. We cannot drop this matter. I want them to pay with their lives!”

“Those in charge of the meals have already been executed.” Zuo Qianqiu looked at Xiao Chiye. “It was Jiming’s idea.”

Libei had to bear such a grave grievance, yet they still reported it as “military provisions adulterated with mold” instead of “premeditated murder attempt”. Xiao Jiming broke out of the siege with sustained wounds. He hung on until the moment before he fell into a coma to give the order to execute those errand-runners, all to prevent others from investigating under the charge “conspiracy to murder”. A deliberate attempt to murder suggested a power struggle. Lifting the veil away would only muddy the situation. It was all too easy for Libei to be used by someone as a weapon. With Xiao Jiming’s retreat, the appointment for a general for Libei’s troops

would fall into Qudu's hands. Who could guarantee that the person who added in the poison was the real murderer? It was not unheard of to kill by proxy. Besides, assuming the moldy grains and poisoning were just the first steps, then if they reported the murder case and the imperial court could not find the perpetrator, the noble clans, in their denunciations, could distort the facts and falsely incriminate them for stooping to deception by using Xiao Jiming's injuries and defeat to get Xiao Chiye back.

"You did well too. You didn't tell them you want to return to Libei to rally the forces and attempt a comeback." Zuo Qianqiu revealed a despondent expression. "If you had spoken frankly and fought for Libei's military power before the emperor, then their guilt tonight would have become machinations. It would also put His Majesty on the alert and set the stage for future troubles."

"I expect that the Grand Secretary will not set me free." Xiao Chiye forced himself to pull himself together. "It's as shifu says. Fighting for military power will only make His Majesty afraid, and I still have 20,000 men in the Imperial Army in my hands. This is a big taboo. What's more, stirring up troubles and making unreasonable demands at this juncture will hold up Libei's military affairs. Shifu coming here has helped me out of my predicament."

"When I have my audience with His Majesty later, I'll discuss the dispatch issue of the military provisions with the Ministry of Revenue and Grand Secretary in detail. I'll have to get on my horse and head back at dawn tomorrow morning at the very latest. Your father has waged war with Amu'er at the eastern mountain range. He's launching a frontal assault first. No matter what, we have to knock their momentum down." This was not the place to talk after all, and Zuo Qianqiu stopped after discussing a little about the military situation. He merely said, "It has been a long time since I last led the troops. I'll have to familiarize myself with the military affairs as soon as I can on my return to the camp. Libei is different from Tianfei Watchtower. Libei Armored Cavalry is skilled in storming the enemy, while I used to be on the defensive back at Tianfei Watchtower. I have to discuss this properly with your father. And one more thing. Zhao Hui is also seriously injured this time. He only has a younger sister who married into Qudu left in his family.<sup>2</sup> Remember to get Chen Yang to go over the Ministry of Rites later to let them know that all is well."

Xiao Chiye nodded his head in acknowledgment. Just then, Fuman came to invite Zuo Qianqiu inside. Zuo Qianqiu took one last look at Xiao Chiye and said, "You're alone in Qudu. Take good care of yourself."

Xiao Chiye performed the disciple's bow to him, and Zuo Qianqiu strode forward and lifted the curtain to enter.



Fei Sheng got his wish these days to handle matters at Jiang Qingshan's side. Something had gone wrong with Juexi's military provisions tonight, and Jiang Qingshan, who still held the post of Provincial Administration Commissioner of Juexi, had to make a trip to Mingli Hall to discuss the matter and would not be out for at least a couple hours. Fei Sheng's old ailment acted up again. Wanting to rest for a moment in the office, he sent a junior eunuch to get him some food.

Fei Sheng was sitting on the chair with one leg propped over the other to wait when he suddenly heard a sound from the door. He took a look with help from the candlelight. Seeing that it was Han Cheng, he hurriedly got up to pay his respects.

Han Cheng, who had just arrived after braving the rain, motioned for him to rise. Fei Sheng went up to remove the overcoat from Han Cheng. Han Cheng asked, "Has His Majesty summoned them to ask about it?"

Fei Sheng knew he was asking about something else, so he replied in a deferential manner, "Commander Zuo is here."

"Zuo Qianqiu?" Han Cheng was taken aback and blanked out for a moment. "He lives up to his name as the Prince of Libei, with reactions so swift that others are not given the opportunity to exploit any openings. With Commander Zuo's appearance, there will be no other candidate in Qudu who can surpass him. This Libei Armored Cavalry is still the Armored Cavalry of Libei."

Fei Sheng concurred but did not continue the topic. He knew that these were not matters he could involve himself in, so he would stay for as far away as he could. Han Cheng knew what he was thinking and held him in contempt for that.

Those *shu* sons born of concubines were all like this. They had no guts and no spunk. They eyed the bit of carrot dangling before them all day long, but made no attempt to forge ahead.

But while this was how Han Cheng thought, he still instructed Fei Sheng with an amiable countenance. "Although this matter is somehow

linked to Jiang Qingshan, it is still not a job he handled after all. The higher-ups won't blame him for this. Following him is indeed a good path that will open up opportunities for you. He is heading for Zhongbo next month. In the future, when the Imperial Bodyguards head there for fieldwork, they will all have to rely on you to pave the way for them. Xiaosheng, work hard and do your best."

Fei Sheng hurriedly responded in the affirmative and saw Han Cheng out. As he lowered his head to lift the hem of Han Cheng's robe for him, he suddenly saw the corner of the robe stained with some grayish-black dirt. He instantly patted it away quickly for Han Cheng and fawned on him, saying, "Did Your Excellency come over on foot? How..."

Han Cheng unexpectedly yanked over the corner of his robe. Fei Sheng's voice promptly came to a halt.

Outside, the heavy rain poured, and the play of shadow and light from the candle sunk Fei Sheng's face into the darkness. In that very instant, the office fell so silent that one could hear a pin drop. But in just a blink of an eye, Fei Sheng raised his head and squeezed out a smile as if nothing had happened. Obsequiously, he said, "The smudge of mud has already been wiped off. Your Excellency, please be careful on your way out."

Han Cheng stared at him and slowly released his grip on the corner of his robe. He smiled along with him and said after a moment had passed, "You may go about your business."

The moment Han Cheng had left, Fei Sheng's face turned cold. He lifted his hand and looked carefully at the residue of dirty mud on his fingertips under the candlelight. There was wood ash mixed within, and the rainwater had turned it into such a sludge that the color was hard to make out, but the bit of red mud mixed up with it did not escape his eyes.

The Xi's Residence had been burned down, and the dye the Xi Clan had used happened to be imported red clay. This stuff was valuable and hard to get. Even a prince's residence was not as this capable as the Xi Clan. Other than the Xi Clan, there were no other clans in Qudu who could use it.

What was Han Cheng doing at the Xi's Residence at this time?

Fei Sheng wiped away the mud on his fingertip. The cold sweat on his back had broken out earlier when his eyes had met Han Cheng's. He stood under the light with his thoughts in disarray, but he was sure of one thing—Han Cheng's intent to kill him had already been ignited in that one exchange of gaze.



The next day, Zuo Qianqiu returned to Libei on horseback. Xiao Chiye accompanied Hai Liangyi to send him out of the city. He could not return home, but he could deploy Chen Yang and Gu Jin out to follow the grains distribution officials to Huaizhou and Cizhou to supervise the military provisions. Nothing must go wrong with the military provisions this time. Xiao Chiye could not trust the men from the Six Ministries. He had long planted Wang Xian in Cizhou. Then he had gotten Pan Lin to transfer Liang Cuishan to Huaizhou. This way, he would not miss a single detail of the overall planning for Libei's military provisions.

"When Liang Cuishan returns," Xiao Chiye, who had not slept for the entire night, wiped his face with a cold handkerchief and said, "I'll have to convey to him my proper thanks."

Shen Zechuan sat in the carriage. He had not slept last night either, having stood guard over the hall. On hearing him, he said, "I have already made arrangements to settle his family down in the residence. Someone will be on night patrol to watch over them, just so he can do his job with peace of mind. Huaizhou differs from Cizhou; it has no dealings with us, and now we are getting them to prepare the military provisions at such a brief notice. Huaizhou Prefectural Prefect must be feeling rather reluctant."

"Huaizhou is exempted from handing over military provisions for eight years. The reason Hai Liangyi considered them is that they can afford to do so." Covering himself with the handkerchief, Xiao Chiye leaned back against the carriage wall and continued after a moment's pause, "We have to arrest Wei Huaigu today. We can't let him land in the hands of the Ministry of Justice."

They had friendly relations with the Minister of Justice, Kong Qiu, and they had a good time drinking wine together the last time too. But this bit of friendship could not be compared to Hai Liangyi. Xiao Chiye had already given up the idea of beating around the bush with them. He wanted to sever Wei Huaigu's retreat route, so he could only make this case bypass the Joint Trial by the Three Judicial Offices and have it end up in the hands of the Imperial Bodyguards—that is, Shen Zechuan.

"Wei Huaigu." Shen Zechuan fiddled with the authority token that had been set aside on the small table. He thought for a moment with a solemn expression, then said, "Since he had already intercepted the express relay



report, it means that he does not want it to make its way to the emperor. Yet, he changed his mind at the last minute. There must be a reason for it.”

Xiao Chiye recalled Wei Huaigu in Mingli Hall last night and said, “He was indeed acting abnormally last night. Going by his temperament, he should be trying every means possible to pass the buck or pick a scapegoat from the Ministry of Revenue to take the blame. But not only did he not try to wrangle his way out, he even answered when asked.”

Shen Zechuan’s fingertips stopped with a “thud”. He said, “It’s true that Baimazhou had a bumper harvest last year. Now that the military provisions have been adulterated with substandard grains, then where did such a big batch of grain go?”

Xiao Chiye pulled off the handkerchief. Clutching it in his hands, he said, “It’s having designs on wealth that causes loss of lives. If these grains were to set out from Baimazhou via Hezhou’s waterways, then it would be able to bypass Qudu to lead directly to Zhongbo, where they can brand it under a merchant’s label and sell it out at a high price as grains for the common folks.”

“There were already rumors before the new year that Jiang Qingshan was going to Zhongbo to assume the position of Provincial Administration Commissioner. If someone were to make much of this matter, then it’s clear what’s going on.” Shen Zechuan raised his eyes to exchange gazes with Xiao Chiye. “Someone in the Provincial Administration Commission of Juexi has been colluding with the wealthy merchants to resell the military grains at a profit. Because Jiang Qingshan was there in the past to oversee the entire operation and to strictly check the provisions, they carried it out on a small scale. But this year, Jiang Qingshan was going to be transferred out of Juexi, and he entered the capital after the new year to report for duty. He had to undergo the judicial process of vetting and waiting for a review trial, so he had no way to supervise Juexi’s preparation and coordination of the military provisions, and this gave the other party an opening to exploit. It’s just that no one expected them to be so bold as to dare to use moldy grains as substitutes.”

“Those who can take this much grains are few and far between.” The expression in Xiao Chiye’s eyes was deep and unfathomable. “Without their own caravan of traveling merchants to conduct the transaction, no one would dare to touch it.”

“Xi Hongxuan.” Shen Zechuan said slowly.

“Xi Hongxuan.” Xiao Chiye said with certainty. “He died not because of you and me, but because he had already become a sacrificial pawn who could implicate others. Wei Huaigu tried every means to make Xi Hongxuan take the blame in the collapse case. Was it because both of them were already dealing in private to resell military provisions for profit, and Wei Huaigu was worried that Xi Hongxuan would be subjected to rigorous checks, that was why he wanted him dead?”

Shen Zechuan contemplated it over for a moment, then said, “That’s right. Xi Hongxuan had indeed said before that Wei Huaigu did it for the money. The fact that he agreed back then to give Wei Huaigu money so quickly shows that he knew Wei Huaigu’s character very well and thought that Wei Huaigu would do this. If that was the case, Xi Hongxuan is already dead. Wei Huaigu had no need to take such a big risk to continue doing this. I suspect this wasn’t done by Wei Huaigu this time. Someone got a handle on him because of the earlier deals. That was why he knew he had already been treated as a tool when he saw the relay report. There was no escape for him now. Given how he did not argue back to vindicate himself, it’s very likely he knew who the other party is. He’s trying to imitate Hua Siqian at this moment—by using his life to prevent the Wei Clan from suffering further losses.”

Listening to the sound of rain in this interval of political intrigue against one another, Xiao Chiye felt a tinge of exhaustion washed over him. Xiao Jiming did right. Libei’s timely execution of the mess cooks was precisely to prevent themselves from being used as a pawn and becoming a stepping stone for the others to eradicate dissidents.

No. Maybe not just a stepping stone. They indeed wanted to use this military defeat to reduce Libei’s military power. They wanted to break up the Libei Armored Cavalry, which had always been in the hands of the Xiao Clan, and hand it over to Qudu to control and command. This way, even if they could not take down Libei immediately, they could still create the effect of supervision by an Army-inspecting Censor,<sup>3</sup> thereby restraining and holding the Xiao Clan in check.

“If Commander Zuo had not arrived in time tonight...” Shen Zechuan held Xiao Chiye’s hand and looked at him in this cramped carriage. “Then the appointment of Qudu’s new general would have been issued this morning, and the Libei Armored Cavalry would no longer be the Libei Armored Cavalry.”

Xiao Chiye's hand was icy cold. It took him a long while before he lifted his hand to stroke Shen Zechuan's hair. He said in a hoarse voice, "Libei Armored Cavalry is the Armored Cavalry of Dazhou... Father personally established it with his own hands; it's far more important than my eldest brother and me. For so many years, Qudu doesn't understand that we serve as an impenetrable fortress in Libei. We are not treasonous traitors."



#### Footnotes

1. Again, for foreign names in this novel, we decided to go with pinyin for the time being due to unfamiliarity with the language involved and to avoid mistranslations with the actual names in its original language. If we do get official subtitles someday, we will replace it in the translation (same goes for titles). Until then, please bear with us.
2. Recap, chapter 39. Zhao Hui's younger sister is married to the Vice Director of the Ministry of Rites.
3. 监军 Army(-inspecting) Censor or Army Supervisor or Military Inspector, designation of an Investigating Censor commissioned on an ad hoc basis to accompany an army on campaign, monitor its activities, and independently report to the throne.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 92 : ANXIETY



The sky was already dark when the rain stopped, with a few thin rays of fading light leaking out amongst the thick clouds. Black boots that came and went trampled on the water on the ground, sending them splashing, with the puddles reflecting the fractured dome of heaven. It was clearly the beginning of summer at this moment, but Qudu still seemed to be soaking in the rainy season; it had already been days since the capital last saw clear skies.

Having only gotten some free time now, Hai Liangyi sat on the *taishi* chair<sup>1</sup> and drank strong tea. He was old, and it was hard for his spirit to keep up. He was already feeling fatigued. But there were officials moving all around him attending to their duties, and the document exchanging hands also needed his perusal and approval. He was not at liberty to rest.

“Secretariat Elder.” Kong Qiu took a temporary rest from the cases on his desk and said respectfully to Hai Liangyi from where he was seated below the latter, “The Ministry of Revenue must be held responsible for the incident with the military provisions this time. This pupil has already submitted the request for the Joint Trial by the Three Judicial Offices to His Majesty yesterday. This matter can’t be delayed. What do you think if this pupil gets started on the arrest tonight?”

Hai Liangyi was slow to answer as he stirred aside the tea foam. He looked at the window and only said after a long time had passed, “I’ve been sitting for so long it makes me tired. His Majesty is still having his meal at present. Come with me for a walk outside.”

Kong Qiu personally took Hai Liangyi’s overcoat from the junior eunuch and put it on for him. Both men walked out of the office. It was already dark outside. Kong Qiu carried a lantern and followed Hai Liangyi along the small garden of the office compound.

“You want to arrest Wei Huaigu, and there is nothing wrong with it.” Contrary to expectation, Hai Liangyi felt a little more comfortable bathing in the night wind. He took a few more slow steps and said, “This incident concerns the stability of the frontier. You mustn’t be too lenient with Wei Huaigu. Just handle it in accordance with the law.”

Kong Qiu guessed that Hai Liangyi still had something to say to him, so he lit the way for Hai Liangyi. Already changing his form of address, he

said, “I shall do as Teacher says. This pupil thinks the same too. He’s so audacious this time that it won’t work even if the Empress Dowager wants to shield him. This pupil can see that he’s been increasingly acting out of line this year. Someone should have given him a warning a long time ago. Military affairs are not like other governmental affairs. This matter must never be tolerated and condoned.”

“That the Prince of Libei put on his armor once again to head into the battlefield is an admonition to Qudu.” Hai Liangyi stopped. He could no longer see the light between Heaven and Earth. He stood still in silence for a long while before he said, “Xiao Fangxu is the alpha wolf. In the power struggle between Libei and the Hua Clan all these years, he has never once stepped out of Libei due to ill health. He watches Xiao Jiming exhaust himself mentally and physically, and watches Xiao Chiye trapped in the imperial city. He places both of his sons in dangerous circumstances. Why do you think he did that?”

Affected by Hai Liangyi’s tone, Kong Qiu subconsciously grew more heavy-hearted. He said, “Concession. The Prince of Libei is making concessions with his sons. The longstanding noble clans have established themselves into a fortress in Qudu, and he broke the ‘rule’ from the frontier. Perhaps he once had the opportunity to advance, but he retreated.”

“He retreated. Yet the Empress Dowager didn’t understand.” Feeling physically and mentally exhausted, Hai Liangyi said, “The Empress Dowager didn’t understand, neither did Wei Huaigu or the noble clans. Xiao Fangxu broke the rule, and he backed off not because of fear, but because he was willing to accede to the sovereign-subject relationship between Dazhou and Libei. But as they say, things will reverse in the opposite direction when they hit their limits.<sup>2</sup> Chasing after the Xiao Clan this urgently to beat them down is like urging Xiao Fangxu to turn back. Since time immemorial, power struggles have always been unavoidable. But when it comes to wars, it’s often an ominous sign that the situation is hopeless. The Zhongbo troops suffered a defeat in the era of Xiande. Back then, the entire imperial court was full of corrupt officials who trampled upon the governmental affairs and made a mess of it! We have now regained the mess, and we are in trouble both internally and externally.”

Hai Liangyi coughed in the wind and refused Kong Qiu’s attempt to support him.

“It’s only this year that the state treasury has the spare resources to bear the expenses for the local aid reliefs. Juexi did good and lived up to expectations by settling the military provisions issue for the two great armies. With Libei and Bianjun Commandery stable, and with capable minister Jiang Qingshan about to be transferred to Zhongbo, there’s hope for Zhongbo’s revival. The Imperial College is on the rise, and scholars from humble backgrounds are gradually increasing. The Chief Surveillance Bureau has Cen Yu to lead it, and of the up-and-coming talents, there’s Yu Xiaozai. His Majesty also no longer indulges in having fun.” Sorrow gradually washed over Hai Liangyi. “I initially thought that a new dawn was about to begin in Dazhou, yet I now increasingly find myself in a situation where my spirit is willing but my flesh is weak.”

Alarmed, Kong Qiu forcibly held Hai Liangyi to support him. His eyes reddened, and he said, “Why does Teacher speak of such demoralizing words? The Prince of Libei is absolutely not that kind of person. This pupil will preside over the trial this time. I will definitely not let Libei suffer this injustice. There is still a chance to turn things around!”

However, Hai Liangyi did not pull himself together. How far can this emaciated body still walk while holding up Dazhou? He was just one man who could not save the situation on his own, much like one log alone could not prop up an entire building. He differed from the others; he could not act as recklessly and unscrupulously like the noble clans, nor could he turn completely to Libei. He was the Grand Secretary of the Grand Secretariat, and the one he supported was Li Jianheng. He had to make a decision that would maintain the balance in the given situation. Even if this decision might lead him to complete annihilation, he still must do it.

“Libei’s fury has already been ignited. Xiao Fangxu is now urging his troops on to Hongyan eastern mountain range, but once the war subsides, he will no doubt turn back to settle this score with Qudu.” Hai Liangyi calmed down amidst the sound of coughing. “When the time comes, no matter how he rages, we mustn’t release Xiao Chiye, even if Libei is willing to use Princess Consort of the Hereditary Prince, Lu Yizhi, and Grandson-heir, Xiao Xun, in exchange for him. He placed both sons in dangerous situations with the intent to toughen them up all precisely for this day. Xiao Jiming is severely wounded, and this is just the time for him to lie low. Xiao Chiye made a name for himself in his youth, and Xiao Fangxu put him in Qudu to temper him for six years. Now that this blade is forged and his glory is

known, letting him go back will be sowing the seeds of future disaster, much like releasing the tiger back into the mountain. I'm already at this age. Boran, I can't hold out for much longer! We have to treat Libei well, but we still can't let go of the rope we tether them with. I know that there will be many people lambasting me for being decrepit and muddle-headed after my death. But Boran, who dares to tell it to my face that Libei will really not rebel? That Qidong will really not rebel? Even if the Xiao Fangxu of today can endure it, can a Xiao Chiye who takes over the Commander-in-Chief seat someday tolerate it? Dazhou cannot afford to stake it all on this! I will take responsibility for deciding what should be given to Libei; not a single item will be lacking. This time, Wei Huaigu had the audacity to resell the military provisions for profit. You go ahead and behead him in accordance with the law! Whoever pleads for mercy, I will remonstrate and impeach him!"

Kong Qiu voiced his acknowledgment.

Hai Liangyi paused for a moment to brace himself before he continued, "I'm going to send a letter to the Prince of Libei to do away with the need for the Army-inspecting Censor.<sup>3</sup> This time, the imperial court will not assign an inspection eunuch to stir up trouble. All major and minor military affairs of Libei will still be managed by the Prince of Libei himself."

Kong Qiu hesitated for a moment before saying, "I am afraid the Empress Dowager will not agree to do away with the Army-inspecting Censor."

"Is there no emperor in Dazhou? It is a century-old rule that the harem should not interfere with government affairs. It's not up to her to decide this time. Besides, fighting a war is no joke. What's the use of sending a few castrated eunuchs who only know how to fawn on others? They are just a waste of food." Hai Liangyi took a few more steps and continued, "The eunuchs are all personal attendants of the Son of Heaven. The Twenty-Four Yamen could be called the 'inner court'. Having resided for long deep in the palace, they know not of the sufferings of the people, nor do they understand the ways of the sages. Pan Rugui was an eunuch who had attended the Eunuch School, but all he did was to frame loyal, upright men and bring harm upon the state. A wise man foresees and mitigates risks. The eunuch faction has only just been eliminated, we mustn't give them any more opportunities. I'll get Chen Zhen to draft the memorial now. Submit it to His Majesty tonight."

Fuman came looking for them with a lantern in hand from the other side. He did not dare to approach them and merely paid his obeisances from afar and said in a solemn voice, "Secretariat Elder and Your Excellency the Minister, this way, please. You have been summoned to the hall."

Hai Liangyi answered in a muted voice. He did not look kindly upon Fuman either. Kong Qiu supported him by the arm and walked back with him. Only when he was this close to Hai Liangyi's body did he realize just how skinny the Grand Secretary had become. He felt a stab of sorrow and grief in his heart, although his expression gave nothing away under the darkness.



Xiao Chiye re-tidied his robes and crown and entered the hall once again. This time, Xue Xiuzhuo was also present, with a spot at the end.

"The case of the military provisions is of grave importance, and it involves the collusion between officials and merchants for illegal profits. It's a bad influence on the local officials. If it can't be dealt with promptly and severely, then those scums will only take it for granted and have no regard for the law." Having smoked his pipe outside, Cen Yu curbed his impatience and said, "Your Majesty, I request to start the investigation and prosecution tonight. First, apprehend Wei Huaigu into the penal prison and have someone keep an eye on the Wei Clan's account books and manors. We can't let them take advantage of the disorder to transfer away the ill-gotten gains."

Li Jianheng had also been hanging on for a day and a night, and he was now so tired he could barely open his eyes. He managed with some difficulty to nod his head and said, "The military provision is a major issue. He made a mess of matters. Whether he should be executed or have his properties sealed, the Grand Secretariat may just deal with him at its own discretion and as it deems fit."

"The reach of this case stretches so far and wide that even Jiang Qingshan has to remain in his post pending the trial. Plus, the Wei Clan is a large clan with an extensive business empire. I'm afraid it can't be done within half a month with the Ministry of Justice acting alone on its own." Xiao Chiye's thumb rubbed the space between his thumb and index finger gently, and the thumb ring slowly rotated. He said, "Likewise, the Joint Trial by the Three Judicial Offices' epidemic case is still pending. To strictly guard against the emergence of similar official-merchant collusion



cases elsewhere, the Chief Surveillance Bureau still has to free up personnel to head down and check the accounts of the various areas. Seems to me that everyone has their own difficulties and are similarly short on manpower.”

“Your Lordship has a point.” Xue Xiuzhuo continued in a soft voice. “But everything has its own importance and urgency. Libei is fighting a war at present, so the matter of the military provision is of top priority. The Ministry of Justice and the Chief Surveillance Bureau naturally have to put this matter first. It’s not an issue at all.”

Blockhead Li Jianheng could tell that Xiao Chiye was hinting at something to him. But with Xue Xiuzhuo’s interruption, he did not know how to continue. Scratching his cheeks, he looked at Hai Liangyi and asked, “What does the Secretariat Elder think?”

Hai Liangyi did not look at any of them. After a moment’s pause, he said, “Is Your Lordship worried that the Joint Trial by the Three Judicial Offices will drag the case on for too long?”

Xiao Chiye said, “The workflow of the Joint Trial by the Three Judicial Offices is too complex. Wei Huaigu has been in the top position for so long that his thinking and methods are all different from the common man. I’m worried that it will cause further complications if we keep him around for too long.”

Li Jianheng hurriedly cut in, “That’s right. The Wei Clan has always shown filial respect to the Empress Dowager. If this case drags on for too long, I’m worried that the Empress Dowager will be overwhelmed with worries and end up causing her health to deteriorate.”

“But without the Joint Trial by the Three Judicial Offices, we can’t thoroughly investigate the various profiteering loose ends down there.” Disagreeing, Kong Qiu said, “These people are only this audacious before they have Wei Huaigu to shield them. It’ll be a disaster to let all of them run free.”

“I’m merely worried about the time. I’m not saying that we shouldn’t investigate.” Xiao Chiye looked at Li Jianheng. “Don’t tell me this is the only course for Qudu to take?”

Something clicked in Li Jianheng’s mind, and he slapped his thigh and picked up the thread, “For a speedy investigation, we should let the Imperial Bodyguards handle it! That Shen Zechuan was pretty fast in his handling of the previous matter in which Xi Hongxuan assembled notorious bandits. Why not let him take charge of this case?”

Xue Xiuzhuo said, "This is such a major case. I'm afraid it won't do to hand it over to the Vice Commander of the Imperial Bodyguards. Shen Zechuan will be limited by his rank. It'd be more appropriate to hand it to the Commander-in-chief, Han Cheng."

Xiao Chiye shifted his gaze to Xue Xiuzhuo's face and pulled his lips into a smile. He said, "That's right. Shen Zechuan is indeed not suitable to take charge of this case. He's young and lacking in experience, and he has a longstanding grudge against me. I can't rest reassured if we hand it over to him."

On the contrary, his retreat in order to advance<sup>4</sup> convinced Hai Liangyi. Hai Liangyi knew Han Cheng had some friendly relations with Xiao Chiye too. He was worried that Xiao Chiye might use this and go too far with his handling of this case, so he might as well hand it over to Shen Zechuan, who had always been at odds with Xiao Chiye, to handle. With both men standing in diametrical opposition to each other and mutually monitoring one another, no one would be able to play dirty tricks and tamper with the case.

"Your Lordship, this is just your prejudice. Shen Zechuan is indeed young and lacking in experience, but it was by imperial decree he was first promoted up the ranks where he dealt with one tough case after another. Letting him gain more experience is a good thing too." Hai Liangyi turned to Li Jianheng and said, "Having the Imperial Bodyguards as the chief investigators of this case means that it'll be handled by the Imperial Prison, and it just so happened that Shen Zechuan is the Northern Judge.<sup>5</sup> Given his official duties and job responsibilities, his handling of the case is justified and reasonable. It's just that it's inadvisable to persist in aiming for speed. Although we are bypassing the Joint Trial by the Three Judicial Offices, there is still a need for the Three Judicial Offices to supervise. What does Your Majesty think?"

Li Jianheng knew that Hai Liangyi was making concessions by this. He did not dare to be too overly partial towards Xiao Chiye, so he instantly agreed and said, "I'll issue the edict to him right at once to start the investigation tonight."

Two consecutive days of official discussions in Mingli Hall finally came to a momentary halt. Everyone had to return and rest for a night. As they stepped out of the hall, Li Jianheng specifically let the eunuchs carry the sedan and send Hai Liangyi to the palace gates to get on his horse

carriage. Kong Qiu and the rest walked out together. Xiao Chiye nodded farewell to them and left alone.

Kong Qiu looked at Xiao Chiye's back and sighed, "The way I see it, he's too broken-hearted to trust the Ministry of Justice to preside over the case and wants to investigate it together with Han Cheng."

Cen Yu descended the stairs and said, "And look at just who Han Cheng is? The Secretariat Elder was right to choose Shen Zechuan. Is Yanqing heading straight back to your residence?"

Xue Xiuzhuo followed behind them with a smile on his face and said, "Yes. I've been resting in the office compound these few days. I should go back tonight and get the preparations ready. There are still cases to handle a few days later."

Cen Yu was very caring and nurturing of his juniors, and promoted them very often. He had personally guided Yu Xiaozai of the Chief Surveillance Bureau, whose career had blossomed under his mentorship, and he occasionally gave Shen Zechuan advice too, all of which was out of concern. He also valued Xue Xiuzhuo's talents, so when he heard these words of his, he simply had to encourage him some.

The three men got into their respective horse carriages at the palace entrance.

It was deep in the night when the servant of the Xue's Residence heard a knock at the door, so he threw on his clothes and came out for a look. Standing outside the door were all solemn-looking Imperial Bodyguards with their blades. He was startled. Before he had time to ask questions, Qiao Tianya, who was at the lead, leisurely squeezed his way through the door and pushed the man aside.

"Have you eaten? It's still early at present, so you probably haven't taken your meal yet. Then go inform the kitchen to prepare meals for us Imperial Bodyguards too. And while you are at it, call everyone up. We're going to search the residence."

The steward lifted his lantern to stop him in his tracks and yelled, "Your Excellency, how can you do this? You haven't produce the search warrant —"

"Take all those who obstruct official duties and hold up the search and arrest into the Imperial Prison." Shen Zechuan stood at the entrance, his gaze sinister and ruthless. "Tell Xue Xiuzhuo that I'm looking for him."



### Author's Words:

First volume is ending soon.

**Special Thanks to:** [Eggy](#), [Yunyun](#), [Lin](#)

Footnotes



- 1.
2. 太师椅 *Taishi* Chair or Grand Preceptor Chair, is a classical style of a wooden armchair in ancient China.
3. 物极必反, i.e., things will develop in the opposite direction when they become extreme or hit their limit.
4. 监军 Army-inspecting Censor or Army Supervisor or Military Inspector, designation of an Investigating Censor commissioned on an ad hoc basis to accompany an army on campaign, monitor its activities, and independently report to the throne.
5. 以退为进 i.e. make concessions in order to gain advantages
6. 镇抚 Judge of the Imperial Prison, which specialized in using torture to suppress corrupt officials. During the Ming Dynasty, there was a Southern and Northern Prison (镇抚司) subordinated to the Imperial Bodyguards. The Southern Prison was in charge of interpreting military laws and managing military craftsmen while the Northern Prison was responsible for cases entrusted by the Emperor.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 93 : GENERAL



The Imperial Bodyguards swarmed into the Xue's Residence and swiftly passed through the veranda to enter within. All the people in the various courtyards were startled awake. The women huddled together in fear as they were herded out of their houses towards an open space in the residence to assemble. The Imperial Bodyguards had a reputation out there, and in these people's eyes, Shen Zechuan was a man-eating predator.<sup>1</sup>

Xue Xiuyi hurriedly put on his clothes and stepped out. Seeing Xue Xiuzhuo standing under the eaves too, he could not help but lunge forward and hauled Xue Xiuzhuo as he said resentfully, "What did you do to bring the Imperial Bodyguards to us?! If you implicate us and get us into trouble, I'll boot you out and have you disowned from the clan!"

Xue Xiuzhuo turned his head to look at this savage-looking eldest brother of his and let him haul him as he liked. With pity and indifference in his eyes, he said, "The whole family gets a share in fame and fortune, but when misfortune befalls, one person alone bears it all. Eldest brother, have no fear. It's still far from your turn to be the head of this clan."

Having said that, he pushed Xue Xiuyi away and walked along the steps towards Shen Zechuan.

This was the second time Shen Zechuan and Xue Xiuzhuo met head-on. Xue Xiuzhuo had not gone to bed yet. He had been in the study handling affairs pertaining to the cases and had promptly walked out with an azure wide-sleeved robe draped over him. This man had a calm and unhurried aura to him, and his scholarly elegance was not something that could be feigned overnight. He had real capabilities, and this was something Shen Zechuan never denied.

"To what I owe the Vice-Commander's presence in my humble abode at this late hour?" Xue Xiuzhuo, who was about the same height as Shen Zechuan, stood firm and said to Shen Zechuan, "I should have prepared a simple meal with wine as a show of hospitality and welcomed you much earlier."

"I've just received the imperial edict. His Majesty orders me to take overall charge of the military provisions case. This is such a major issue, and the Imperial Bodyguards, not daring to be sloppy, have promptly arrested Wei Huaigu." Shen Zechuan scrutinized the couplets in the main

hall and did not look at Xue Xiuzhou as he said with nonchalance, “Wei Huaigu has always been on good terms with Assistant Minister Xue. In order for you to avoid suspicions, your residence will have to be searched tonight.”

“I am fully aware that the Court of Judicial Review is assisting the Imperial Bodyguards with the case. But I am an appointed official of the imperial court. If the Imperial Bodyguards want to search my residence, you’ll need the warrant issued by the Ministry of Justice.” Xue Xiuzhuo looked around the courtyard and saw panic and confusion all around. He said, “However, this case is urgent, and the Vice Commander has the prerogative to act first and report later. Uncle Xue, hand the keys to the inner courtyard to the Imperial Bodyguards as well. Lead the way to whichever area they wish to search.”

Shen Zechuan inclined his head and said, “You are really something to be on guard even against an impromptu imperial edict issued by His Majesty.”

Xue Xiuzhuo smiled. “It’s only right that I act with caution when encountering a character like the Vice Commander. It’s late and chilly out there. If the Vice Commander doesn’t find it beneath you, would you like to have a cup of tea with me inside? This residence isn’t small. By the time the search is done, it would be time for morning court.”

“I’ll skip the tea.” Shen Zechuan slowly turned around. “I can’t afford to ask for tea from prominent clans. So does it mean I’m going to have to return empty-handed again today?”

Xue Xiuzhuo said, “That will have to depend on what the Vice Commander is here for. If it is to investigate the case, then it’s indeed going to be regrettable. I’m just acquaintances with Wei Huaigu; we aren’t connected in any way.”

Shen Zechuan fell silent. As he stared at Xue Xiuzhuo, that feeling of being played for a fool indistinctly resurfaced again. After a long while, Qiao Tianya returned to the open ground and shook his head at Shen Zechuan from afar. Shen Zechuan then knew that he had come up empty-handed once again—Shifu and Teacher were both not here.

“A wily hare has three burrows.”<sup>2</sup> Shen Zechuan said softly.

“Just a fish swimming at the bottom of the cauldron<sup>3</sup> taking a momentary breather.” Xue Xiuzhuo said in a deferential manner.

“You only have this one chance with me.” Shen Zechuan moved his feet and approached Xue Xiuzhuo. “Where are they?”

It was a moonless night, with the after-rain dampness and chill pervasive all around. The men and women in the courtyard were all covering their faces and weeping. Xue Xiuyi did not know the details, but fearing Xue Xiuzhuo would infuriate Shen Zechuan, he hurriedly stepped forth and bowed to Shen Zechuan with his hands clasped before him. With trepidation, he said, “Who is Your Excellency looking for? We are not harboring any fugitives from the military provisions case! All the people in the compound are here. Your Excellency, please feel free to interrogate them. We will definitely tell you all we know without holding anything back!”

Xue Xiuzhuo said nothing. Seeing that he was not willing to reveal his shifu’s whereabouts, he said, “I’m looking for wanted criminals of the imperial court. I’ve heard that there is a batch of prostitutes being kept in Assistant Minister Xue’s residence. Is that right?”

Xue Xiuzhuo’s gaze flickered. Xue Xiuyi immediately butted in and said, “Yes, yes, there is! But matters like soliciting and consorting with prostitutes are all impeachable by the Chief Surveillance Bureau. He has been pretty careful in hiding them, so the imperial censors have no awareness of it. Your Excellency, Your Excellency, please take a look. These are the children. They are just some little playthings. How could they be wanted criminals of the imperial court?”

Shen Zechuan noticed the slight change in Xue Xiuzhuo’s expression at Xue Xiuyi’s words. He turned his eyes to look at those boys and girls and said, “What place is Xiangyun Villa? Everyone in there are all wanted criminals implicated in the assassination case. Assistant Minister Xue bought them from Xiangyun Villa without so much a word. Why wasn’t the Ministry of Justice notified?”

Xue Xiuzhuo pushed Xue Xiuyi aside and said, “These people all have proof of household registration. Although they are from the brothel, they are all innocent. The Vice Commander is currently on the military provisions case tonight. It has nothing to do with them, so why keep harping on it?”

“Whether they are innocent or not, we will only find out after they make a trip to the imperial prison.” Shen Zechuan looked back and said, “Take all these people away.”

The group of people hugged themselves and cried out loud. Qiao Tianya took the lead and dragged them away. Under Xue Xiuzhuo's tutelage, those boys had been taught to carry themselves like the younger generation of distinguished clans, so how could they compare to the Imperial Bodyguards? In no time, their wails worsened. Xue Xiuyi was so frightened that his legs were trembling. Still wanting to mediate and say a few words of appeasement to ease the tension, he even brought out Xiao Chiye.

"Your, Your Excellency!" Bracing himself, Xue Xiuyi said with difficulty, "Since this matter concerns Libei, then why not ask, ask what His Lordship thinks... If there's really something wrong, then go ahead and take Xue Xiuzhuo away!"

Xue Xiuzhuo suddenly took a few steps forward to obstruct Qiao Tianya. He bellowed, "The Imperial Bodyguards still have to follow procedures even if you are officially on the case! Vice Commander Shen, you can take my people away, but I want to see the arrest warrant from the Ministry of Justice!"

"Take them away!" Shen Zechuan held up his blade to push back against him, forcing Xue Xiuzhuo to take a step back. He said, "Since you want the arrest warrant, then I will give you as many as you want tomorrow morning!"

"Shen Zechuan!" Xue Xiuzhuo abruptly flung his sleeves. "I'm going to impeach you for abusing the power of public office to avenge personal grudges!"

"Then go ahead and submit the memorial for impeachment tonight!" Shen Zechuan's tone turned frosty. "This batch of people is now in my hands. For each day I don't see Teacher, I will kill one! Guess how long will it take for me to kill my way to your precious student?"

"Don't you dare!" Xue Xiuzhuo suddenly flew into a rage. Seeing that Qiao Tianya had already dragged them away to the other end where the wails were increasing in intensity, he grabbed Qiao Tianya's arm and said, "You people are accessories to crime by willfully arresting innocent commoners. So why investigate? Stop it!"

"If you dare to get in the way again, I'll kill them now!" Shen Zechuan partially pressed his blade out of its sheath with his thumb, revealing a glint.

Seeing Shen Zechuan made to draw his blade out amidst their dispute, Xue Xiuyi could not help but be so seized with terror that he actually



fainted from the fright. The surrounding servants all yelled out “Eldest Master” and hurried over to help him up. Xue Xiuzhuo, who was being dragged backward by the Imperial Bodyguards, watched helplessly as the Imperial Bodyguards rounded all the students up onto the wagon.

“Shen Zechuan!” Xue Xiuzhuo held on to the arm blocking his way, his composure all but gone. With his eyes reddened, he spat resentfully, “You dare to kill them. You dare to kill them?! You tyrant! You aren’t worthy of being Mister’s student!”

Shen Zechuan flipped atop his horse and left Xue Xiuzhuo’s shouts of abuse all behind.



The wars in Libei were concentrated in numbers and intensity. Likewise, it was not all quiet and still over at the Bianjun Commandery.

Lu Guangbai returned to his camp for a rest. He had not even dismounted when he saw his deputy general hurrying over towards him. He asked, “What’s the matter?”

The deputy general did not look too good as he whispered, “General, Qudu has dispatched an Army-inspecting eunuch over. He brought this year’s military provisions too.”

After a moment of silence, Lu Guangbai dismounted, removed his helmet, and lifted the screen to enter the tent. An eunuch was sitting on the raised seat that had been set up inside; he was dressed in a python-patterned robe and wore a *yandun* hat<sup>4</sup> on his head. Even when he saw Lu Guangbai stepping in, he did not get up to pay his obeisances.

Lu Guangbai set aside his long spear and said, “*Gonggong* has been rushing the entire journey. Why are you not taking a rest? I’ll order the men to tidy up the tent.”

Yingxi was a recently promoted eunuch. He had backings in the palace, and he knew that his masters had never looked kindly upon the Lu clan of the Bianjun Commandery, so he looked down upon Lu Guangbai too. On hearing him, he smiled and said, “It’s desolate and barren here, and all the people here are clumsy fools, so how would they know how to serve others? There’s no need for the general to go to such trouble. I have already taken a look around. That tent is so dark and filthy it’s not inhabitable. I’ve gotten men to hurry over to Cangjun to buy some timber with the plan to build a separate compound here—I still have to stay here for half a year!”

Lu Guangbai was not good with words. He knew that the Army-inspecting eunuchs were always this pretentious, and he could not be bothered to make conversation either. He undid the arm guard, and with the removal of that iron skin, filthy blood dripped onto the ground. On seeing this, Yingxi covered his nose in horror and exclaimed, "How did it fester to such an extent?!"

The deputy general dragged the chest over with the intent to bandage it for Lu Guangbai. When he saw the wound, he said, "General, it's scraped so badly! We have to get the military medic over to take a look."

Lu Guangbai motioned for him to shut up and felt around the side of his thigh for a dagger. As he poured wine around his wound, he heated up the dagger in the candle flame until it was searing hot. The deputy general hurriedly held up his sleeve for him. Yingxi had never seen such a ruthless person before, and his limbs went cold as he listened to the sound of rotten flesh being gouged out. Lu Guangbai sprinkled the medicine over the wound and got the deputy general to bandage it for him.

"The cavalry is hard to deal with. Without the deployment order, we can't pursue our way out of the delimited range, and we are naturally too occupied to bother with this when we are going back and forth engaged in attrition battles." Having cleaned up his wound, Lu Guangbai propped up his knee and looked at Yingxi to ask, "Did *gonggong* come with the military provisions?"

Yingxi forced back his disgust and nausea and nodded his head.

Lu Guangbai rose and said, "I'll go take a look."

With that, he stepped out of the tent with his deputy general and headed towards the military provisions. Those who had escorted and transported the military provisions had already withdrawn. Lu Guangbai made his way into the granary and opened up a burlap sack. Yet when he saw the provisions within, he frowned. He reached out to grab a handful—it was all damp rice and moldy flour.

"General." The deputy general said. "It's not just damp rice and moldy flour that were sent this time. The quantity is pathetic too. Our Bianjun Commandery has 20,000 men, and troops are dispatched every day to engage in guerrilla warfare. There's a lot of running around involved, and naturally the amount of food consumed is high too—it can't be compared to the garrison troops of the other four commanderies. This bit of provision can't even last us until autumn!"

Lu Guangbai's scarred palm released these grains and said, "The Secretariat Elder Hai has always looked out for us. Last year's military provisions were also allocated pretty quickly. Is there a reason for the reduction in quantity this time?"

The deputy general's chest heaved. Several times, he wanted to say something, but then he held it back.

Lu Guangbai said, "Just say it if you have something to say. What is this for? Someone gag your mouth?"

"General!" The deputy general was indignant. He stepped forth to grab those grains, and his emotions surged. He said in a tearful voice, "They gave us less! Why? Isn't it all because they were in a hurry to transfer it to Libei Armored Cavalry?! What the heck! Libei Armored Cavalry are all good men and soldiers, while the garrison troops of our Bianjun Commandery are all lowly bastards! They have always loved fawning on those at the top and bullying those at the bottom; they trampled on you every opportunity they can! But these are wars we are waging! We are all risking our own lives here, so on what grounds can they play favorites?! What issue do they have with our Bianjun Commandery?! We are already this poor, and they still want to skimp here and there! I asked those escorts who transported the food what are we to do in autumn, and they said the imperial court told us to play it by ear and take care of it ourselves! Do as we deem fit. Fuck them to hell and back!"

The deputy general clenched his fists.

"Qidong's military provisions were reduced by half to supply to Libei. But don't the other commanderies need to fight too?! They still have military fields to provide them with food to eat, but we can only eat empty air! Once autumn arrives, the horses of the Biansha Twelve Tribes will all be fattened up, and when that time comes, the battles will be even harder to fight! With just this bit of grains, we—"

"Not a word more!" Lu Guangbai bellowed at the deputy general, stopping him in his tracks. He stood for a long time in the darkness. Eventually, he looked at the starry sky outside and said in a hoarse voice, "... I'll think of a way."

The fire beacon towers of the Bianjun Commandery sat in silence between the rolling terrains, while the night, like the reversed flow of filthy waters, sealed this opening and obstructed them from seeing the light. Lu Guangbai did not have the prestigious reputation of the other three generals.

He was just like the stubborn rock stationed at the edge of the desert, enduring the weight of oppressive pressure from three directions until it gradually eroded his originally round and smooth body into one with sharpened edges.<sup>5</sup> Many people from their Lu clan had died, leaving only him to inherit Lu Pingyan's spear.

He was this slow-witted. And he was this unlikable. He made a name for himself pretty late in his years, having none of the natural talents Xiao Jiming and Qi Zhuyin possessed. He was Lu Pingyan's youngest and stupidest son. Yet, it was also such a "him" who held up the Bianjun Commandery after Lu Pingyan's retirement. He choked off the strategic passage in which the Biansha Cavalry wanted to penetrate and advance through. He did not have a master; he was a general who learned his craft by following Lu Pingyan into the desert and tumbling his way out from the yellow sands. He treated others with sincerity. He... was riddled with scars all over.

This very night, Lu Guangbai did not sleep. He sat hugging his spear on the earthen slope before the camp, unable to think of a way to resolve the shortage of military provisions. Qi Zhuyin had jurisdiction over the Five Commanderies. All these years, she had emptied her own private savings to give them financial aid; he could not keep asking Qi Zhuyin for help every single time. His old man at home was still ill too, so he could not ask Lu Pingyan to drag his sick body around to borrow money either.

The deputy general saw Lu Guangbai's lonely back when he got up in the middle of the night to relieve himself. He wanted to go over and tell him to rest, but before he could approach, he saw Lu Guangbai bending over and reached out to touch the soil at his feet. For a long time, Lu Guangbai never raised his head.



#### Footnotes

1. 狼虎 literally wolves and tigers. i.e., evildoers, oppressors
2. 狡兔三窟 literally a wily hare has three burrows; a craft person has more than one hideout, or a sly individual has more than one plan to fall back on.
3. 釜底游鱼 literally a fish swimming at the bottom of the cauldron/pot; a person whose fate is sealed, or a person who is in

dire danger.

4. 烟墩帽 a hat worn by eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty.
5. 棱角 may also refers to a person's abilities. Effect here could be taken to mean honing his abilities as well.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 94 : RAGING WAVES



**Note:**

The title, raging waves, also refers to a critical or desperate situation.



Wei Huaigu was sent to prison to be placed on trial, while Yang Cheng of the Provincial Administration Commission of Juexi was also apprehended by the Imperial Bodyguards and taken to the imperial prison. This was a major case in the year of Tianchen, and the entire court of civil and military officials was watching. Shen Zechuan moved very quickly. From the confession submitted by Yang Chen, he found out that Wei Huaigu had been reselling military provisions for profits ever since the fourth year of Xiande.

Using his position as the Minister of Revenue, Wei Huaigu would buy military provisions from Yang Cheng each time he supervised the handling of the military provisions. Then he resold it at a higher price to Xi Hongxuan, who then separately sent these military grains via sea and land towards the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo and Xuhai to make a huge profit off them. In this way, he split the land tax among the commoners' fields in the thirteen cities of Juexi and let the common folk down there bear the tax

“Since you’ve already been doing this for so long, then why was it only this time that you were pricked by your conscience into reporting Wei Huaigu through the relay report?” Shen Zechuan looked through Yang Cheng’s confession.

Yang Cheng had been in the imperial prison for a few days. He lowered his head and said, “This time, moldy grains were used to fill it up; it’s not the same as before. Libei is going to fight a war. These grains would be the poison that causes the death of the soldiers at the frontier pass if they were sent over. I was afraid that something bad would really happen to the Hereditary Prince of Libei.”

There were no other people at the sides of the table. Xiao Chiye, who was sitting in the shadows, said out of the blue, “You are so certain that these foods will reach the mouth of the Hereditary Prince?”

Yang Cheng shifted his arms uneasily. His lips turned pale as he said, "That's what I was afraid of. Although I'm greedy for wealth, I don't want to cause anyone to lose their lives."

"Don't be afraid." Shen Zechuan cast a glance at Xiao Chiye and softened his tone at Yang Cheng, "This place may be the imperial prison, but this is a case that is personally supervised and tried by His Majesty. If you have anything to say, you can voice them all out here."

The contrast between both of them was stark. Yang Cheng gulped down his saliva. He was already a little dazed from the non-stop interrogation all night. He muttered, "I didn't know it. I didn't—"

"What didn't you know? Shen Zechuan asked gently.

"I didn't know that something would really happen to the Hereditary Prince of Libei..." Yang Cheng began to choke with sobs as he spoke. "I didn't know... I was worried the Libei Armored Cavalry would suffer a defeat because of this and let the Biansha Cavalry assault their way in once again."

Xiao Chiye bent over slightly, his body like a vicious beast whose shadows loomed over Yang Cheng's face. He said in a frosty voice, "So you know this batch of military provisions can lead to the defeat of the Libei Armored Cavalry. Yet you still had them sealed and loaded up the carriages. You deserve to die."

Yang Cheng grew terrified under Xiao Chiye's gaze. Stumped for words, he cried incoherently, "Your Lordship... I plead guilty. I, I deserve to die..."

"You won't die." With compassion brimming in his expressive, upturned eyes on his jade-like handsome face, Shen Zechuan said, "The main perpetrator is Wei Huaigu in this case. He used his position to coerce you, and there was nothing you could do. I understand these difficulties of yours. His Lordship understands it as well. Yang Cheng, you entered government service in the era of Yongyi. You have been an official in Juexi for half of your life, and you have made your way up to the post of Assistant Administration Commissioner. You are a capable man, as assessed from the Qudu's inspection. Now that Jiang Qingshan has left Juexi to be transferred to Zhongbo as a provincial governor, the position of the Provincial Administration Commissioner of Juexi will be vacant. Going by age and experience, you will be the first choice for recommendation when the Ministry of Personnel is deliberating over it. You see, your future was

supposed to be bright, and yet you forfeited it all for that bit of money. It's not worth it."

Hunching over, Yang Cheng sobbed.

"I heard that you were from Baimazhou in your early years. Your family was poor, and you lost your father at the age of six. Your siblings and you were single-handedly raised by your mother alone. She sent you and your brothers to school and spent most of her life enduring hardships. She finally waited for the day you became an official and had your own residence, yet you committed such a grave mistake." Shen Zechuan was particularly compassionate as he continued, "From today onwards, she'll be left all alone and forsaken, and she still has to endure scorns and curses because of this case. How can you be so heartless?"

Yang Cheng could not help himself and burst out crying. He was a scholar to begin with, and he knew of propriety, justice, integrity, and honor.<sup>1</sup> He was the most filial in serving and attending to his mother's needs back at home. Covering his face with both hands, he cried, "I have made such an inhumane mistake. I'm too ashamed to see her again!"

"This case is still not closed. Whether you will be executed or not is still up for debate." Xiao Chiye threw down the confession and looked askance at him. "Since you still know to be ashamed, then you still have a shred of conscience left. All the questions I'm going to ask you next will not be recorded in the confession. If you answer truthfully, I'll think of a way to preserve your life so that your old mother may live her remaining years in peace and comfort. But if you dare to prevaricate in an attempt to fob me off, then I'll immediately have you publicly beheaded at the foot of Duancheng's city gate as a warning to the rest. With one relay report, you gave Wei Huaigu away and ruined many people's golden rice bowl.<sup>2</sup> You are a man in the trade, so you understand best what fate awaits those widows and orphans. Without me to vouch for you, the lives of everyone in your family will be in imminent danger."

Yang Cheng cried for a long time. When he stopped, Shen Zechuan personally held out a cup of hot tea to him. He wiped his tears hastily and repeatedly said his thanks. With both hands holding the tea, he fell silent for a long while before he said, "Your Lordship's willingness to protect me... is a great life-saving kindness. I don't dare to ask to re-enter government service as an official again; all I wish for is to be sent into exile. This case



implicates way too much. It's not something that can be clearly explained in a short time. I'll tell Your Lordship about it slowly."

"Ever since the first year of the era of Xiande, the state treasury has been depleting in substantial amounts. The Ministry of Revenue's accounts are all messed up. Hua Siqian, as the Grand Secretary of the Grand Secretariat, collaborated with Pan Rugui to approve many projects that squandered away public funds. For example, Linlang Garden in Qinzhou. Most of them weren't really built for real. These gardens were merely just a pretext to pass through the Grand Secretariat's examination and gain its approval so that everyone could draw out money from the state treasury together. The collusion between officials and merchants for illegal gains was something everyone in the palace knew. The money really flowed like water flowing into these people's pockets."

"In the fourth year of Xiande, Wei Huaigu dragged me into this. I'll be honest, Your Lordship. I know these money shouldn't be touched, but I had no choice. When local officials like us enter the capital, the Pan and Hua factions will take turns to call on us and ask for 'ice respect'. No doubt you would have also heard of the widely-spread practice of spending money to get a promotion those few years. The noble clans have the dignity of a noble clan to uphold. Those who are truly held back by all these 'ice respect' and 'coal respect'<sup>3</sup> are officials from humble backgrounds like me. Without money, we can't enter the central administration. Without money, we won't have a job to do."

"That year, Juexi faced a locust plague, and not a single grain was reaped from the thirteen cities. It was Jiang Qingshan who did all he could to shoulder this responsibility and save our lives. He forcibly opened up the commercial granaries to release food aid relief to the commoners, and this was how the situation did not deteriorate into a famine. It was also because of this that Jiang Qingshan became the thorn in the flesh of the prominent businessmen in Juexi. Qudu also knew this at that time. The debtors hunted him down to his residence, and his mother even had to weave fabrics to pay off the debt even at her age. But what debt was he repaying? We all know it very well that he was repaying the debt on behalf of the imperial court. But there was one thing that no one else but those of us from the Provincial Administration Commission of Juexi knew, and that was, the defeat of the Zhongbo troops was too timely."

“Why do I say that? The state treasury was empty at that time, and Juexi had faced a calamity. Libei and Bianjun Commandery still had to deal with the Biansha Cavalry. The harvest of Hezhou further down was dismal too. People from the various areas were already starving to death at the beginning of the year. The Ministry of Revenue was forced into a corner, but they had no way to provide aid reliefs to the various areas because the state treasury had already been emptied out. Hua Siqian had to give the various regions an explanation, and Hai Liangyi of the Grand Secretariat was also looking into the accounts. In no time, Hua Siqian was caught between a rock and a hard place. This matter put him in a terrible fix. At that time, the Hua Clan in Dicheng sold their manor, and it was the Xi Clan who took over. We all know that Hua Siqian wanted to backfill the state treasury by doing this; he wanted to cover up the matter. But a vacuum of that size was not something he alone can fill in, and so, Hua Siqian began to collect his debt from the others.”

“I don’t know if Hua Siqian got his money back. But it was at this juncture that the Biansha Cavalry suddenly launched an assault at Chashi River. Duanzhou’s garrison troops suffered a crushing defeat, and Shen Wei withdrew and holed himself up like a tortoise, leading to Zhongbo’s defeat one after another. Libei Armored Cavalry and Qidong Garrison Troops came from both sides to provide reinforcements. It was at the gate of Qudu that they stopped the Biansha Tribes from penetrating deeper. But although the homeland was reclaimed, the massacred cities had already turned into deserted ones. And Juexi’s subsequent resupply of relief grains were precisely the grains of the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo.”

Shen Zechuan abruptly rose to his feet. He stood in the darkness without saying a word.

Xiao Chiye’s heart went icy as well. He and Shen Zechuan had made so many assumptions in the past, but it had never occurred to them that the defeat of the Zhongbo troops might be to fill up the empty granaries at the back and pay off the debt for Hua Siqian and the officials who were caught in a difficult position owing to the state treasury investigation.

“That was more than 100,000 people.” Shen Zechuan stupefyingly supported himself on the table and looked ahead as he said in a hoarse voice, “That was... That was the lives of 40,000 soldiers... Do you know what you are talking about...”

Shen Zechuan was caught off-guard by these words. He spent six years convincing himself that these people possibly died in the struggle for power. These vivacious people, these young lives—all of them existed once, like Ji Mu. Duanzhou was the first door in. They all died so tragically. The singing reverberating in Chashi sinkhole was Shen Zechuan's nightmare for a lifetime.

The defeat of Zhongbo troops led to countless of victims. No one went to collect the bodies of the soldiers who died in battle. Blood inundated the dreams of survivors.

In this oppressive atmosphere, Yang Cheng held his head and said, "The filling of military grains this time really made me afraid. Zhongbo still had the chance to be rescued, but Libei can only rely on the reinforcement from Luoxia Pass. Once the Biansha Cavalry breaches Libei, I'll become a sinner condemned through the ages!"

"The defeat of Zhongbo troops and the arrival of the Biansha Cavalry were too coincidental! Hanshe Tribe's transfer of their troops south was not a coincidence; it was because they received news."

In that case, Hanshe Tribe's encounter with Xiao Jiming at the Hongyan eastern mountain range this time was definitely no coincidence either. There were people everywhere in Qudu, Zhongbo, Libei, and even Qidong, to pass information to the Twelve Tribes of Biansha. They raise the Twelve Tribes of Biansha like they were raising a jackal so starving it would lap up everything. And when necessary, they would let it into the territory to gobble up all the traces that could not be wiped clean.

"I don't know if there is anyone else in the central administration who is still doing such a thing." Yang Cheng said fearfully. "But it's really a close call this time... There are already reserves in the state treasury, and the Grand Secretariat is also carrying out stringent audits on the Ministry of Revenue's accounts. It'd be selling out the state if the Biansha Cavalry is released into our territory again. I don't know... I don't dare to bet on it. There are people monitoring my private correspondences, so I could only inform Qudu through the relay report!"

"Since you want to report Wei Huaigu..." Shen Zechuan suddenly lifted up Yang Cheng. "Why did you affix it with the Ministry of Revenue's tag when you sent out the urgent relay report? The very first moment this report enters Qudu, it would land in Wei Huaigu's hands!"

Yang Cheng lost his grip on the teacup. Under the sound of the porcelain cup shattering, he said in a trembling voice, “No, no! I had it affixed with the Ministry of Justice’s tag!”

Shen Zechuan was stunned.

Looking fearful, Yang Cheng said in disbelief, “I’d no doubt die if this report were to land in Wei Huaigu’s hands! I know that the Minister of Justice, Kong Qiu, is a courageous one. He isn’t born from a noble clan, so he will definitely not put it off or cover it up for Wei Huaigu. That’s why I triple-checked before dispatching it that it was the Ministry of Justice I tagged!”

“We’ve been had.” Xiao Chiye grasped hold of Shen Zechuan in support. The expression in his eyes was ruthless. “Wei Huaigu isn’t the culprit this time. When Wei Huaigu received the relay report, he knew that someone had already read the content. This was a silent coercion—he had to turn himself in!”



#### Footnotes

1. 礼义廉耻 propriety, justice, integrity, and honor, also known as the four social bonds.
2. 金饭碗 golden rice bowl; a well-paid and secure job.
3. 冰敬 ‘Ice Respect’ and 炭敬 ‘Coal Respect’, together with ‘Departure Respect’, are objectionable practices of ‘Three Respects’ during the Qing Dynasty. ‘Ice Respect’ refers to the bribe money officials outside the capital used to bribe the officials in the capital during summer-time, while ‘Coal Respect’ refers to bribes made during winter-time.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 95 : MANSION



Wei Huaigu, who was over 50 years old, was stripped of his official robes, thereby turning into a prisoner in white.<sup>1</sup> He was shackled, with iron bars separating him and Xiao Chiye. No one had ever maltreated him these few days he had been put on trial. His hair, which had been tied up in a bun, was tidy, and his face was clean. It was just that he seemed to have aged by several years in a few short days. He looked very haggard.

“The trial ended last night.” Wei Huaigu sat on the chair and said to both of them. “My confession has already been submitted, and I’m now waiting to be sentenced. What else do you want to ask?”

“Embezzlement of state treasury funds, resale of military provisions for illegal gains, and the poisoning of the generals at the frontier—all three charges are capital crimes.” Xiao Chiye looked closely at Wei Huaigu. “Wei Huaixing has also been removed from his post and thrown into prison to await the impeachment order. The fall of your Wei Clan’s line of direct descendants took out two imperial court ministers along with it. How is it that you could bear to let it happen this time?”

“This matter concerns Libei. Who would dare to bend the law and play favorites? There’s no one to protect me.” Wei Huaigu adjusted his sitting posture as if he was still sitting in the main seat at the Ministry of Revenue’s office compound. He looked at Xiao Chiye, “Your father has now come out of obscurity to take up the mantle. His Majesty probably won’t even dare to sleep these few days. The Prince of Libei is still the same tough nut as he was back in those days. He knows what to do to give them a rap on the knuckles.”

“You should have known that those military provisions were to be delivered to Libei when you were filling the military provisions up with moldy grains. But you still did it all the same, didn’t you? At that time, you weren’t the slightest bit afraid that there’s no one protecting you.” Xiao Chiye shifted a little and continued, “To send these things into my eldest brother’s mouth, adulterating it was only the first step. When the grains arrived at Libei, you bribed the officials in charge of examining the granary so that they would close an eye and send the stuff to the camps. This was the second step. Then you bribed the mess cooks of the Libei Armored Cavalry and mixed this poisonous stuff into the dishes before they were sent

to the soldiers at the frontier pass for consumption. This was the third step.”

Xiao Chiye stopped and looked out of the corner of his eyes at Wei Huaigu.

“These arrangements take time and effort. The moment an accident happens, you won’t be able to deny your involvement in it. Not only will you not get away with it, you’ll even be subjected to a probe by the Ministry of Justice, which will bring your crime of reselling military provisions for profits to light. You are not this kind of person.”

Wei Huaigu did not answer Xiao Chiye’s question immediately. Instead, he looked at Shen Zechuan, who had been sitting behind Xiao Chiye all this while. He laughed and pointed at Shen Zechuan, saying, “Second Young Master has made progress, having been in Qudu for six years. Back then, when you first entered the capital, you spent the whole day looking for fights and braying for blood. Vice Commander Shen knows this from experience, right? That’s why I said Xiao Fangxu is an iron fist to dare to put his son on the edge of the blade to polish. You really have your father to thank for being able to grow into the person you are now.”

Xiao Chiye looked at Wei Huaigu with indifference. It was unexpectedly Shen Zechuan who pushed aside the confession statement. With both hands slightly clasped together on the table, he said calmly to Wei Huaigu without so much a smile or wrath, “That’s right. You find it unfair to see such a Xiao Ce’an. Your son spent all day mixing with the brothel crowd during the years of Xiande. By the time the Grand Secretariat had a change of personnel in the reign of Tianchen, it would have been insurmountably hard for him to enter officialdom through the imperial examinations even if he wanted to.<sup>2</sup> You are already at this age. Yet the Wei clan does not have a descendant of direct lineage who is capable of keeping the Wei clan going. You placed your hopes on a marriage alliance, but a pity the Fei clan knows that the Wei clan is on the decline, and Commandery Princess Zhaoyue eventually married into the Pan clan. In your post as the Minister of Revenue, you’ve repeatedly demoted and relegated newly appointed officials to remote areas. What you fear was being replaced by the up-and-coming talents. Today, the Wei clan seemed to be still at the height of its power, but in truth, it is already water that is about to spill over—With your death, the Wei clan is doomed to fall.”

Touching his shackles, Wei Huaigu said, "The power of a clan is like the tides, whose rise and fall is a fact of the world. It thrives one moment and declines the next. All of it are predestined. There's nothing for me to regret when the time comes for the Wei clan. History has gone through several generation changes for as long as Dazhou has existed to this day. Everything is ever-changing; only the Eight Great Clans have not changed. Therefore, it's only with my death that the Wei clan can survive."

"Will the Eight Great Clans really remain unchanged?" Xiao Chiye said. "The internal strife between the Xi brothers led to the end of all their *di* and *shu* descendants. There is already no one left today to carry on the bloodline. In the future, the Xi clan will no longer be the Xi clan it used to be. It's only a matter of time before they are squeezed out of the political game."

But Wei Huaigu laughed it off and said, "As long as the Xi clan still exists, they won't be booted out of the game. Today, you kill Xi Hongxuan, wanting to cut up the Xi clan's family fortune, yet you can't bear to give up the Xi clan's businesses, so you still have to continue to rely on others to put things in order for you. So tell me, is the Xi clan still considered dead then? They merely lost a helmsman at the head. This is a temporary predicament. As long as that eldest madam of theirs still wants to control the business under Xi's name, then when she finds a new flame in the future, the other party can only marry into the family<sup>3</sup> and change his surname. The child they bear will still take on the surname Xi. And this, is a new direct line of descendants that will continue the Xi clan's lineage."

Candle wax dripped, like tears mottling the sides of it. Night was coming to an end. Silence reigned on the outside. Wei Huaigu stood up, like an elder guiding intellectual discussions.

"I have a question. I have always wanted to ask Xiao Fangxu, but there is no more chance for me to now, so I can only ask you. Xiao Chiye, your father came from a humble background. He experienced hardship at the frontier before he finally tided over the sea of suffering to possess his own turf and title. You call yourselves people who broke the shackles of the noble clans. But it has been thirty years now, and Libei and the Xiao clan have become a single inseparable entity. He came to have sons too. You and Xiao Jiming are both legitimate sons born of the principal wife. To avoid disputes between the son of lawful births born of the principal wives and son of common births born of concubines, he even refused to remarry<sup>4</sup> or

get a concubine. He turned Xiao Jiming and you into the only choices to lead the Libei Armored Cavalry. Isn't this precisely the impenetrable fortress built as a safeguard at the inception of a noble clan? You are now walking the same exact path as us."

After a moment of silence, Xiao Chiye said, "You think this way because you don't understand that there are people in this world willing to be tied down by love. My father doesn't remarry or take a concubine simply because he is only willing to exchange lifetime vows of conjugal bliss with my mother in this life of his. Libei Armored Cavalry is a heavy cavalry<sup>5</sup> he established. He understands this army better than anyone else. This is his third son, one that is far more important than my eldest brother and me. All along, the ones who have been seeing my eldest brother and me as the only choices for Libei Armored Cavalry are you people. My being in Qudu doesn't tether the Libei Armored Cavalry at all, only Xiao Fangxu and Xiao Jiming. You still have not understood one thing. My father has indeed set up an impenetrable fortress around the position of the Libei Armored Cavalry's commander-in-chief. But that is not a bastion of iron to safeguard the status of a noble clan. Rather, it is a weight – a test – of whether one can truly become the chief commander of an army to lead Libei Armored Cavalry into bearing the ravages of the elements against the fortress amidst those ceaseless confrontations with Biansha. Thirty years ago, Xiao Fangxu was the man who broke through this layer of fortress. Ten years ago, the one who did the same was Xiao Jiming. If someday, someone is similarly able to break through this layer of fortress, has no fear of hardships and suffering, and is willing to be forged and tempered in such a way, then, he shall be the new commander-in-chief of the Libei Armored Cavalry."

"You made it out to be all so honorable and dignified for Xiao Fangxu, but in reality, the Xiao clan has been monopolizing the military power of Libei all these years." The expression in Wei Huaigu's eye was slightly mocking.

"That's just because the two men who have borne such a weight one after another happen to be surnamed Xiao." Xiao Chiye's eyes suddenly revealed a brilliance that made it hard for one to look right at him in the eyes. In the dimness of this fading light, he was both Xiao Fangxu and Xiao Jiming, as well as the pride the three men of the Xiao clan had hidden deep under their armors. He said, "You people called my father an alpha wolf. There are no prejudices against one's blood lineage in a pack of wolves. As



long as you can defeat us., you can lead us. Everything the Libei Armored Cavalry has to show for today is what it deserves. Someday—”

Xiao Chiye’s voice came to a stop.

But Shen Zechuan knew what he was going to say next. He wanted to say that someday when he returned to Libei, he would also participate in such a fight amongst the wolves. As long as he could defeat the others, he would be the third alpha wolf. The source of their pride and willfulness was that they had never feared resistance. This was Xiao Fangxu’s soul, and he taught this kind of spirit to both of his sons, as well as the Libei Armored Cavalry.

“Do you know why the Qi clan, who similarly guards the frontier and who holds military power firmly in their hands, has never faced such animosity from the noble clans as the Xiao clan did?” Wei Huaigu and Xiao Chiye looked at each other. He said mildly, “Because you were all born with a rebellious bone. This pride is precisely the root cause of Qudu’s distrust of Libei. And do you know why the noble clans would not fall? Because we know to go with the flow and seize the opportunities presented to us. The Li clan is the root – the foundation – of Dazhou. We surround it, see it born, let it grow. We alternate with one another, and we give each other. We are the soil that sustains Dazhou. The land you step on under your feet, and the sky you look at when you raise your head—they are the stability that arises as a result of the noble clans holding together. All those who want to break such a stability are enemies. Twenty-six years ago, the Crown Prince of the Li clan led the eastern palace in an attempt to break the status quo. That was naïve. The Crown Prince didn’t understand that once the noble clans collapsed, the Li clan would rapidly wither too. That was why he was sure to die.”

“Hua Siqian may die, as may Xi Hongxuan. Same goes for me. But it’s just our bodies that perish. The noble clan is not a world that can be overthrown by human power alone. Nobody, and I mean nobody, can defeat us. All these years, the only scholar of a humble background in the imperial court who truly broke through the siege to endanger us all is Hai Liangyi. He used close to thirty years to lie low in patience. He has made his way up now, but does he dare to turn the world upside down without careful consideration? He rejuvenated the Imperial College and promoted scholars of humble backgrounds. Every step he takes is that careful and cautious, because he knows the outcome of using brute force to tussle will be the ruin

of the empire. But how long can he still live? After his death, this phase will crumble and fall apart. It's impossible for him to succeed." Wei Huaigu suddenly burst out laughing. He held on to the bars and looked at Shen Zechuan. "Qi Huilian led the eastern palace to act with haste and resolve. He would never let us off easily. He thought he could do it, but he ended up causing the death of the Crown Prince. All the geniuses in this world should learn to reflect on their shortcomings. He is a cautionary tale of political radicalism."

"Stop him!" Shen Zechuan suddenly rose.

Xiao Chiye immediately reached out, but it was already too late. Wei Huaigu started to cough violently. He bent over, cupping the blood in his hands, and lifted his eyes to look at both of them. Amidst his intense pain and with blood in his mouth, he said,

"You can't win... You are doomed... doomed to fail!"

Xiao Chiye kicked the cell door open, hauled Wei Huaigu up, and pinched his mouth open. The filthy blood within trickled down. Wei Huaigu was just like the expiring candle in the wind. His limbs gradually stiffened amidst his convulsions, until he finally stopped moving, his eyes still open in a glare.

The flame of the candle went out. Only the whimpers of the wind could be heard inside the prison.

"The imperial heir!" Xiao Chiye let go of the corpse and strode out.

The sky was brightening up a little outside, although it was still shrouded with dense, dark clouds. The rainstorm that had stopped seemed as if it was about to stage a comeback. Oppressiveness pervaded the air along with the sounds of chaotic footsteps. Xiao Chiye pushed the door open and saw the panic-stricken girls in the prison. The stench of blood came assailing their nostrils. All the boys had been killed, their bodies lying haphazardly on the ground. Sweat formed on Xiao Chiye's temples. He clutched Langli Blade as his eyes swept across each of these terrified faces.

He and Shen Zechuan had not made their moves yet. So who killed the imperial heir?

Cool wind blew against Xiao Chiye's soaked back. He had yet to turn around when he heard the gallops of a horse.

Amidst the jolts and bumps, Fuman shouted in a fluster, "Your, Your Lordship! Please head into the palace quickly! His Majesty is in imminent danger!"

Xiao Chiye abruptly turned back, but Shen Zechuan pressed his hand down on Xiao Chiye's arm. He was so calm that his gaze made Fuman's limbs tremble. He asked, "What do you mean by imminent danger? Make yourself clear."

With snot and tears running down his face, Fuman cried, "His Majesty is critically ill. He is urgently summoning His Lordship over for an audience with him. There is an important matter he wishes to entrust to His Lordship!"



### Footnotes



- 1.
2. Prisoner typically wore white (or their inner garment after their robes have been stripped)
3. Unless his son was truly smart enough to pass the exam on his own merit, he was likely to bribe his way into passing. But with a reign change and Hai Liangyi now helming the Grand Secretariat instead of Hua Siqian, bribery would be out of the question.

4. 入赘 marry into the bride's family, in effect becoming a member of her family. Some rich clans do this when they need a 'son' or a man to continue on the family legacy. (Usually, the girl is the one marrying into the man's family.)
5. 续弦 specifically of a widow who remarry a second (principal) wife after his first principal wife's death.
6. Heavy Cavalry: heavily armed and armored men on horses. Their primary role was to engage in direct combat with enemy forces.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 96 : COLLAPSE

Translated with: [Eggy](#), [Yunyun](#)<3

Note:

The titles for this and last chapter make up 大厦倾塌, or “the mansion collapses”, which is from the idiom 大厦将倾, or “the mansion on the verge of collapse”. The original idiom refers to a hopeless situation, like a mansion on the brink of collapse. The words in this and the last chapter suggest that this mansion has already collapsed, or i.e., the situation is a total goner.

The sky's overcast foreshadowed the incoming rainstorm.

Xiao Chiye took off Langli Blade by the palace entrance and stepped into the dark and long hallway. Eunuchs kneeling on either side all kept quiet with their heads lowered. Silence befell in and outside of Mingli Hall. With scuttling steps, Fuman led Xiao Chiye to the door and lifted the curtains. The bed curtains within the bedchamber were not drawn up. There was a suffocating heat inside, mixed with a hint of blood.

Fuman whispered between sobs, “Your Majesty, look. His Lordship is here!”

Li Jianheng answered from within and said, “Tell the rest to take their leave. I want to speak with the marquis before the Secretariat Elder arrives. Do not disturb us.”

Fuman quietly exited with the other servants.

“Ce'an.” Li Jianheng seemed to have shifted his body. He said, “Pull the bed curtains open.”

Xiao Chiye raised his hand and pulled the hanging curtains back. The bed was stained all over with blood. Li Jianheng looked as if he was soaking in a pool of filthy color. His chest heaved as he struggled to gasp for breath.

“Brother.” Li Jianheng’s pale face was full of tears and sweat. He wiped off the sweat with his trembling hand, but smeared his entire face with blood instead, “Where the heck have you been? The anxiety is killing me.”

Mu Ru was lying beside Li Jianheng. Dead.

Xiao Chiye suddenly felt a little lonesome. Even though he knew this meeting was a trap, he still agreed to this invitation just to live up to this word of “brother” from Li Jianheng. The brotherhood of their reckless youth was already crushed and shattered to smithereens under the unforgiving wheel of power; yet in this moment, it seemed as though it was glued back together again. He felt as if he had returned to the past. He hung up the curtains and said in a raspy voice, “It was very windy on the way here, and there were too many people on Shenwu Street, which made it inconvenient to ride a horse.”

Li Jianheng raised the hand that was covering up his wound and looked at where he was stabbed. He said, “You have been a good brother to me. You clearly knew this trip was dangerous, yet you still came. It is not in vain that I, Li Jianheng, could be buddies with you.”

Xiao Chiye pulled over a chair to sit down and looked at Li Jianheng as his Adam’s apple bobbed several times. He said, “I had already told you a long time back that she was not a good match for you.”

“But I liked her so much,” Li Jianheng blankly rubbed the blood between his fingers. “I thought she liked me too. Fuck... so this is how much it hurts to be stabbed with a knife.”

Xiao Chiye rubbed his face and propped his elbows on his knees. He said, “What did you want to tell me now that you have called me over?”

Li Jianheng turned his eyes and chuckled at Xiao Chiye through his tears before his face fell again. Choking with sobs, he said with a broken voice, “I called for you, so you came. The fuck is wrong with you, Xiao Ce’an. Do you know that it’s full of people out there... waiting for you with swords in their hands?”

Just like Xiao Chiye had done when he was resolving tough situations for him in the past, he calmly nodded and said, “I know.”

Li Jianheng forced down a sob and said, “If you didn’t come, I’d not have to apologize.”

Xiao Chiye’s eyes reddened. He said, “You are the emperor. There is no need for the emperor to apologize.”

Li Jianheng covered his wound and bawled his eyes out while shaking his head. He sobbed, "I... Brother... I really... wanted to be a good emperor. I even memorized the texts a few days ago. Tell this to the Secretariat Elder on my behalf when you head out."

Xiao Chiye said, "You are the emperor. Tell him yourself."

Gasping and crying in a hoarse voice, Li Jianheng said, "That won't do. I'm the emperor; I cannot go myself. It's too humiliating. He is a loyal subject. Tell me, why am I this, this stupid? I, really wanted to call him my second father.<sup>1</sup> I'm scared, scared that after I die, both of you will also end up stabbed by the others."

Xiao Chiye's voice turned raspy as he answered, "How are you going to leave when you are such a scaredy-cat?"

Li Jianheng gestured, "Imperial Brother is waiting for me. I'm scared that he's going to scold me again. I've let him down."

Xiao Chiye snorted a laugh and said, "That's all you've got?"

"I..." Li Jianheng's breath grew rapid. He pursed his parched lips again and again, then said, "I've let you down too. I've not stuck by you enough. We are both in situations that we have control over. I really... really regret it. Ce'an, leave. When you get outside, just go. Get on your horse and go home. I have nothing to give you, but it's also a shame not to gift you anything."

Xiao Chiye rubbed his face again.

Li Jianheng raised a finger and pointed toward the wall. He muttered indistinctly, "That... that bow, is what you helped me obtain from Imperial Brother. But fuck, I-I can't pull it... Take it with you. The wolf pup should stay... stay in the grasslands. That thumb ring of yours must be rusted by now."

Xiao Chiye said heartlessly, "I don't want it. That's the Conqueror Bow of your clan."

"You are the conqueror..." Li Jianheng's voice was already very soft. He gazed at the bow. "In my next life... don't... don't make me the emperor again... I want to be a swallow of Dazhou... nesting under the roof of riches and glory..."

He looked quietly at the Conqueror Bow and did not move anymore.

The wind blew against the drapes in the bedchamber. Sitting, Xiao Chiye listened as that muffled thunder struck and torrential rain exploded forth.

Han Cheng finished up the last mouthful of tea and held the teacup in his hands as he walked out of the door to look at the Eight Great Training Divisions' soldiers who were standing by in combat readiness. He flung the teacup onto the ground and boomed at the top of his voice, "The Imperial Army of Qudu only has eight thousand people. Without receiving news, the men at Mount Feng military grounds can't come to provide reinforcement. Xiao Chiye is already a trapped beast in a cage. Today, we must take him down!"

Heavy rain rumbled. The sound of densely clustered footsteps surrounded the imperial palace like layers of walls. Sheaths of blades scraped against armors as the Eight Great Training Divisions laid a heavy siege outside the bedchamber. Fuman could no longer stand up as he listened to those sounds. The eunuchs each cowered in the corners, lest they were taken to be sacrificed to these swords.

Xiao Chiye finally stood up. Under the intersection of light and shadows, he put down the bed curtains for Li Jianheng. Then he turned around to take down the Conqueror Bow that weighed a hundred catty.<sup>2</sup> The doors had long been opened. Xiao Chiye pushed aside layers upon layers of fluttering drapery and walked towards the heavy rain without so much a look back.

Han Cheng led the men into drawing their blades. There was nothing for him to shout, because they had already won. They wanted to change the world in this heavy bout of downpour and make Xiao Chiye kneel once more.

Xiao Chiye looked at those dark and dense masses of heads. He strode a step out and walked down along the long stairs. He had no blade. When the rainwater wiped off his indifference, he was already clashing with that group of people. He held out the Conqueror Bow horizontally to intercept the blades, then pushed back against the wall of people into a retreat with an unrelenting, indomitable aura that suppressed the roar of the torrential rain.

Shen Zechuan spurred his horse across the street, with the Imperial Bodyguards and Imperial Army behind him like a red serpent as they crashed through the palace gates under the flashes and glints of their blades and galloped their way within.

The entire palace was already surrounded by armors. Pandemonium broke loose as the sound of fighting and killing at close quarters filled the air. The influx of horses sped up the fighting. Ignoring the sea of people,



Lang Tao Xue Jin charged right for Xiao Chiye. Xiao Chiye used the momentary opening to flip atop the horse and caught hold of Langli Blade, which Shen Zechuan had tossed over.

Xiao Chiye suddenly drew his blade and said, “Qudu is not the hometown in my dreams. I’m going home today. Whoever dares to stand in my way—I’ll kill him!”

With that, he clamped the horse tightly with his legs and drew blood with a brandish of his blade.

With the torrential rain pouring down on them, Xiao Chiye forcibly killed a bloody path out. The battlefield retreated from the palace interior to the streets. Seeing as the situation did not look good, Han Cheng hurriedly shouted, “Guard the city gate to the death. We mustn’t let this vile spawn who killed the sovereign and plotted a rebellion leave tonight!”

How was the Eight Great Training Divisions the Imperial Army’s match? Even if they had many men, they were still afraid to death as the master of these wolves and tigers forced them back into a retreat. The city gate had long been shut. Shen Zechuan held his blade and went up the city wall first. He kicked over the obstructions in his way and told his men to open the city gate. That tightly shut gate lifted with a rumble. Beyond that curtain of rain was the home Xiao Chiye had been longing for for six years.

Han Cheng turned back and shouted, “Hurry and bring him over!”

Xiao Chiye’s horse had already galloped out of the city. He raised a hand to motion to Ding Tao to take the men and rush towards the military grounds at Mount Feng; they had to take these 20,000 men from the Imperial Army away with them. He turned his horse around among the crowd of people and opened up his arms to Shen Zechuan, who was at the top of the city wall, and said to him in a deep, somber voice, “Lanzhou, come with me!”

But the Imperial Bodyguards stood tall and still. In the heavy rain, Shen Zechuan held on to the battlement of the wall and gazed at Xiao Chiye as if he wanted to get a full, clear look at him.

The Eight Great Training Divisions had swarmed up again and were about to pursue their way out of the city gate. That highly suspended city gate let out a muffled groan, as if it could not hold up to gravitational force. Iron chains swiftly recoiled, and the city gate went crashing down with a thunderous bang.

“Ce’an.” Shen Zechuan raised his voice and said gently to him through the heavy rain. “Go home.”

Xiao Chiye felt as though his heart had been dunked in icy water. He clenched the reins tightly, already spurring his horse back. The city gate slammed onto the ground with a “thud”, completely cutting off the path of the pursuing soldiers from the Eight Great Training Divisions, keeping them within the city, and also completely shutting Xiao Chiye out on the other side of the gate.

Xiao Chiye shouted himself hoarse, as if he was a beast that had been enraged, “Shen Lanzhou!”

Shen Zechuan did not look at Xiao Chiye again. Instead, he turned around to look at Han Cheng and that densely packed troop of soldiers.

Han Cheng turned his head and spat out a mouthful of saliva. He said in a ferocious voice, “Shen Zechuan, you’ve ruined things for me!”

“You think you are worthy to call yourself an Imperial Bodyguard?” Shen Zechuan looked down on him and said in a frosty voice, “Since Ji Wufan, the Imperial Bodyguards have always been heroes of indomitable spirits and clear consciences. You people lay a trap and conspire to murder the Son of Heaven. Han Cheng, it’s entirely justified for me to kill you!”

Han Cheng threw his head back and laughed out loud. He said, “What are you? The last evil remnant of the Shen Clan! I treated you well, having guided and supported you many times, and this is how you repay me? Here! Bring the man over and show him to Vice Commander Shen!”

A disheveled Qi Huilian was dragged out. He fell into the rainwater and cursed, “Treacherous traitor!”

Yanking at the chain, Han Cheng spurred the horse forward and dragged Qi Huilian through the streets. He pointed at Qi Huilian and said to Shen Zechuan, “Haven’t you been looking for him for a long time? He’s here! Shen Zechuan, come and get him!”

“Traitor, traitor!” Qi Huilian was boiling with fury as the dragging smeared his face with muddy water.

Han Cheng looked at Shen Zechuan’s pale face, then at the dark expression in his eyes. He said, “Your eldest brother is the Hereditary Prince of Jianxing, I remember that the Biansha Cavalry dragged him to his death alive. But there is no love lost between you both, so you weren’t hurt by it at all. Are you hurting now that it’s your teacher’s turn today?”

“Han Cheng!” Shen Zechuan spat out Han Cheng’s name through clenched teeth, “You went to such trouble to hide Teacher in your hands. What do you want?”

“He was initially of great use!” Han Cheng suddenly turned hostile, “But you let Xiao Chiye go and ruined the trap I set. As such, you’re no longer of use, and neither is he! If you still want him to live, then kowtow to me and admit your mistakes! Kneel and call me ‘father’ loudly three times, and I’ll spare him, and you as well!”

Shen Zechuan strode a big step forward and said, “Deal!”

“Bollocks!” Qi Huilian raised his head from the muddy water. He wiped off the filth and climbed to his feet. Staring at Shen Zechuan, he said, “The reason I taught you the classics was not for you to allow yourself to be humiliated by anyone! I, Qi Huilian, will not even bow down to heaven and earth. So how can you kneel to a despicable scum?!”

The metal shackles clanked and clattered.

Qi Huilian stumbled and shouted at the top of his lungs amidst the rain, “Hundreds of years have passed like a dream,<sup>3</sup> and I still come and go as I wish! I have lived a life of wealth and glory, of fame and fortune, and I—” He laughed maniacally as he tugged at the chains around his neck. “I have laughed at all the heroic figures throughout the land, and there is not another talent who surpasses me in the world! Who is there who can be compared to me, Qi Huilian? I am the world-renowned triple-yuan<sup>4</sup> top scholar from Yuzhou! When I conversed in His Majesty’s presence and counseled His Majesty on state affairs—oh, Han Cheng, where were you? You were just a vermin in the ditch!”

It was as if Qi Huilian was intoxicated as he soaked in the rain.

“You vermins are unworthy of even carrying my shoes! The noble clans are like the rotten boils of this land. Tell Hai Liangyi that Dazhou is already beyond cure. He and I are both too powerless to turn the situation around!” Qi Huilian arrogantly turned around amid the sound of his laughter and spat at Han Cheng. He said, “But I will not admit defeat. I will only serve as the Imperial Preceptor in this life! Lanzhou! The cage is now broken, and the world will rise in turbulent chaos. I have taught you all that I could teach you. This decaying world....”

With his back to Shen Zechuan, Qi Huilian suddenly choked with sobs. The downpour drenched his body through and through, but it could not douse his ideals and passion that had been blazing for years. In the past, he

was always calling out for the crown prince, yet, at this moment, he could not bear to look back at Shen Zechuan.

“Why not overturn this decaying empire and go create a world you can call yours. Lanzhou, go. Don’t look back. Teacher shall shoulder the burden of these 40,000 souls who have died unjust death on your behalf. Don’t be afraid. Have—” His blood spattered in the rain, and he fell over on his back. Gazing at the sky, he murmured, “Have no fear.”

A sudden clap of thunder erupted. Shen Zechuan cried out involuntarily and fell to his knees. He stared blankly in a daze, giving the heavy rain free rein to land blows on him. In that endless silence, his mask was utterly torn to pieces. He finally let out the first howl of despair in six years. There was already no more sanity left in those reddened eyes of him. He clenched Yang Shen Xue and suddenly drew his blade.

“Han Cheng—!”

He hated this empire to death. He also loathed these faces to death.

Shen Zechuan propped himself up from the ground. Yang Shen Xue slashed through the droplets of rain and flung out blood from among this heavy siege. He killed one, then killed another. He strode across those bodies, yet he seemed like a beast that had been abandoned. His blade sliced across throats, so swift that it seemed like a stream of mercury. Blood sprayed over half of Shen Zechuan’s face.

He was beside himself. The blood trickled like tears across his cheek.

Retreating again and again, Han Cheng bellowed, “Kill him!”

The raindrops in the wind suddenly burst apart. In the blink of an eye, a long arrow had reached right before Han Cheng. Xiao Chiye leaped down from atop the city wall along the iron chain, kicked down a man, and flipped his hand over to draw his blade and stab it through the other party. With the corpse falling onto him, he moved swiftly and struck away the flashes of blades. When he extracted the blade, blood had already soaked both of his palm.

Xiao Chiye dragged Shen Zechuan back with one arm and whistled. Meng spread its wings and pounced. In the chaos, it pecked Han Cheng’s right eye, injuring it. Han Cheng hastily covered his face in a panic. He heard the waves of horse hooves beyond the city; Ding Tao had already brought the men over in a swift charge forth.

“Break down the gate!” Ding Tao shouted himself hoarse.

The Imperial Army swept forth, but before they could take any action, they heard that city gate let out a dull, thunderous noise again as it was slowly hoisted up.

Dragging the iron chain, Fei Sheng gasped heavily a few times and led the Imperial Bodyguards to draw back with all their might. He cursed, “Fuck! Son of a bitch is so heavy, doggone it! Your Lordship—Get on your horse and run!”

Lang Tao Xue Jin swiftly galloped in from the opening. Sounds of killing and shouts engulfed Qudu.

Thunderous sounds of killing and shouts similarly reverberated through the Bianjun Commandery, which was also engaged in a life-and-death battle. Lu Guangbai could barely lift his spear now. As he withdrew, he shouted, “Where are the reinforcements?!”

The deputy general, who had received several stabs and slashes himself, answered, “They... didn’t come.”

The rain howled. Lu Guangbai looked back in the direction of the camp.

Xiao Chiye had already gotten on his horse. He pressed Shen Zechuan to his chest before him and broke through the heavy rain towards the city gate.

Lightning flashed, and thunder boomed. A rift seemed to have been torn open in the sky. The rain poured mercilessly down.

Lu Guangbai ripped off his tattered cloak and nailed the spear into the ground by his feet. He said over the sandstorm and rainstorm, “We can’t fight on anymore.”

The deputy general lay at the side of the sand slope and looked at him.

“Fate wants to bind me here for life, but this is not the path I choose.”

Lu Guangbai took off the armor with Dazhou with Dazhou’s imprint on it. He wiped the wind and frost<sup>5</sup> off his face, and his eyes spoke of worldly weariness as he said a little self-mockingly, “The yellow dust<sup>6</sup> submerged my brothers deep under. I no longer have a wish to bow in submission to an illusory fate. The imperial edict can’t save my troops, and the imperial court can’t fill the stomachs of my mounts.”

Xiao Chiye had already galloped his way out of Qudu, with countless soldiers in pursuit behind him. They charged ahead, as if tearing apart the dark, rainy sky.

“I’m no longer willing to lay down my life for this purpose.”

Lu Guangbai closed both of his eyes. Watery blood trickled along his fingers and dripped onto the yellow sands. His Adam's apple bobbed. When he finally opened his eyes, there was darkness in them.

The blood on Shen Zechuan's cheek was washed away. Grieved sobs escaped his throat. He had already forsaken all of his past submissive obedience in this sorry escape. Like a sharp sword, they pierced through the heavy rain.

Lu Guangbai washed both of his hands clean in the rain and held up his long spear once again.

They were all prisoners pursued by fate. They were once willing to be shackled. But the rainstorm toppled over the great mansion, and its collapsed debris came assaulting towards them like a deluge of floodwater.<sup>7</sup>

Onward, onward!

"I want to surmount that mountain."

"I am going to fight for myself!"

——First Volume End——



Author's Words:

I've been reading everyone's comment lately. Following the updates has been hard on all of you. Thank you. W

Translators' Words:

This is the end of the first volume. If you enjoy the novel, kindly support the author by purchasing the [novel on JJWXC](#)! You may refer to the "[how to buy guide](#)" here. Thank you and stay tuned for more of Cezhou to come! (人•□□)♡

## Support the Author!

### Footnotes

1. 亚父 *yafu*, a term of respect for a man that's second only to father, i.e., like a father.
2. 斤 *jin* or catty, 1 *jin* equal to 0.5 kg
3. 百年(岁)光阴如梦蝶 from 《双调·夜行船·秋思》 by Ma Zhiyuan (马致远), a Chinese poet and celebrated playwright from the Yuan dynasty.

4. 三元 “Triple Yuan”. In the Ming Dynasty, the imperial examination system was split into three phases: the provincial exam (乡试); metropolitan exam (会试); and the palace exam (殿试). The titles for the top scholars in each exam were known as the *Jieyuan* (解元), *Huiyuan* (会元) and *Zhuangyuan* (状元). These three are known as the “Triple Yuan”. So a Triple Yuan Top Scholar is one who came first in all these examinations.
5. 风霜 literally, wind and frost, also refers to hardships and vicissitudes of life.
6. 黄沙 Yellow dust, yellow sand, yellow wind, or dust storms is a meteorological phenomenon that affects much of East Asia year round.
7. As mentioned in the note at the top. The titles for this and last chapter make up 大厦倾塌, or “the mansion collapses”, which is from the idiom 大厦将倾, or “the mansion on the verge of collapse”. The original idiom refers to a hopeless situation, like a mansion on the brink of collapse. The words in this and the last chapter suggest that this mansion has already collapsed, or i.e., the situation is a total goner.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 97 : IN PAIN



Rain that had been falling for several days in a row subsided, leaving the public roads utterly muddy.

Qudu fell into a state of mourning. With the sudden death of the young Emperor Tianchen, rumors that the Marquis of Dingdu, Xiao Chiye, had colluded with the Vice Commander of the Imperial Bodyguard-cum-Northern Judge, Shen Zechuan, to assassinate the emperor with the intent to rebel spread like wildfire as whispers behind closed doors in Qudu.

As Emperor Tianchen did not have any imperial heir, the ministers presented a memorial to request the Empress Dowager to preside over the overall situation in place of the Emperor. The Empress Dowager repeatedly excused herself on the grounds that the harem must not interfere with state affairs. It was only after the Commander-in-chief of the Imperial Bodyguards, Han Cheng, kowtowed thrice in remonstrance that the Empress Dowager was convinced to step in.

The Eight Great Training Divisions were back in charge of Qudu's patrols and defenses, and the streets these days were crawling with patrol squads around the clock. Common folks did not dare to venture outdoors, and all the wine taverns and brothels kept their doors shut. It was as if the bustling scene of Qudu was a thing of the past. Even the color of the vermilion walls and glazed tiles in Qudu looked washed out by the misty drizzle.

Hai Liangyi fainted several times when he wept before the coffin. He was now lying on the bed, unable to drink even a drop of medicine. His hair seemed to have turned entirely white overnight, and those spirited eyes of his that once gleamed with brilliance became dim and gloomy. They even looked particularly turbid and cloudy, after all those tears he had shed.

"Teacher." Kong Qiu sat at the bottom with his head lowered and said, "You have to eat the medicine. Now that the world is in turmoil, everyone is waiting for you to take the helm and steer the state towards stability once more... You must take care of your health!"

The tear streaks at the corners of Hai Liangyi's eyes had not been fully wiped. His gaze drifted, and it was only after a long time that he said, "Take the helm and steer the state towards stability once more? Boran, there is nothing I can do anymore to save the situation."



The bamboo tube in the courtyard tapped gently against the rock in the stream, exposing the cracked lines. Rain fell soundlessly. Yet there was no way those scars could be covered up. Hai Liangyi was too advanced in age. His vital energy had been worn out by the ups and downs of officialdom, and now, there were signs that he might never recover from his illness.

Sorrow overwhelmed Kong Qiu. He sat where he was, weeping with his face covered. "How... how did it come to this?!"

"Han Cheng is a hypocrite who speaks honeyed words but has the malicious heart of a viper. He is petty and narrow-minded. Now that he has gained power, the entire imperial court of civil and military officials will be on tenterhooks. He forced Xiao Chiye out, and so Libei is now without a shackle. From now on..." Hai Liangyi suddenly started coughing. He propped himself up and vomited out blood. For a moment, he could not hold back his emotions, and he cried in a hoarse voice as he held onto the edge of the bed, "From now on, our territory will be torn asunder, and turbulent times will rise once again. The century-old empire of the Li clan will fall into ruins here! I've sinned. I'm a sinner! I, Hai Renshi, have spent my entire life shamelessly advancing my own agenda and navigating official circles. Yet it was all to toil in vain for the benefit of these people! I... Oh, I..."

With a headful of ash white hair, Hai Liangyi hunched over and wailed in a voice so hoarse and so full of despair that it was a tragic sight to behold.

"Teacher, Teacher!" Kong Qiu hastily came over to help him up, then looked back and shouted, "Men!"

The door curtain was lifted, but it was Yao Wenyu who entered. On seeing what was happening, he immediately knelt on the footrest and disregarded the filth as he wiped the tears and blood for Hai Liangyi. At the same time, he directed the attendant to draw water and rinsed the handkerchief. Finally, he helped Hai Liangyi lie down. After soothing him for a moment, he said to Kong Qiu in a soft voice, "Your Excellency, may I ask of you to wait outside, please."

Kong Qiu did not dare to disturb them any further and hurriedly retreated to wait outside.

After a long time, the sound of Hai Liangyi's cries receded. Yao Wenyu held the bowl in his hand and personally fed his teacher medicine. It was

only after Hai Liangyi fell into a drowsy sleep that he lifted the curtain and stepped out.

Kong Qiu wanted to say something, but Yao Wenyu motioned for him to follow the attendant to the main hall first, while he himself made his way through the veranda to the back for a change of clean clothes.

“Apologies for keeping you waiting, Your Excellency.” Yao Wenyu got the attendant to serve tea and sat down below Kong Qiu.

Kong Qiu held the teacup and was silent for a moment before he said, “Teacher has no son. I feel reassured with you here to take care of him. I shouldn’t have brought up these matters earlier... and ended up making him sad.”

“Although Teacher has returned home ill, he is still concerned about state affairs. Even if Your Excellency doesn’t bring it up, he would still find it hard to dismiss it from his mind. It’d have been better to cry it out than to bottle it all up in his heart.” Yao Wenyu held up the teacup and stirred it a few times before saying, “The current situation is unstable and volatile. Teacher won’t be able to rest for long anyway,”

Kong Qiu knew that Hai Liangyi treated him like his own son. So he did not hold back and said with a sigh, “His Majesty’s passing is so sudden. We are now already in a disadvantageous position. In addition, the Han clan has control of military power in Qudu, and we are presently in an irreversible situation in which Her Majesty is in power and in control of the government. After this incident... what is to be of Libei in the future?”

Yao Wenyu was fair by nature, and he looked no different from porcelain as he held that teacup. He said, “The way things stand now, it’s vital to discuss countermeasures to deal with the situation. Han Cheng’s original position was that of the Imperial Bodyguards’ Commander-in-chief. If he wants to overstep his authority and enter the Grand Secretariat to take charge, his only option would be to ask the Empress Dowager to issue an imperial edict, so he isn’t exactly without leverage. Wei Huaigu consumed poison and committed suicide because of the military provisions case. The temporary vacancy in the Grand Secretariat will thus have to be filled in by Your Excellency. With this, all the important affairs of the imperial court will still have to be deliberated over and endorsed by the various excellencies under Teacher.”

On hearing this, Kong Qiu set down the teacup and humbly asked, “But the Empress Dowager is in charge of state affairs, and any changes in the

Grand Secretariat is subjected to her whims and fancies. If she issued a change of people using Han Cheng as a pretext, then what should we do?"

Yao Wenyu smiled and said, "The Empress Dowager being in charge of state affairs is a desperate measure to begin with. Her surname isn't Li, so the authority of acting on behalf of the Son of Heaven can't convince the public. The others don't matter; what's crucial is the Qi clan. Although Qi Zhuyin may be indolent by nature and doesn't care about government affairs, she has the Qi clan's reputation for loyalty resting on her shoulder. She will never allow the Empress Dowager and Han Cheng to commit all kinds of outrages in Qudu. Since the Empress Dowager wants to win her over to her side, she won't go too far at this point in time. Rather than worry about the Empress Dowager's substitution attempt, Your Excellency might as well worry about Han Cheng's subsequent plans."

Kong Qiu said, "Han Cheng went all out to ingratiate himself with the Empress Dowager. He has succeeded."

"In my humble opinion, it's just the opposite." Yao Wenyu lifted his eyes to look at the misty rain at the entrance, "At this time, it indeed seems like Han Cheng has gained the favor of the Empress Dowager. But looking at the bigger picture in the long run, it's instead the Empress Dowager who is seeking connection with Han Cheng. The Empress Dowager is able to rise to power because the Emperor had no heir. The imperial court cannot be without a master, and it was out of a lack of options that everyone compromised and made concessions. But Dazhou will definitely have a new Son of Heaven. The military power Han Cheng holds in his hands is the real thing. His daringness to lay an encirclement trap for Xiao Chiye to force him out and make his move in Mingli Hall is a clear indicator that he has backing and, therefore, has nothing to fear."

"You mean..." Kong Qiu was shocked. "Han Cheng still has the imperial heir in his hands?"

Yao Wenyu drank the tea and said, "Emperor Guangcheng often ventured out of the palace to stay overnight. It's hard to say whether there is an imperial heir. It's just the situation is already now at this stage. Even if Han Cheng doesn't have the imperial heir in his hands, he will think of every means possible to push someone out."

Kong Qiu's heart went cold. He said, "Han Cheng has soldiers and horses, and the Imperial Bodyguards to boot. The officials in the capital are all tied down by their own families and might not necessarily be willing to

conflict with him should a power struggle really break out. If he forcibly elects someone to sit on the dragon throne and rule the imperial court, we..."

Yao Wenyu, however, changed the topic and asked, "Has the Imperial Army already passed through Dancheng?"



The Imperial Army had already passed through Dancheng, but they had yet to reach the territory of Zhongbo. Xiao Chiye made haste all the way. The soldiers and horses all needed to rest, so they made a stop midway.

Shen Zechuan was severely ill, with his old ailment and heartbreak acting up together. He seemed to be conscious, but yet he was not. It was as if he was lying in a puddle of dreams, engulfed once again by the rainwater and filthy blood.

Ever since the epidemic the last time, Xiao Chiye suspected that Shen Zechuan had never attempted to recuperate and nurse himself back to health. Instead, the medicines he had consumed in his early years had now turned into a form of latent poison lurking in his body. Xiao Chiye did not dare to be negligent, so he made a stop and immediately went looking for a physician.

Shen Zechuan's head was in a muddle, and the roaring in his ears persisted. He heard Xiao Chiye's voice, yet he also seemed to hear Teacher's shouts. He lay on the pillow. The few times he woke up, he thought that he was still in Duanzhou. He smelled the aroma of dishes, as if the one standing outside the door was his *shiniang*, Hua Pingting.

But he did not dare to move or look.

He seemed to possess it all, but he still had nothing to his name. He thought he had killed off himself, and that this mortal flesh would not shed any more tears. But he had been too young, too full of youthful arrogance and ignorance—that was only because he had yet to experience immeasurable pain. He came this far, feeling as if he was just being executed by dismemberment.

Xiao Chiye hugged Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan's nape, which had once radiated seduction, had turned deathly pale. The man himself looked like a cloud lying across the night. Xiao Chiye stayed close to him, hugging him so tightly that he hurt.

"Cold?" Xiao Chiye asked in a whisper.

Shen Zechuan was a little slow to react as he nodded his head. He tilted his head, pressing his cheek against Xiao Chiye's cheek. That heat warmed him up, making him seem a little more human. He reached out his hand in the darkness to stroke Xiao Chiye's arm, feebly and slowly.

Xiao Chiye turned his hand around to hold Shen Zechuan's hand, interlocking his fingers tightly with Shen Zechuan's. He gave all his warmth to Shen Zechuan. His chest, being the most scalding, pressed against Shen Zechuan's back, as if he could dissolve Shen Zechuan away with the heat. He seemed to be harboring Shen Zechuan in his arms, no longer permitting anyone to get close. He clumsily licked Shen Zechuan's wound. This was his way of healing. He did not want this person to be in pain ever again.

"Qiao Tianya has gone to look for *shifu*." Shen Zechuan's eyes were dark and gloomy. "When will he be back?"

"Soon." Xiao Chiye squeezed Shen Zechuan's hand and repeated, "Soon."

Shen Zechuan said, "I can't wipe the blood clean."

Xiao Chiye said, "We have both embarked on the way of the asura<sup>1</sup>—the bloody path of carnage. We have no more need to be clean, as long as we're together."

Shen Zechuan pursed his thin lips slightly and said, "I—"

He paused, dazed, as if he had forgotten what he wanted to say. Listening to the sound of the rain, he closed his mouth again. Xiao Chiye pinched his tightly clenched mouth open and asked, "What do you want to say to me?"

Shen Zechuan turned his head hastily, refusing to let Xiao Chiye look at him squarely in the face. But Xiao Chiye grasped him by his jaws to prevent him from dodging and asked once again in a lowered voice, "What do you want to say to me?"

Shen Zechuan's face was pale under that gaze. He opened his mouth several times, but could not bring himself to speak. Xiao Chiye gazed at him, until a long time later when he finally heard Shen Zechuan say with a sob, "It hurts."

Xiao Chiye cupped Shen Zechuan's cheeks and raised his face. Shen Zechuan looked as if he had returned to the time when he was a child. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he repeated "it hurts" over and over again with his lips trembling.

Xiao Chiye stroked Shen Zechuan's hair and wiped his tears with his thumbs. He said, "Where does it hurt? Tell me all about it."

Shen Zechuan broke out into sobs. Even his shoulders were trembling. He was so grief-stricken as he cried, as though he was venting all these years of anguish in this one night. But he was dumb; he did not know where he was hurting. He clearly could no longer endure this kind of pain anymore. He disconsolately let Xiao Chiye wipe his cheeks. Tears brimmed in his eyes. There was nothing left of all those machinations that spoke of a maturity far beyond his age, only naked pain.

Xiao Chiye rolled over and embraced Shen Zechuan. He took all of Shen Zechuan into his arms, providing a haven where Shen Zechuan could remove his mask. They hugged each other tightly. Xiao Chiye listened as Shen Zechuan cried himself hoarse, like a small animal that had been abandoned, and at the same time, like a battered child who was broken and bleeding. Gradually, Xiao Chiye's chest was soaked through. He caressed Shen Zechuan's hair, answering again and again,

"It won't hurt anymore. I promise. Lanzhou will never hurt again."



### **Support the Author!**

Special thanks to [Alex](#) and [Dee](#) for brain cells burnt.

#### Footnotes

1. 修罗道 Literally the way or path of asura, one of the six realms of existence in Buddhism. Asura are powerful but often amoral beings (or demigods) in Buddhism since they are primarily driven by envy and greed for power.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 98 : ON THE RUN



Translated with: [Rie](#)<3



The rain stopped at the crack of dawn, where heaven and earth appeared like a vast, murky expanse under the intersection of light and darkness. Qi Zhuyin trod on muddy water and withdrew from the military grounds. She secured her arm guards and looked at her own deputy general riding his horse into the camp. Her deputy general's name was Qi Wei, a strong and sturdy man who was also cautious by nature. He could hoist an ax on the battlefield and hold a needle off the battleground. He was a man of prestigious standing among the troops in the army.

Qi Wei dismounted midway and hastily nodded in acknowledgement to the soldiers at the sides of the road who were paying their obeisances to him. He headed straight to Qi Zhuyin's side and said, "Commander-in-chief, we've received news!"

"Qudu or Bianjun?" Qi Zhuyin asked.

"Both." Qi Wei was not a tall man. He looked around and reported, "Qudu was caught in a sudden bout of rain and got completely washed out. The Second Young Master of the Xiao clan fled in a hurry with 20,000 Imperial Army soldiers and have already arrived at the border of Zhongbo. Looks like he's going to Cizhou."

Qi Zhuyin was not at all alarmed. She tightened her arm guard and let out a vague smile as she bit down on the rope and said, "That lad sure runs fast."

"First there's the case of the military provisions, and now there's the encirclement of Xiao Chiye with the intent to kill. The Prince of Libei will no doubt fly into a rage this time." Following Qi Zhuyin as she walked, Qi Wei said, "If Libei revolts, we will have to set up additional garrison troops in the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo. The Zhongbo troops will also fall under the Commander-in-chief's command and governance...."

Qi Zhuyin put on her outer garment and said, "Zhongbo is such a big place. Even if they transfer them all under my command, I wouldn't dare to

accept. Qudu's matter is of no urgency. Tell me first, what exactly happened to the garrison troops of Bianjun Commandery? Lu Guangbai fought an ambush all the way into the Biansha's home state?"

A hesitant expression materialized on Qi Wei's rugged face. He said, "Commander-in-chief, General Lu disregarded military orders this time and chased the Biansha Cavalry across the border. I suspect..."

He fell silent and did not voice that word out.

Qi Zhuyin said, "The military provisions this year have been reduced by half. It'll be tough for Bianjun to hold out based just on that. I signed a memorandum of debt with the Yan clan of Hezhou under Father's name. The money is meant to be set aside to buy grains for the Bianjun garrison troops. So what's with this suspicion you're telling me about? I will not listen to a word without proof."

Qi Wei knew that Qi Zhuyin valued her generals and had always been fair in meting out rewards and punishments. She would never trample upon them because of a mere few words. But it was also because he noticed something odd when he went to Bianjun to scout this time that his suspicions were aroused. Not daring to hide it, he truthfully said, "Commander-in-chief, I wouldn't dare to say a word if I had no proof. The purpose of this trip to Bianjun is to investigate military intelligence from a few days back. But not only did General Lu not return to camp, he even transferred away the garrison troops at the fire beacon towers."

Qi Zhuyin stopped in her tracks. She looked at Qi Wei and asked, "He transferred away the garrison troops at the fire beacon towers?"

Qi Wei nodded. He was just about to go into details when he heard a commotion at the side. Both of them turned aside and saw a whole new bunch of people clustered around a sedan with embroidered borders pouring into the camp. They were stopped by the guards.

On hearing that the guards were adamant about not letting them enter, Yingxi could not help but lift the curtain personally and said in a shrill voice, "Don't you know who I am? What is there to stop my sedan! I'm the Army-inspecting Censor His Majesty in Qudu dispatched over! Go announce my arrival, quick. Tell Commander-in-chief Qi that I have something important to tell her!"

Qi Zhuyin watched from afar and said to Qi Wei, "Go tell him that I'm busy and don't have the luxury of time to see him. All these eunuchs from Qudu are the same. Just offer him good food and wine and tell him to keep



his mouth shut and not cause trouble. I'm going to the Bianjun Commandery now. Lu Guangbai is not one who will turn deserter. Before I return, tell those from Qudu that I'm not around. It's troubled waters over there. Keep a close watch on Father too. If he sends a message to Qudu, intercept it and tell him to behave himself."

Qi Wei had more to say, but Qi Zhuyin had already flipped atop the horse.

Before she left, she looked back and said to Qi Wei, "Qudu's matter needs at least half a month to be settled. No doubt the wedding next month has to be delayed. Remove all those red silks at home first. They all cost money."

Without further ado after saying her piece, she led the men to skirt around Yingxi's sedan and headed right for Bianjun Commandery.



Shen Zechuan drank the medicine, and his illness gradually showed signs of improvement along the way. The Imperial Army was to continue moving in the northeast direction. They had to think of a way to convince Cizhou's Prefectural Prefect, Zhou Gui, to let them pass through—but before that, they still had to shake off those pesky and persistent troops pursuing them.

"Han Jin is the one in hot pursuit behind us." Tantai Hu carried his blade and sat all huddled up on the rock. "If we can't repel him back before we arrive at Cizhou, then he will use the deployment order to force Zhou Gui to seal off the city and trap us within Zhongbo with our retreat paths all cut off."

Xiao Chiye folded his arms and said nothing. There was a rudimentary map before him. Xiao Chiye was not at all afraid of coming to blows with Han Jin, but he had to consider the timing too. The longer this drags on, the less advantageous it would be to the Imperial Army. It was only because Qudu was presently in a state of chaos due to the lack of imperial heir that Qi Zhuyin had not deployed troops to encircle and take him down. By the time things settled down in Qudu and Qudu had a hand free to mobilize Qi Zhuyin to pursue and capture them, these 20,000 soldiers of the Imperial Army would be on a collision course with a wall of metal armors.

"That hard part is not in fighting, but in the speed of battle." Shen Zechuan's pale face had yet to recover its rosiness. He picked up a stone and drew a few lines on the ground. "Han Jin dared to chase us this far

because there is Dancheng behind him. To the Eight Great Training Divisions in his hands, the granary of Dancheng is just like a wide-opened door; they don't have to worry about food and clothing. Our 20,000 men ran all the way here in one breath without stopping. We have no army provisions to sustain us. If we want to get to Libei via Cizhou, then we must first resolve this issue."

Tantai Hu was still not used to looking at Shen Zechuan face-to-face. He presently fell silent for a moment, then looked at Xiao Chiye.

Without looking at him, Xiao Chiye said, "Spit it out if you have something to say."

Tantai Hu changed his sitting posture. Pointing at the ground with his finger, he said, "Cizhou and us are old acquaintances. Can't we get Zhou Gui to let us borrow some food for emergency use first with the excuse that there was a delay in them getting the news?"

"No." Shen Zechuan let go of the stone. "At this juncture, all the actions taken implies the taking of sides. Zhou Gui may not have the intent, but as long as he does it, then in Qudu's eyes, he is a traitor who provided aid to the rebel forces. After we pass through Cizhou, he will be taken into custody in Qudu to be impeached and punished. Zhou Gui has a family. He won't do this."

Ding Tao looked up from his book and said, "Chen-ge went to make arrangements for the military provisions, didn't he? He must be rushing on his way back to us now."

"The military provisions he prepared have already been dispatched to Libei. It's Libei Armored Cavalry's food at the frontline. There isn't that much surplus left to fill the stomachs of the Imperial Army." Xiao Chiye squatted down and examined the map. "Even if he and Gu Jin come, they won't be able to bring much food."

As the saying goes, food and fodder should go before troops and horses.<sup>1</sup> Back then, Libei and Qidong were able to swiftly beat back the Biansha Cavalry because the Biansha Cavalry had no reserve supplies and could not afford to fight a war of attrition. And now, the Imperial Army, caught in a dilemma and sandwiched here, similarly could not afford to fight a war of attrition either. Striking Cizhou down might be an option, but it was definitely a bad one. They had successively spent close to 100,000 taels of silver on Cizhou to foster a mutual relationship with Zhou Gui to

look out for one another, and that had been done as a safeguard for the future.

“Turn back and attack Dancheng.” Tantai Hu pondered it over. “Dancheng has a granary. We won’t linger for long in the city. Just take the grains and leave. We can negotiate everything else with Zhou Gui when we arrive at Cizhou.”

“No.” Shen Zechuan let out a soft sigh. “Dancheng has direct military routes to Chuancheng and Qudu. Turning back is to give Qudu time to dispatch the remaining Eight Great Training Divisions. The journey back will take up our time and sap us of energy, and we might not necessarily be able to take down the city swiftly either.”

It was humiliating for Tantai Hu to have both of his proposals vetoed by Shen Zechuan. He rubbed his hands together and said nothing more. His elder brother, Tantai Long, was a brave man who was also a general, but Tantai Hu had no one to teach him. At this moment, he was feeling embarrassed and awkward, but he was pretty much convinced deep down. He was not an unreasonable man. At the very least, he was willing to admit that he was a boor.

Xiao Chiye seemed to have an insight into Tantai Hu’s mind. He lifted a hand to pat Tantai Hu on the back and said nonchalantly, “There may be a time constraint for counterattacking Dancheng, but it *is* an idea. You have only fought once in the past with the Eight Great Training Divisions on the streets of Qudu. Now that you’ve left Qudu, just ask away if there’s something you don’t know. In the future, there will be plenty of moments where you will be needed to lead the troops and make decisions, and you won’t have His Excellency Shen around every time to give you pointers. Laohu, the sea of learning knows no bounds. It is with the willingness to take a tumble and have fun in spite of it that you will have a bright future ahead of you.”

With the muddy soil on the ground already drawn into a mess, Shen Zechuan looked up at the sun and said, “Han Jin is a descendent from Qudu who usually only rides horses on the hunting grounds. So he won’t be able to catch up to us for the time being.”

“We can plunder Han Jin’s food provisions with an ambush here.” Xiao Chiye surveyed the surroundings. “We won’t even need 20,000 men.”

“He’s afraid of you.” Shen Zechuan’s fingertips were stained with a bit of mud. He said, “He has been hesitant and timid in his pursuit of us all this

while. To let him fall for the ambush, we will need a bait first.”

“I’ll lead 500 people to wait here for him. There is a river of silt to the east, backed by mountains on both sides and close to the forest on one side. Laohu will lead 2,000 people to lay in ambush there.” Xiao Chiye wiped the mud away from Shen Zechuan’s fingertip. “Ding Tao will bring some men to the town along the way tonight for food and wine. Say that the Imperial Army has fled here, and they are all demoralized because I’m too poor to buy grain and I can’t get out of Zhongbo either, resulting in many of them turning deserters.”

Han Jin was young, and he had interactions with Xiao Chiye during the time the public ditches were clogged. Shen Zechuan was right. He was indeed afraid of Xiao Chiye. In fact, there were very few among the noble young masters in Qudu who were not afraid of Xiao Chiye. Xiao Chiye’s physique and character had already made him a veritable tyrant long before the autumn hunt. The Nanlin Hunting Grounds was a watershed. With their fathers and elder brothers looking out for them, it would be a breeze for direct descendants like Han Jin who were not the eldest sons in their family to enter officialdom. They seemed no different from Xiao Chiye, yet they had never stood out the way Xiao Chiye did. Perhaps he would pursue Xiao Chiye with caution because of his misgivings of the latter, but he would definitely not pass up the chance to defeat him.

As long as Xiao Chiye showed him a weakness.

“Other than these.” Shen Zechuan considered it for a moment and said to Ding Tao, “You also have to say that I don’t get along with the marquis and have had so many disputes with him on the way that we are going our separate ways.”

“We are in a difficult position both internally and externally.” Xiao Chiye bared his teeth. “Make it out to be as tragic as you can.”

Ding Tao swiftly took notes in his book.

Not feeling reassured, Tantai Hu asked, “Can Tao-zi act? Say it once for us here first.”

Ding Tao rubbed his eyes and held up the book with both hands to read, “My master is in such a miserable state, doomed as he was by those people. The Eight Great Training Divisions keep pursuing us relentlessly like dogs, so much that my master doesn’t even have money for porridge. When we left Qudu, we were fleeing for our lives, so we didn’t have time to pack up all those manors and shop, and we didn’t even take the money in the

residence. Our pockets are now as empty as sheep poop. Master even owes the ear ornaments shop at Shenwu Street several thousand taels of silver, and there's no way he can pay it back now. His Excellency Shen fell severely ill after getting caught in the rain, but we have no money to call for a physician. Alas, a poor cou... uh, His Excellency has forsaken my master too. Our soldiers and horses are now on the run on empty stomachs. I'm too hungry. I'm so hungry that I'm regurgitating bile. I really can't take it anymore, so I took a few brothers to rob some houses along the way to cobble together some money for ourselves. We were originally all good men from decent families, and it's all because we followed the wrong person that we were forced into such a corner. Now we are filling up our tummies a little before we continue on our way to seek asylum with Han Jin in Dancheng! Aye, Han Jin is good. He has money and grains. It's only by throwing in with him that we will have a future! The future is..."

Ding Tao read with great emotion and feeling.

"This master thinks that was pretty well-said." Xiao Chiye commented. "Laohu, strip off his little robe and smear mud all over his face. Then give him three strings of copper coins and hurry him on his way. There's no need to eat and drink in a tavern anymore, just beg for alms along the streets in the town—what are you looking pitifully at Lanzhou for?"

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Thank you [Alex](#) for the consultation!

#### Footnotes

1. 兵马未动，粮草先行 logistics comes before military maneuvers, i.e., proper preparations should be made ahead of time

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 99 : THANK YOU GIFT



Han Cheng captured several deserters from the Imperial Army one after another. All of them were covered in filth and were so starved that they looked sallow and emaciated. After making several enquiries, he found out about the predicament the Imperial Army was in, but still, he did not dare to act rashly and advance his troops without careful consideration. This was because a 20,000-men strong Imperial Army was not a small number. He was continually weighing his chances of winning against Xiao Chiye in a head-on battle.

“The Imperial Army’s performance at the Nanlin Hunting Grounds was out of the ordinary. They killed many a number of people when they vied with us for the city gate patrol back then.” Han Jin sat inside the tent and looked at the deserters below. “Now that you people have followed Xiao Chiye into defecting from the capital, how can you simply just break up at the drop of a hat?”

“To reply Your Excellency, we can’t go far.” The army deserter who was kneeling at the foot of Han Ji’s seat said, “We fled all the way here, far away from civilization with no villages or shops in sight. We have no food nor camping site. Cizhou lies ahead of us, and there’s also the Qidong Garrison Troops if we look south. It’s obvious we are going to be caught in an encirclement like a dumpling being wrapped.”

Han Cheng thought it over for a moment carefully and asked, “Are there many deserters?”

The deserter said, “When I fled, there were about a few hundred. The Imperial Army is now like duckweeds in a muddy ditch that will scatter at just one strike. It won’t be able to withstand a blow!”

Han Jin wondered, “And Xiao Chiye didn’t think of a way? I heard that he strictly enforces military law. The soldiers under his command are all very afraid of him.”

“Your Excellency doesn’t know this, but...” Having spoken for so long, the deserter swallowed his saliva and said, “can you give me some rations first? I fucking ran for the entire way, and I’m now so starving I can’t explain it clearly!”

Han Jin motioned for the men to give him some rations, and the deserter began to gobble it down on the spot. As he chewed on his food, he said, "They are afraid of him! In the past, we brothers had nowhere to go in Qudu, and so we had no other choice but to follow him, and we ended up offending the various masters of the Eight Great Training Divisions. Now that he even went on to become a traitor, how would we still dare to continue following him?"

Han Jin noted that all these deserters did indeed seem to be down and out. What's more, they were captured back. It did not look like they were faking. He could not help but make some mental calculations carefully in his mind. First, he got the men to take the deserters out. Then he began to deliberate over the battle strategy in his tent with his advisors.

Among the advisors was a man called Gao Zhongxiong, who had been the person taking the lead back then when the Imperial College had stirred up a disturbance. As he had offended Pan Rugui and was thrown into prison with no one to vouch for him, he gave up the idea of an official career and threw in his lot with Han Jin. He was a high-spirited scholar full of patriotic fervor who abhorred traitors to the state all his life. Shen Wei, Pan Rugui, and the likes were all men he held in contempt. And now, hearing that Xiao Chiye had fled the state after carrying out an assassination, he was even more worked up, unable to condone it.

Gao Zhongxiong pointed at the map and said, "Since Xiao Chiye is already at the end of his rope, we cannot tolerate him being on the run within Zhongbo's territory. The Viceroy has a strong army with sturdy horses and Dancheng to fall back upon. In my view, there's no time to lose. We will be able to deploy troops to pursue and attack him shortly. As long as he is captured before he enters Cizhou, it'd be a meritorious service rendered."

Han Jin was still hesitating. He said, "But Xiao Chiye still had more than 10,000 men, and they are all real men who have been through the Nanlin Hunting Grounds incident. If there's a trap..."

Gao Zhongxiong did not think the same. He said, "The soldiers of the Imperial Army are demoralized, and they are all not of one mind. There's no difference between 10,000 men and one man. They are now just a motley crew of disorganized men; they are nothing to worry about. The Viceroy had already pursued him all the way here. If we can't capture him

as soon as possible and bring him to justice, we won't be able to account for it to Qudu either. ”

Pretty much stirred, Han Jin asked, “What should I do if he's in cahoots with the Prefectural Prefect, Zhou Gui, to hatch a plot to do me harm?”

Gao Zhongxiong said with slight urgency, “Viceroy, that Zhou Gui is a man with a family. Would he cast aside a decent official position to plot a revolt with the traitor Xiao Chiye? He won't dare to. If we dispatch troops now, we will definitely catch Xiao Chiye by surprise. Then we can follow up the victory and press home the attack, and we will be able to return in triumph.”

Han Jin had been sleeping in the tent for days in a row and was already displeased from all the mosquitoes and bugs bites over his body. He was still thinking of Qudu, where his eldest brother, Han Cheng, had aided the Empress Dowager in gaining charge of the government. The glorious rise of the Han clan was right before him. It was just the perfect time for him to return and call up his friends and associates for a lavish celebration. The longer he stayed here, the more irritable he became. So right after hearing Gao Zhongxiong's words, he weighed over the pros and cons and promptly agreed.

The next day, Han Jin woke up early and led the troops onwards while there was still dew outside. Using the information provided by the deserters, he followed the trail to the forested area outside the river of silt. There were earthen stoves dug all over the forest, but not in a way that could provide food for 20,000 people.

Han Jin thoroughly believed the deserters' words now. With his spirits soaring, he drew his blade from where he was on his horse and brandished it forward, saying, “The traitors have no way out now. Search the forest all over. We will surely find their traces!”

The soldiers of the Eight Great Training Divisions surged forth.

Xiao Chiye was squatting by the stream, washing his face. On hearing sounds, he looked back just in time to see Han Jin spurring his horse over.

The moment Han Jin saw Xiao Chiye, he hurriedly bellowed, “The traitor is here. Catch him quick!”

Xiao Chiye whistled to summon Lang Tao Xue Jin. The smattering of five hundred men all seemed to be in a panicked fluster, shouting and yelling as they were chased through the forest. On seeing the situation, Han Jin could not help but get all fired up. He laughed out loud a few times, then



shouted from afar, “Your Lordship, to think you’d fall into such a state today!”

Xiao Chiye ignored the soldiers and fled away alone on his horse. Han Jin was afraid he would make his escape and hurriedly led his men in hot pursuit. The Eight Great Training Divisions charged through the forest, following Han Jin towards the northeast at full throttle. The more Han Jin ran, the more anxious he became. He shouted after him from behind, “Xiao Chiye! You’re already at a dead end. Surrender yourself quickly!”

Xiao Chiye looked back on horseback and led his men in an attempt to resist, but they were no match for the Eight Great Training Divisions’ ferociousness. The sight of the five hundred men being chased was a sorry sight to behold. In the blink of an eye, they had already fled out of the forest. They made a beeline towards the river of silt, where they were finally boxed in at the side of the river.

“Xiao Chiye!” Han Jin reined in the horse and waved his sleeve. “Look around you. It’s all soldiers from my Eight Great Training Divisions! You’re currently besieged and under attack on all sides. So what are you still struggling for? Beg for mercy now, and I’ll spare your life!”

Lang Tao Xue Jin dug its hooves where it stood. Xiao Chiye said frostily, “You want me to die, sure. I’ll just ask you one question. Why didn’t Han Cheng come himself today?”

“My eldest brother is currently the noble regent, with weighty and taxing official duties to attend to. How would he come here to deal with you?” Han Jin pointed at Xiao Chiye with his sword. “If you get off your horse to await capture, your Xiao clan will still have a slim chance of survival. You alone committed such a heinous and grave mistake, yet you are willing to let your entire family pay for it with their lives now?”

“I’ve indeed made many mistakes.” Xiao Chiye nodded slightly and looked askance at Han Jin, “But it’s not your Han clan’s place to talk about it with me.”

The moment the words left his mouth, several hundreds of people suddenly climbed to their feet from both sides. Tantai Hu took the lead and completely surrounded Han Jin from behind. Leading the soldiers from the back, he slashed away at everyone he saw, throwing both men and horses off their feet into utter confusion and a crushing defeat. Han Jin’s guards on his left and right were all Imperial Bodyguards whom Han Cheng had assigned over to protect Han Jin. On seeing this, they realized that they had

fallen for the trap and immediately raised their whips to whip Han Jin's horse in an attempt to lead him to break out of the encirclement from the side of the forest.

Where had Han Jin ever seen such a battle array before? He was pretty much an expert when it came to past military exercises held at the Qudu military grounds. But he had never truly fought a war before. He was already totally frightened out of his wits. The pain jerked the horse into action, and it broke into a mad dash towards the periphery of the encirclement in the forest, with the Imperial Bodyguards forming a protective circle around it.

With his blade in hand, Shen Zechuan stood in the shadows of the tree and looked at Han Jin.

Han Jin still wanted to charge on ahead, but a sharp-eyed Imperial Bodyguard deftly reined in the horse. Under cold sweat and fresh blood, the group of people exchanged eye signals with each other. Eventually, the man at the head spoke, "Vice Commander! It's affinity that leads us to encounter each other today. How about letting us go on account of our past comradeship?"

Shen Zechuan had lost a lot of weight in the past few days. The wrist bones on the hand he was grasping the blade with looked just like a crescent moon peeking out in an icy-colored arc from that plain white sleeve opening of his. His eyes seemed to harbor solid ice that never melted throughout the seasons, yet a smile infused with the warmth of spring gradually materialized on his face. He said, "I do understand that the various brothers have been entrusted by another with this mission and, therefore, had no choice but to do it."

That man knew Shen Zechuan was malicious and ruthless by nature. So when he saw him reveal a smile, he shielded Han Jin and took a few steps back instead. The thunderous sound of fighting and killing filled the air behind him. Xiao Chiye was also closing in on them, one step at a time. Sweat trickled down the man's temples. He said, "Your Excellency has a bright future ahead of you, so why follow a traitor and suffer untold hardships here? If you are willing to release Viceroy Han back to the capital, the Commander-in-chief will definitely forgive and forget past grudges and welcome you back to the capital!"

Unexpectedly enough, Shen Zechuan chuckled. His voice was clear and unhurried, and he was a pretty sight to behold when he smiled. That pale

skin of his looked extraordinarily delicate under the speckles of sunlight. Very slowly, he drew out his blade, scraping Yang Shan Xue's slender and long blade against its sheath.

"I'm very grateful to Han Cheng." Shen Zechuan backhandedly grasped hold of the hilt and paused. "Words cannot express the extent of my gratitude towards him. When you return this time, please bring him a thank you gift on my behalf."

Han Jin felt a chill on his back and nearly tumbled off his horse.



Xiao Chiye rinsed away the blood on the blade at the edge of the water. Shen Zechuan squatted at the back to clean his hands. He buried his entire palms into the stream. Even when Xiao Chiye was done washing his blade, Shen Zechuan did not remove them. Xiao Chiye squatted opposite Shen Zechuan. He was much taller than him, but he could still put his head against Shen Zechuan's. Both men's palms met in the water, and Xiao Chiye grasped hold of his fingertips.

Shen Zechuan's sobs seemed to be a dream of the night, seeing as how he was clean and composed under the sunlight. Very slowly, his index finger stroked along Xiao Chiye's hand and made its way through the gap between Xiao Chiye's fingers. His palm fitted into Xiao Chiye's palm, bringing along with it the icy-cold softness of the water current.

Tantai Hu was presently leading the men to clean up the battlefield. They still had to stay over for a night in this forest. There were soldiers not far away all around them, but Shen Zechuan's hand clung to his, as if he was nonchalantly playing with it. At the same time, it also seemed like a seduction long premeditated.

He still had the stench of blood on him.

Xiao Chiye let him do as he wished and said, "You left only one soldier alive and sent him back. He might not necessarily be willing to bring the message back to them."

Shen Zechuan looked at the shimmering surface of the stream and said, "He's an Imperial Bodyguard. As long as he is still alive, he has to complete the mission. Han Jin has fallen into our hands. If he doesn't bring news of it back, then he has failed in his mission. He's going to die anyway, might as well die with a little more dignity. Furthermore, the heads in that burlap sack are all those of Imperial Bodyguards on the job with a authority token. He has to bring his brothers home."

Xiao Chiye wanted to wipe away the droplets of blood on Shen Zechuan's wrists. But there were people all around. Both of them gazed at each other for a moment. He suddenly grasped Shen Zechuan back, then slowly leaned forward and said, "The earring dropped in Qudu. I'll make a new one for you once we arrived in Libei."

"You still have an outstanding bill of several thousand taels of silvers." Shen Zechuan looked at him. "Tighten your belt and make some money first, *er-gongzi*."

"I can marry into a rich family. Pledge myself in marriage in exchange for money." Xiao Chiye lowered his voice.

Propping himself up against the soft sediment at the bottom of the stream, Shen Zechuan whispered into Xiao Chiye's ear, "Five hundred taels for one night..."

That bit of enchanting sensuality had yet to pervade the atmosphere between them when Shen Zechuan suddenly looked back with a stern countenance and said to Tantai Hu, who had wanted to go over but did not know what posture he should adopt to walk over, "Han Jin must not have brought plenty of provisions along this time considering that he had been thinking of going back to Qudu soonest possible and that he had Dancheng to fill in whatever he was lacking. Have everyone cook all those provisions tonight. Tomorrow morning, we—"

Shen Zechuan stopped abruptly for a moment. He swiftly cast a sidelong glance at Xiao Chiye before he continued, "... will continue on our way to the northeast."

Xiao Chiye said nothing and washed the handkerchief in all seriousness, all the while conveniently caressing Shen Zechuan's hand that had been covered under the handkerchief until it turned a shade of light red.



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## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 100 : HIDDEN DANGER



News of Han Jin's rash advance made its way back to Qudu, causing quite the stir. Because the only surviving Imperial Bodyguard brought back a sack of human heads, making it clear to all that Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye had completely split from Qudu. There was no longer a glimmer of possibility that both sides could sit down for negotiation. Han Jin's capture threw Han Cheng into a rage. When Shen Zechuan left Qudu, the Imperial Bodyguards were already falling apart. The Imperial Bodyguards led by Ge Qingqing were still in Juexi looking after the Xi clan, and Fei Sheng had gone into hiding with his own trusted men. Han Cheng did not have much manpower left on hand.

The Imperial Bodyguards were at the height of power and the peak of glory under Ji Wufan's command. By the time the command fell to Ji Lei, it was already on the decline. And now, in Han Cheng's hands, it had thoroughly turned into an utterly fractured squad of ceremonial guards. The batch of men under Fei Sheng's command were all capable men, but Han Cheng's premature exposure of his intent to kill Fei Sheng had consequently caused him to miss the chance to win Fei Sheng over to his side.

"Once the overall situation has stabilized, the Twelve Offices of the Imperial Bodyguards will have to be reorganized. Our lack of current manpower is really a disgrace, and we can't get anything done with this few people." Han Cheng sat at the right-handed seat below the Empress Dowager and said in a steady voice, "I noticed that the noble clans' descendants are mostly in positions with practically no obligations lately. Giving them a place to go would also prevent them from recklessly stirring up trouble at this crucial juncture."

The Empress Dowager wore a crown of jade, with her hair tidily worn in a bun and her sideburns, trimmed. Pendant earrings inlaid with gold and gems dangled at the sides of her ears. She was really suited to dressing in such an elegant and poised manner, just like how a peony ought to be grown in the main halls of the nobles. Only gold and jade in its glorious splendor was worthy enough for a divine beauty of this caliber. She was already beyond her prime, yet her graceful demeanor was far from diminished. At

present, she was holding a wooden spoon, teasing the parrot. Without even looking at Han Cheng, she said, "The Imperial Bodyguards is a place where serious work is done. It's already providing for many hereditary descendants of the noble clans. Keep stuffing more people inside, and it will be rendered useless sooner or later. The Eight Great Training Divisions suffered a defeat in the battle outside Dancheng. If you ask me, it not only needs an infusion of new blood, but also a dismissal of some old-timers."

It was precisely at the behest of someone else that Han Cheng was thinking of finding decent posts for the young masters of the noble clans. On hearing this, he said, "I have the same intent. I'll discuss it over with the Ministry of War tomorrow and write a memorial to submit to the Grand Secretariat. Your Majesty, that Hai Liangyi is so sick that he can't even straighten his back. He has been toiling hard his entire lifetime for state affairs. At the very least, we mustn't let him exhaust himself to death while on the job. We need to come up with an arrangement for him."

By this, he meant for Hai Liangyi to be relieved of his post and sent back to his hometown. With a smile on her face, the Empress Dowager tapped the wooden spoon and handed it over to Matron Liuxiang, who was serving at the side. She said to Han Cheng with an amicable countenance, "What he has is an affliction of the heart for which he has yet to regain his footing. He's still the one who understands many of the Six Ministries' affairs best. How can we rashly dismiss him back to his hometown at such a crucial time? Let's wait for a few more days."

Han Cheng, having been tactfully rebuffed, gnashed his teeth inwardly, although he kept his expression unchanged on his face and said, "Your Majesty is the one leading the administration now, so naturally, Your Majesty is the one who decides. Since the Eight Great Training Divisions have been defeated before the City of Dancheng, and Xiao Chiye has already fled to Zhongbo, then it'd be better for the Ministry of War to mobilize the Qidong Garrison Troops to stop them as soon as possible. Otherwise, the Libei Armored Cavalry would have a 20,000-men strong reinforcement by the time he returns to Libei!"

The Empress Dowager cleaned her hands and said, "If you had been able to stop him in Qudu, we would not have all these subsequent worries now. That Prefectural Prefect, Zhou Gui, knows how to do his job, and he is also caught in a tight spot. He still has to come into contact with Libei in the future, so he will definitely not offend Libei. Xiao Chiye's return to Libei is

already a foregone conclusion. Even if we get Qi Zhuyin to go, she'll be just fighting the Libei Armored Cavalry in a head-on attack. It's easy for us to talk about deploying troops here. But where are the military provisions to sustain the army as they head north? Hezhou can't bear this extra burden."

"Then are we just going to let Xiao Chiye return to Libei just like this?" Han Cheng stood up in astonishment. "This will make Libei even more powerful, like a tiger that has been given wings!"

The Empress Dowager let Matron Liuxiang hold her for support as she stood at the entrance of the front yard to look at the beautiful flowers in a multitude of vivid colors. She asked, "Han Cheng, do you think that Xiao Chiye will definitely be of assistance when he returns to Libei?"

Han Cheng put on a look as if he was listening attentively and said deferentially, "I do not understand. Please enlighten me."

"From the time Xiao Jiming took over military power of the Libei Armored Cavalry from Xiao Fangxu, he used ten years to get to where he is today. He is the heart of the Libei's military forces, one the soldiers look up to." The Empress Dowager watched as Hua Xiangyi pounced on butterflies in the garden with the maidservants and could not help but reveal a smile. She watched for a while longer before she continued, "Xiao Chiye has left Libei for six years. His return now makes him look like a wolf pup intruding into someone else's territory. He said Qudu is not the hometown in his dreams, but he is too young to understand the implied meaning of the phrase 'circumstances change with the passage of time'. Leading that 20,000-strong Imperial Army of his, he will gradually come to realize how out of element he is in Libei. Xiao Fangxu has always taken the hard line in setting up the Libei Armored Cavalry under one command. This is the reason why he is still standing, but it's also going to be the reason why it will be hard for Xiao Chiye to fit in. In a pack of wolves feeding on meat, Xiao Chiye, in order to kill his way out of the encirclement to become the alpha wolf, must first have the determination to bite the former king of wolf to death."

The Empress Dowager looked back and smiled at Han Cheng.

"The Xiao clan can't bear the sight of internal strife among the other clans. But sometimes, there is no other choice. The Xiao clan has always been a paragon of brotherly love and respect, but how long can this brotherhood last in the face of military power? The battlefield is a cruel place. It is where the blood of millions of battered soldiers is shed. But the

combat zone for power is even more brutal. A change of hands often means infighting and fratricide.”

Han Cheng indistinctly shrank under the Empress Dowager’s gaze. He hurriedly lowered his head in agreement and said, “Your Majesty is wise. But Xiao Jiming is already seriously injured. It’s entirely justifiable for Xiao Chiye to stand in for him.”

The Empress Dowager asked, “Did Xiao Jiming die?”

Han Cheng shook his head.

The Empress Dowager said, “Xiao Jiming didn’t die. He can still assist and coordinate military affairs from the back, while Xiao Fangxu, with his re-emergence, can command the soldiers from the front. This pair of father and son controls the Libei Armored Cavalry. There are many matters in which they have to show mutual understanding in order to keep it up. But Xiao Chiye has both the ability to unify and coordinate military affairs and the ability to charge into battle and kill the enemies. If he barges into this equilibrium – among that extremely unified military leadership – then he will be the unforeseen event that hinders the Libei Armored Cavalry from having only one commander-in-chief. Maybe he doesn’t have the intent to take his father and elder brother’s place. But very soon, he will understand that Libei isn’t as indivisible as we see it. His return is the hidden danger that will bring about Libei’s split.”

The trajectory of such a situation was not something anyone can deliberately direct. It was something that took shape in passing based on the opportunities present. The seed had been sown the day Xiao Fangxu led the Libei Armored Cavalry in an attempt to take a stand against Qudu. But as for what fruit it would reap, no one knew.<sup>1</sup>

“In this world, the common man has the worries of the common men to bear, while a talented one has the agony of the talented to endure.” The Empress Dowager said calmly. “Since there is already a Xiao Jiming, then why beget another Xiao Chiye? Six years is not a long time, nor is it a short time, yet it’s enough to change many things. The source of Xiao Chiye’s agony in Qudu comes from the fact that he is not a man of mediocre ability. But after he returns to Libei, he will still continue to be tormented by this kind of suffering. Once this pair of role models for brotherhood realizes that killing each other is the only way out, the anguish will intensify. Whether it is Xiao Jiming who gives up his position to Xiao Chiye, or if it is Xiao



Chiye who excuses himself to avoid suspicion, even brothers who were once loyal and devoted to each other will grow estranged.”

Under the warmth of this fifth month, Han Cheng felt a chill, followed by a tingle of thrill.

“The former emperor has already been buried. There ought to be some signs of progress for the preparation of the new ruler.” The Empress Dowager said, “You said you’ve found the imperial heir. When are you going to bring the imperial heir out for me to have a look?”

Han Cheng said with a slight bow, “I’ve already sent men to bring the imperial heir to Qudu at top speed. Your Majesty will be able to see the imperial heir in five days at the latest.”

The Empress Dowager looked at him and said, “Since you’re so sure he is the imperial heir, you must have credible proof that will convince the others. The civil officials led by Hai Liangyi aren’t that easy to dismiss. Han Cheng, you should go and make preparations.”

Han Cheng kept her company for a while longer, then said his farewell and left. The moment he left, Hua Xiangyi approached the Empress Dowager with a flower branch in her arms.

“Han Cheng has never climbed this high before. Just let him in on it a little, and he lost all sense of propriety.” The Empress Dowager looked in the direction in which Han Cheng had left and pulled Hua Xiangyi along to stroll a few steps. “What a fool that Han Jin is to be defeated in Dancheng. He has the timing, location, and manpower all in his favor, and he still ended up being taken captive. How can such a person take on heavy responsibilities? Han Cheng’s words in the palace today are all hints for me to dispatch men to save him. Little would he imagine that they only kept Han Jin alive to threaten him with.”

“I noticed that the commander-in-chief has been looking good lately. He doesn’t even address himself as ‘this subject’ when he enters the palace to pay his respects.” Hua Xiangyi leaned on the Empress Dowager. “Auntie, he’s up to no good. Going by how early his preparation of the so-called imperial heir is, I fear he’s already no longer satisfied with being the Imperial Bodyguards’ Commander-in-chief.”

“He wants to be the prince regent.” The Empress Dowager took away the flowers in Hua Xiangyi’s arms. “I’ve already made inquiries into the child he has chosen. How is that an orphan of the late emperor? It’s merely a child he found from a distant relative in his native hometown. It’s a tad

delusional for such a lowly thing to dream of occupying the Li clan's empire, isn't it?"

The Empress Dowager thought for a moment.

"But there's really no one else at present."

While both of them were conversing, they suddenly saw Fuman hurrying over. He paid his obeisance and said in an obsequious manner, "His Excellency the Assistant Minister Xue requests an audience."



Tantai Hu distributed the food that night. Just as Shen Zechuan expected, Han Jin had traveled light when he led the troops in pursuit of them and did not bring that much food. The Imperial Army, however, had gone hungry for several days. At least they could eat their fill tonight.

Shen Zechuan had grown terribly thin after his teacher's passing, but this forest had been long cleared out, and there was not even a rabbit around. Xiao Chiye took out the steamed bun and meat jerky he had hoarded and gave it all to Shen Zechuan, while he himself ate dry biscuits and rice water just like everyone else.

"I've done as per Master's arrangement and sent someone to notify Zhou Gui so that he can get prepared." Tantai Hu crouched down next to the fire and said, "Master will be able to go home once we make our way past Cizhou the day after tomorrow!"

Xiao Chiye threw firewood into the bonfire and said, "Informing Zhou Gui is just to get him to play along with us. With Han Jin in our hands, he will have no other choice but to give way."

"This Han Jin really came at the most opportune time." Tantai Hu grinned. "Just the day before, we were still thinking about how to get past Cizhou, and he delivered himself right to our doorstep!"

Shen Zechuan warmed his hands by the fire and said nothing as he looked at the fire.

Tantai Hu soaked the biscuit and said, "I've eaten this kind of provision when I was a part of Dengzhou's garrison troop a few years back. Zhongbo, looking at it again now, is different from the Zhongbo of the past... I almost can't recognize it."

Ding Tao poured out a bit of rice in his bowl to feed to the sparrow in his sleeve. When he heard this, he said, "It's still not too bad here. Go further east, and that's what it truly means to be totally a different sight."

Ding Tao had a photographic memory. He still remembered the tragic scenes he had seen in Duanzhou and Dunzhou six years ago when he followed Xiao Chiye and the army to clean up the mess. That year, he was only ten years old. He had just gotten a little notebook and was just starting to take notes just like his father did. And consequently, he had nightmares the entire journey.

“You were merely passing by after the battle. You’ve never seen how Zhongbo used to look like.” Tantai Hu lowered his eyes to look at the soup in the bowl. “I followed my parents to Dunzhou when I was a child. It was really big, and almost as bustling as Qudu. The display of fireworks and lanterns during the new year<sup>2</sup> was very beautiful, as was the turtle mountain lantern display.<sup>3</sup> People crowding and jostling with one another... so many people.”

Shen Wei was the Prince of Jianxing, and the Prince of Jianxing’s Manor was in Dunzhou. For a moment, all of them lowered their heads. No one dared to glance at Shen Zechuan, not to mention that they were also afraid of offending Xiao Chiye too. These few days on the road, the Imperial Army had gradually come to discover the subtle and delicate relationship between Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye. It was a completely different feeling to come face-to-face with it compared to when it had been merely rumors to them before.

How should they see Shen Zechuan? Do they regard him as their madam—the wife of their commander-in-chief? But which household’s lady could command the Imperial Bodyguards to raid others thrice? When he hacked off the heads of all those old subordinates who were protecting Han Jin, not one of the Imperial Army’s military officials could bring themselves to watch.

Shen Zechuan was too different from Xiao Chiye. He did not look and behave like the Commander-in-chief the Imperial Army was familiar with. He seemed to be gentle and modest, yet he rarely changed his mind during official discussions. He would even overrule Tantai Hu outright. Compared to Xiao Chiye, he was a lot more cold-blooded. In the past, they all privately saw Shen Zechuan as a mere beauty—a delicate fragility that clung on to the stronghold of power. But after Shen Zechuan put on the scarlet python robe,<sup>4</sup> everything that he had once concealed was exposed to the public. He became someone different from that last remnant of the Shen clan they knew of in the past. His beauty was no longer a vision anyone

could wantonly admire at will—that was an unrivaled allure that bespoke a ruthless strength.

There were very few people in the Imperial Army who were willing to look at Shen Zechuan in the eye, other than the totally clueless Ding Tao. Even Tantai Hu could sense a certain kind of pressure. They took their orders from Xiao Chiye, and they did not mind if Xiao Chiye liked men, but they had to figure out what Shen Zechuan's position was soonest possible—Shen Zechuan had the might that put him on par to vie with Xiao Chiye for power and authority. This was what they were most unaccustomed to these few days: the subtle fear.

Xiao Chiye rubbed his thumb ring gently. He was just about to speak when Shen Zechuan turned his palms over and said, “The wild herbs and vegetables in Duanzhou are delicious.”

The tension in the atmosphere eased a little. Sure enough, Ding Tao raised his head and said, “I heard from others back in Libei that a handful of wild vegetables in Duanzhou during the winter are as expensive as gold. I want to try them! Young master, do you eat them often?”

“When the ice and snow melt in spring, my *shiniang* would choose the most tender wild vegetables to make dumplings.” Shen Zechuan replied in his usual tone. His fingertips were clean and free of dust, as if they had never been tainted with those blood stains before. He said with a smile, “I rarely eat them. That's why I remember it so clearly.”

Ding Tao gulped down his saliva and wrote carefully in his notebook with that bit of ink he had. “I want to eat it. We will definitely get the chance to in the future. If I note it down, I won't forget it.”

Tantai Hu rubbed the back of Ding Tao's head and chided him with a smile, “Grow up! What delicacy is there that you have never tasted before? To think you are still thinking about wild vegetables!”

Everyone laughed, and the topic of Zhongbo was thus diverted. Shen Zechuan warmed up his hands and said nothing more.

At night, Xiao Chiye rested his head on a stone. He had yet to fall asleep when a slightly hot oil paper stuck to his cheek. He sat up and took a sniff at it from Shen Zechuan's hands. He smiled and said, “Where did you get this bun from?”

“Ding Tao brought it back from the town. He said to keep it for eating.” Shen Zechuan sat beside Xiao Chiye.

Both men sat side to side, with the already asleep forest belt at their backs, and the boundless starry sky before them. Xiao Chiye opened the oil paper and pushed it towards Shen Zechuan. He said, “Then eat it. It’s going to get cold if you keep it any longer.”

Shen Zechuan said, “I’m full. You can have it.”

Knowing that Shen Zechuan was keeping it specially for him, Xiao Chiye took it and broke it into two, with one half in one hand for himself, and the other half in the other hand for Shen Zechuan. Shen Zechuan took a few symbolic bites and let Xiao Chiye finish the rest of it.

“You also have to decide whether the betrothal gift of two million should be taken to Libei or left in Cizhou.” Xiao Chiye drank the water from the water bag. “Ge Qingqing will surely keep an eye on the Xi clan’s business for you when he receives the message. Once we reach Libei, Qiao Tianya and Chen Yang should have also hurried back too. When the time comes, we’ll set up a new compound...”

Xiao Chiye stopped, acutely sensing something off in this unusual silence. He fell silent for a moment.

“Is there something you want to tell me?”

Grasping the little bamboo fan that never left his side in his hands, Shen Zechuan looked at Xiao Chiye out of the corners of his eyes and said, “Ce’an, I can’t go with you to Libei.”

The way he spoke was so gentle. Just like that time at the top of the city gate when he had said to Xiao Chiye with the same tenderness, “*Ce’an, go home.*”



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#### Footnotes

1. 因果 karma, also known as cause (the seed sown) and effect (the fruit reaped). 果 also means fruit, or the result or consequences of something.
2. 正旦 Zhengdan, the first day of the first month in the lunar calendar.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 101 : TREASURE



Shen Zechuan had, at Zhao Zui Temple, received Qi Huilian's entire lifetime of knowledge. Six years ago, when he kneeled at Qi Huilian's feet, he already knew which path he was going to take. It was in pain and anxiety that he tempered his body and spirit. He once naively thought that he could throw off the noble clans' restraints by relying on power checks and balances alone.

But he failed.

Shen Zechuan looked ahead. The murmuring waters of the river flowed, like life that had plunged into darkness, unable to turn back, and twinkling only because of the starry sky reflected in it. He slowly nudged the little bamboo fan open, then slowly closed it up again. He said, "I left Qudu, but I'm still in a cage. This is a punishment to me for taking my chances. I have to find a new way out soonest possible. Teacher entrusted his entire lifetime of convictions to me. I once promised him to walk to the end of this battle for him. We endured it all in the past because Qudu did not seem to have reached the stage of no return yet. But now, I've come to the understanding that it has long been on the decline, like the sun setting beyond the western hills."

Qi Huilian shouted about the decaying empire in the heavy downpour, yet his raised arms still seemed to be trying in vain to hold up the mansion that was collapsing.<sup>1</sup> He had taken an entirely different path from Hai Liangyi, but yet they had both lit up the same torch. In the last moment of his life that had always blazed for the Li clan, he cast aside the crown prince whom he could never let go of in the past and chose Shen Zechuan, who was of humble origins.

Both of Qi Huilian's students were what the common folks called worlds apart, like clouds and mud. The Crown Prince was the direct descendant of the Li clan, and he seemed to be born just to be a wise sovereign. Qi Huilian thought that they could create a new world, because they were the undisputed legitimate descendants of direct lineage in this world. But then he failed. Subsequently, he found Shen Zechuan in the mire. A Shen Zechuan whose birth mother was of lowly birth and whose father was defeated in battle. A Shen Zechuan who was not a direct

descendant. Qi Huilian chose such a Shen Zechuan. This was a change of his lifelong conviction. It was a declaration that he no longer bow to what lineage had in store for them. He wanted such a Shen Zechuan to pierce through this wretched, decaying empire.

“I have given up enduring it all.” Shen Zechuan rested his fan on his knee and turned slightly sideways to gaze at Xiao Chiye. “I’m going to choose another way to fight. I want to remain in Zhongbo. You once said to Tantai Hu, ‘the humiliation of our nation has yet to be redressed, and the feuds of our families have yet to be avenged’. That’s right, Ce’an, the humiliation Zhongbo has suffered should be redressed in Zhongbo itself. This is what I want to do. One day, we will gallop under the skies of Libei, and that will be when I am strong and powerful enough. Two million isn’t enough to marry the wolf pup of the Prince of Libei. Such a betrothal gift is not worthy of my Xiao Ce’an. If I’m in Zhongbo, however, I will one day go on to be your indestructible shield.”

The water bag hurriedly fell to the ground, splashing water all over the ground and onto the corner of Xiao Chiye’s robe, wetting it. Under the soft veil of moonlight, Xiao Chiye suddenly grasped hold of Shen Zechuan’s hand and hugged him.

After a long time, Xiao Chiye’s hoarse voice rang out beside Shen Zechuan’s ear, clinging close to it, “I’ll leave my back to you, and you’ll leave your chest to me. We cannot do without the other. I’ll choose the best horse for you in Libei. We’ll build a house on the Zhongbo-Libei demarcation line and meet there every month—it’s a must. To marry me, two million isn’t enough; I want Lanzhou’s priceless smile that even a thousand gold cannot buy.”

Shen Zechuan raised his hands to cover Xiao Chiye’s back—to embrace this captivating scent. Xiao Chiye was the wind traversing across the meadow to assail and invade the turbulent river in Shen Zechuan’s heart, allowing him to taste the sweetness of love all over. Having lost Duanzhou and his teacher, there was not much he had left. He eventually had to stride across that ravine of unfathomable depths to become a fortress for whatever was left of these remaining treasures.



Cizhou’s Prefect, Zhou Gui, had been busy with his official duties in recent days. He had heard that the Imperial Army had already passed

Dancheng and was on their way to Cizhou. Because of this, he tossed and turned in bed, unable to sleep all night.

Zhou Gui's advisor was a man from the prefecture of Dengzhou in Zhongbo. His name was Kong Ling, and he used to be fellow students with Zhou Gui. He had prepared the wine and gotten the chef to make several refreshing cold appetizers, and now, he was sitting cross-legged on the veranda of the courtyard with Zhou Gui across the table for a drink and chat. White flowers were falling from the Chinese scholar tree in the courtyard, giving out a refreshing, sweet fragrance.

"I can't sleep these few days." Zhou Gui said as he grasped the wine cup.

With his sitting posture casual, Kong Ling picked up the appetizer to eat and swallowed a mouthful of pungent wine before he said, "I know. The bandits in Dunzhou have already converged into a sizable group whose force is not to be underestimated. We have no soldiers and horses; we can't afford to provoke them. But it just had to be the case that we had a bumper harvest last year. That bandit chief, Lei Changming, is eyeing the granary in our Cizhou."

"All the grains have been given to the Libei Armored Cavalry as military provisions. The granary in Cizhou is now empty. I wrote a letter to Dunzhou's Prefect. But as you know, he's a puppet supported by Lei Changming. How would he dare to reason with Lei Changming on our behalf? I'm really suffering in silence." Zhou Gui could not even gulp down a mouthful of wine. "Then there's that Second Young Master of Libei who rebelled and fled the capital. 20,000 Imperial Army soldiers are about to arrive at the foot of the city gate. Chengfeng, I'm in a dilemma. I can't let them pass, but I can't refuse to let them pass either."

Kong Ling set down his chopsticks and said, "If Libei were to rebel, Cizhou, being sandwiched in the middle, won't be able to waver for long. You have to make a decision as soon as possible."

"It's not up to me to decide." Zhou Gui sighed disconsolately. "This time we are really cornered by wolves in front and tigers at the back. We can't afford to offend both Libei and Qudu, and there's still a Lei Changming at the side eyeing us covetously like a tiger eyeing its prey."

Kong Ling grasped the flower of the Chinese scholar tree and tossed it in the wine. "Lei Changming is a bandit. Sooner or later, he will be besieged and annihilated. But the Six Prefectures each have their own



government affairs to handle and cannot join forces to suppress the bandits. There's no knowing when the Imperial Court will send men over too. Seeing how Lei Changming is getting all arrogant and giving himself air day after day, he has already become the local tyrant of Zhongbo. There's no point in fretting."

"Six years ago, when Biansha Cavalry breached into our territory, Duanzhou and Dunzhou were the first to bear the brunt of the attack and became barren wastelands where 'bones of the dead lay exposed in the wild, and nary a rooster crowed for thousands of *li*<sup>2</sup> around'.<sup>3</sup> The ravages of war turned those thousands of *li* of fertile farmland into abandoned fields. Who is willing to go and serve as a soldier in the garrison troop now?" Zhou Gui looked at the courtyard and raised his hand to point around for Kong Ling, "Cizhou was able to conserve our strength and resources because the Libei Armored Cavalry came to the rescue at lightning speed. I've always kept this show of goodwill in mind, so I have no complaints whatsoever about the overall arrangements for military provisions this time. But plotting to murder the emperor is such a heinous crime that I can't even feign ignorance even if I want to. In less than a month, that Lei Changming will surely come to ask for grain and money, and Xiao Chiye will just happen to arrive in Cizhou. I'm really afraid there'll be a disaster when these two tyrants cross paths with each other. This is truly what it means by 'when it rains, it pours'!"

Kong Ling drank the wine and suddenly had a brainwave. He said, "Xiao Chiye brought 20,000 well-trained soldiers from the Imperial Army to Cizhou. Isn't that our 'soldiers'? With him here to personally assume command, even Lei Changming himself would have to take measure of his own abilities!"

"The Imperial Army remained in Qudu all year round. When had they ever seen a real battlefield? Lei Changming overthrew the garrison battalions in the two prefectures of Duanzhou and Dunzhou, and he isn't afraid of the Biansha Cavalry either. What he counts on is the solidarity of the people under his command. What's more, he's familiar with Zhongbo's terrain. Even if they were to come to blows, Xiao Chiye might not necessarily be his match." Zhou Gui hurriedly waved his hand. "Besides, that Second Young Master Xiao is in the prime of his youth. He hasn't fought that many battles, and he has his father and elder brother to back

him. If something were to happen to him in Cizhou, I won't be able to account to Libei."

Kong Ling stroked his goatee and said, "Xiao Chiye has rendered meritorious services by helping Emperor Tianchen ascend to the throne. The fact that the Imperial Army is willing to follow him after he rebelled and fled from Qudu means that he has the capability to lead an army. Otherwise, who would be willing to risk their heads to flee this far with him? However, seeing is believing. We'll meet him to get a proper feel of him when he comes later."

"I heard he's not easy to get along with." This was what Zhou Gui was worried about. "And he has stayed in Qudu for a long time. If he acts all like a rich young master, then I have to hurry and think of a way to send him away. We can't afford to have him stir up trouble!"



A few days later, the Imperial Army arrived at the city walls of Cizhou as expected. Zhou Gui did not dare to let them through directly, and merely opened the gate to welcome Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan in. He had long gotten his people to prepare a banquet, but Xiao Chiye turned it down with the reason that they were exhausted from being on the go the entire way here. Instead, he got Zhou Gui to prepare a table of simple home-cooked dishes to reminisce about the past.

They had never met before and had merely corresponded through letters, so what past was there for them to reminisce about? He was merely looking for an opportunity to have an in-depth negotiation.

Shen Zechuan changed his clothes and stood behind the screen in the room to look at the courtyard through the window. The courtyard was full of well-tended flowers and trees; supposedly, this was a residence used specifically for receiving guests. The unconcealable fragrance of Chinese scholar trees permeated the air, invigorating those who caught a whiff of it.

Xiao Chiye came in late. He was still undressing himself. Having undone half of his clothes, he leaned over the top of the screen to look at Shen Zechuan behind the screen and asked, "Can you get a clear look through the screen?"

Shen Zechuan saw how easily the screen was pressed down by him and thought that this person was really tall. He said, "It's only when one sees it as if through a dream or an illusion that one's heart will be moved. It won't be such an enchanting sight anymore if seen clearly."

Xiao Chiye's opened garment exposed half of his chest. His last piece of clothes hung uninhibitedly on him, with those firm muscles faintly visible through the screen. He was still leaning over the top of the screen. After leaving Qudu, he no longer wore a crown, yet his messy hair could not conceal how dashing he was. He seemed to be displaying more and more of his unrestrained and carefree nature the closer he was to Libei.

"What a frivolous fellow." Shen Zechuan strode closer and raised his hand to cup the back of Xiao Chiye's head before he raised his head high to kiss him.

Xiao Chiye pinched Shen Zechuan's chin and took advantage of the fact that Shen Zechuan was shorter than him to lift him up.

"Take a good look." Xiao Chiye looked at Shen Zechuan's radiant lips with a watery sheen on them. "Is this not enchanting enough?"

Shen Zechuan licked the sheen of water on his lips, only to make his lips even more red and moist. He said, "Still a little something missing."

"Five hundred taels for tonight." Xiao Chiye moved in closer and whispered, "Satisfaction guaranteed."<sup>4</sup>

"I'm afraid my delicate body can't take it." Shen Zechuan leaned back slightly. His fingertips longingly slid their way down along Xiao Chiye's chest, with just the flimsy fabric of the screen separating their flesh.

"Don't think so little of yourself." The expression in Xiao Chiye's eyes was dangerous. "Lanzhou."

Shen Zechuan withdrew his hand and said, "When we came in earlier, I saw another person beside Zhou Gui. Who is he?"

"Don't recognize him." Xiao Chiye nimbly changed his clothes. "Should be Zhou Gui's adviser. We'll know once we ask during the meal later."

"Since he did not let us through immediately, it means he still has some misgivings." Shen Zechuan watched as Xiao Chiye stepped out from behind the screen, then turned his gaze back to the courtyard. "When we discuss it tonight, you mustn't—"

Xiao Chiye suddenly picked Shen Zechuan up by the waist and turned a circle to press him against the wall by the side of the window. Pinning him down, he kissed him hard. Shen Zechuan lifted his arms to hang them over Xiao Chiye's body. The sudden and unexpected kisses disoriented him and threw his breathing into disarray.

“Don’t abuse my power to bully them.” Xiao Chiye’s expression was serious. “I know. I’ll do as my wife says.”

Shen Zechuan was still panting for breath. Xiao Chiye fastened Shen Zechuan’s collar for him, then brushed aside Shen Zechuan’s ink-black hair to pinch his right ear.

“I want to hang an earring here as soon as possible and engrave my name, Xiao Ce’an, on it.”



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Thank you [Peach](#) for the correction! <3

#### Footnotes

1. As mentioned in chapter 96. The idiom 大厦将倾 “the mansion on the verge of collapse” refers to a hopeless situation, like a mansion on the brink of collapse. The titles in chapters 95 and 96 suggest that this mansion has already collapsed, or, i.e., the situation is a total goner.
2. 里 *li*, an ancient measure of length, 1 *li* = approx. 500m
3. 白骨露於野 , 千里无鸡鸣 from Graveyard Song by Cao Cao (曹操)
4. 包赚不赔 literally you’ll only stand to earn and suffer no loss.



- 5.
6. 鳌山 Aoshan, turtle-shaped mountain, made up of a pile of colored lanterns (in the shape of a giant turtle) for the Lantern Festival on the 15th day of the first lunisolar month.
7. 蟒衣 (or 蟒袍) “python (or mang) robes” were embroidered robes bestowed by the Emperor to officials with merits during the Ming Dynasty. It was a sign of honor and favor for officials who were granted the privilege of wearing a “python robe”.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 102 : CIZHOU



Zhou Gui did as Xiao Chiye said and set up a tableful of home-cooked dishes in his own courtyard. Shen Zechuan, on stepping into the courtyard, found it to be quite unconventional despite its simple setup. It was close to nature, and had no valuable wares such as gold and jade.

Zhou Gui welcomed Xiao Chiye and invited him to take his seat. It was presently the sixth month. The side of the small table was encircled by a cool and clear stream, with hanging branches brushing against its water. It was pleasantly cool and cheery. Zhou Gui did not get anyone else to serve them. Only Kong Ling remained standing in attendance by his side to pour wine for them.

Xiao Chiye cleaned his hands and watched as the wine in the cup was gradually filled to the brim. He said, “Your Excellency Zhou has truly gone to much trouble. Even the wine prepared is ‘On Horseback’ from Libei. I’ve been away from home for so many years, and it has been a long time since I last drank it.”

This wine was wine from the Libei Armored Cavalry made out of grains. It was bold and intense. Just a few sips in the snowy winter could warm the body up. The reason it was called “On Horseback” was because more than thirty years ago on his wedding night, the Prince of Libei, Xiao Fangxu, received a military report of the Biansha’s breach into the territory. With no time for him to remove his wedding outfit, he flipped onto the horse to head into the battlefield to kill the enemies. Before he set off, the Princess Consort of Libei, who was similarly still dressed in her wedding outfit, lifted the jar to pour wine and exchanged a cup of matrimony wine<sup>1</sup> with Xiao Fangxu, who was sitting on horseback. This was a common scene at the frontiers, but with this person being the reputable Prince of Libei, everyone could not help but lament the fact. From then on, ‘for most of three hundred and sixty days in a year, on horseback he rides, weapon in hand’<sup>2</sup> came to be how the Libei Armored Cavalry was portrayed.

When Zhou Gui saw Xiao Chiye looking calm and serene, some of his anxiety eased. He said, “We are close to the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path. When the military provisions were being escorted for delivery last month, the army sent many jars of wine over. Your Lordship is about to

return to your hometown, but there is nothing good in Cizhou to entertain you with, so I can only offer you such a borrowed gift.”<sup>3</sup>

Xiao Chiye laughed and said, “It’s the local dishes that are the most flavorful. Compared to the delicacies of Qudu, this entire table of dishes shows more sincerity. There’s no need for Your Excellency to be modest. The arrangements for matters relating to the military provisions are complex, and it’s all because of Your Excellency’s valuable assistance that Cizhou could finish sealing and loading in just a few short days. It’s only fitting for me to give you a toast as a show of my appreciation.”

Zhou Gui did not dare to accept the toast sitting down and hurriedly rose to his feet. He held up the wine cup in both hands for a toast, then drank up with Xiao Chiye. It was only after he was done drinking the wine that he took his seat and said, “The Libei Armored Cavalry is fighting a battle with the Hanshe Tribe at the front line, and the military provisions are crucial to their success and failure on the battlefield. What I did was merely my duty. How can it be worthy enough to have Your Lordship make a special point of expressing your thanks? I really don’t deserve it.”

“Although Cizhou had a bumper harvest last year, it has been continuously providing aid to Duanzhou and Libei since the start of spring. Those are all grains the commoners of Cizhou saved up. I should thank you for this.” With that, Xiao Chiye raised his hand and slightly stopped Kong Ling as the latter moved to pour wine. He said, “Since it’s a private family feast, there’s no need to stand on ceremony. This gentleman, please take a seat too.”

Kong Ling was swift to react. He promptly bowed where he stood and sat down.

“Where is Mister from?” Shen Zechuan asked with a smile.

The gears in Kong Ling’s mind turned even faster. He saw Xiao Chiye starting to dig in, and so he knew the main negotiator tonight was this Vice Commander Shen. He bowed his head and answered, “I do not dare to be addressed as such, given that I’m merely a commoner from the countryside. I’m a native from Dengzhou.”

“Dengzhou has no lack of talents. May I know how I should address you?”

“My name is Kong Ling, and my humble courtesy name<sup>4</sup> is Chengfeng.” Kong Ling sat upright and said as he looked at Shen Zechuan,

“Tantai Hu of the Imperial Army is the blood brother of a close friend of mine, Tantai Long.”

“To think one would run into an old friend in a foreign land.” Shen Zechuan turned his head to the side and said to Xiao Chiye with a smile, “Ce’an, let’s get Laohu to meet up with mister Chengfeng another day. It isn’t easy to have an encounter in turbulent times.”

He called Xiao Chiye Ce’an, and this address alone was enough for Kong Ling to re-evaluate this orphan of Shen Wei. Shen Zechuan was pretty much inconspicuous when he entered Cizhou, or rather, far less conspicuous than his mortal flesh. Kong Ling knew he was Shen Zechuan, the Imperial Bodyguards Vice Commander that Emperor Tianchen personally made an exception to promote. But after leaving Qudu, Shen Zechuan lost his basis to command the world—In Kong Ling’s eyes, he had no soldiers and no men. He was merely a vassal who had fled with Xiao Chiye to this place. But then, a vassal could never sit as equals at the same table with Xiao Chiye and call him by his courtesy name.

Xiao Chiye poured wine for himself and said, “You decide.”

Zhou Gui cast a glance at Kong Ling, then looked at Shen Zechuan. Kong Ling stood up to toast him and said, “I’ve long heard of the Vice Commander’s name...”

“You are too kind.” Shen Zechuan said, “Please sit and let us talk as we drink,”

Kong Ling said, “I’m just a minor clerk under His Excellency’s command. How would I dare to discuss official affairs with Your Excellency? It’s already half a lifetime of blessing for me to be able to sit here and listen to your guidance with the cup of wine I’ve received.”

The corners of Shen Zechuan’s lips lifted slightly. He said, “Mister is truly too modest. I heard that you also used to be Tantai Long’s adviser in Duanzhou. When the Biansha Cavalry breached into our territories, Tantai Long advocated war, and you were the one who devised all his battle strategies.”

They had only just entered Cizhou, and they had already dug up all the inside stories. Kong Ling’s heart sank. He said, “I was merely an armchair strategist strategizing on paper.”

“A pity Tantai Long died in Shen Wei’s hands.” Shen Zechuan drank his wine. “And Duanzhou fell without even being attacked.”



Shen Zechuan said it so lightly that it was as if Duanzhou's fall was merely a stack of paper cards that had collapsed—that it was nothing worth hating; nothing worth resenting.

Kong Ling's expression gradually grew glum as he remained sitting. A long while later, he forced a smile and said, "The Vice Commander lives a life of luxury in Qudu. How would you know the suffering of the people after the city of Duanzhou fell? White bones stretching thousands of *li*<sup>5</sup> from the Chashi River to Dunzhou remained uncollected. It's not that big of a deal that Shen Wei was a rat who shrank from battles. But he and Shen Zhouji set up a banquet to strangle Tantai Long to death... The troops of Zhongbo suffered a defeat. I, Kong Chengfeng, was able to have a change of master and continue living. But the pro-war faction led by Tantai Long was completely wiped out. You're right. It's a pity Tantai Long died in Shen Wei's hands. He was a good man of Zhongbo."

Shen Zechuan said, "Mister had a narrow escape. With your talents and learning, you'd be able to come across a Bo Le<sup>6</sup> even if you go to Qudu. Yet you remained in Cizhou. I don't understand."

Kong Ling wanted to stand up, but then he could not leave his seat arbitrarily. He could only raise his head to look at Shen Zechuan and said, "The Vice Commander doesn't understand. How can you understand? The calamity that is the ravages of war came out of the blue and turned Zhongbo into a scene of devastation everywhere. But here, there is no fame nor fortune here. Perhaps in the Vice Commander's eyes, it is just like the scattered willow catkins in the air, but to us, Zhongbo still has hope of getting back on its feet."

Shen Zechuan smiled and said, "Duanzhou lost its garrison battalion, and subsequently a band of bandits proclaimed themselves king. The fields have fallen into disuse, and there's no signs of human lives beyond half a *li* outside the city. So is this hope you speak of exactly the opportunity to get back on its feet for the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo, or just for the single city of Cizhou? On one hand, Cizhou intends to drag out an ignoble existence with Qudu, but on the other hand, Cizhou accedes to every one of Libei's requests. To be such a fence-sitter... I indeed don't understand."

Kong Ling suddenly rose and said, "How would you know of Cizhou's difficulties? Qudu had their hands full with internal strife after the defeat of Zhongbo's troops, and we never got a reply despite our numerous memorials to ask for help. It was His Excellency who personally handled

the reclamation of the wasted fields. It took three years before we could have this bumper harvest. That's right. Cizhou is indeed stuck in a dilemma between Qudu and Libei, but Cizhou has always gone all out to help each time Libei is faced with a difficulty. Vice Commander, isn't it a tad too cutting to say that Cizhou is a fence-sitter?!"

"It is as you said." Shen Zechuan suddenly changed his expression and said with a stern countenance, "I know Cizhou has its own difficulties, so we've come for the specific purpose of talking things out with both of you. We'll go straight to the point. Your Excellency isn't willing to let the Imperial Army pass for fear of being censured by Qudu in the days to come. But with the disintegration of the current state of affairs, holding on to what is left is not the wisest strategy. Han Cheng devised a scheme to murder the Son of Heaven. The reason Ce'an and I left Qudu was not to flee for our lives, but to pick up the pieces. The Empress Dowager now has control over the administration of the imperial court, and the noble clans have once again sealed off the main gate of Qudu. How long can the Imperial College still thrive? Wasn't it precisely because of Hua Siqian's perfunctory attitude back then – when Your Excellency and Mister Chengfeng submitted repeated memorials after the defeat of Zhongbo troops – that Zhongbo has no hope of getting back on its feet? I've long heard about the bandits in Zhongbo back then when I was in Qudu. As long as those bandits aren't eliminated, Zhongbo will remain unstable. So how are you going to continue in your plans to restore Zhongbo to its former glory? The beginning of an undertaking is full of hardships, like one driving a wooden cart in tattered clothing to blaze a new trail through the mountains and forests.<sup>7</sup> I very much admire both gentlemen's determination for restoration. It's just that the road ahead is difficult. So why not change your course and leave Zhongbo's affairs to Zhongbo itself to handle?"

Holding his wine, Zhou Gui held Kong Ling in place and said, "Since the Vice Commander is so frank, then I shall not beat around the bush. It's indeed the case that I'm not willing to let His Lordship pass because I'm worried that Qudu would hold us responsible and increase Cizhou's tax as a punishment. If Cizhou disregards Qudu's deployment order and acts on its own, I fear it'd be hard for us to accomplish anything in the future without support. We have no military force and no wealthy merchants to provide financial aid. Furthermore, we don't have the same level of confidence as

Libei. The Vice Commander may persuade me thus, but there is no way I can use the lives of Cizhou's commoners to take a gamble."

"On the contrary." Xiao Chiye motioned for Kong Ling to sit. "By saying this, Lanzhou is not persuading Your Excellency to fight alone. Cizhou is close to the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path, and it has, at present, yet to establish a fully working garrison of its own. As long as Your Excellency is willing to allow my troops to come and go without obstruction, then, until Cizhou's garrison troop is formed, my Imperial Army of 20,000 men can take over the patrol duty in its place."

Zhou Gui contemplated it in silence. Kong Ling said, "Your Lordship will naturally keep your promise. But I also have to ask Your Lordship, if Libei were to revolt, the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path will naturally become obsolete. Where then will military provisions for the Libei Armored Cavalry come from in the future? Cizhou?"

"The Northeast Provisions Bridle Path is a key route that was opened up for the specific purpose of escorted transportation after the establishment of Libei Armored Cavalry. Isn't it too much of a pity for it to go to waste just like this?" Shen Zechuan fiddled with the wine cup. The expression in his eyes was calm and unhurried. "The Libei Armored Cavalry and the Imperial Army has a total of 140,000 soldiers and horses. The military provisions will still have to go through the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path in the future."

Kong Ling exchanged a glance with Zhou Gui and said in astonishment, "Your Lordship currently has the charge of regicide hanging over your head. How would the thirteen cities of Juexi still dare to prepare military provisions for the Libei Armored Cavalry again?"

Shen Zechuan smiled and said, "Juexi is Juexi. Qudu is Qudu. Mister Chengfeng, since I dare to say so, I naturally have my means. How about it? As long as Your Excellency Zhou is willing to let the Imperial Army pass through tonight, Cizhou will never have to fight alone in the future."

Zhou Gui hesitated and held his voice steady to say, "I can trust His Lordship's moral character, but I can't trust this rapidly changing situation. Both of you keep saying that the Imperial Army will suppress the bandits after passing through. But if both of you renege on your promise after the transit, then Cizhou will really be caught in a dead end with no way out!"

"No need to fret." Shen Zechuan put down his wine cup and said placidly, "I alone shall remain in Cizhou until the Imperial Army squashes

the bandits. If Your Excellency still has misgivings, we can hand over our current captive, Han Jin, to Your Excellency. That way, even if we go back on our word in future, Your Excellency can use Han Jin's life as an excuse to appease the wrath of Qudu."

Li Jianheng was dead, and there was still no news about a new ruler from Qudu. The region was already beginning to stir and show signs of restlessness. It was only out of fear of the Qi clan in Qidong that no one dared to follow in the wake of Libei and set up their own banner to stand on their own feet. But Cizhou was different. It was so close to the Libei Armored Cavalry. If it could really get the assistance of the military forces, then they would no longer need to submit to the deployment orders of the noble clans.

"News of my entry into the city today has already spread to Qudu." Xiao Chiye continued unhurriedly, "Whether Your Excellency let me through or not, the Empress Dowager will have misgivings of Cizhou after tonight."

Zhou Gui's countenance suddenly changed. "Your Lordship, Your Excellency. You!"

"Besides." Shen Zechuan followed close on Xiao Chiye's heels and said in a mild tone, "If both gentlemen want to establish a fully working Cizhou's garrison troop, then the most pressing task at hand is to recruit soldiers and buy horses. Cizhou relies on the farm fields to eat and make a living. There are no businesses inside and outside of Cizhou that are connected to Juexi and the harbors. I'm afraid it will take you until several years later to achieve this aim if you just use tax money alone. I just happen to have some savings, and I'm willing to contribute whatever little I have to the best I can—So Your Excellency Zhou, can the Imperial Army leave now?"



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#### **Footnotes**

1. 交杯酒 nuptial cups; a formal exchange of cups of wine between bride and groom as traditional wedding ceremony; a toast

in which one links one's arm with a partner to drink from one's cup of wine.



- 2.
3. 一年三百六十日, 多是横戈马上行 from 《马上作》 Qi Jiguang (戚继光), a Chinese military general and writer of the Ming dynasty. Refers to how most of the time he is on the battlefield wielding his weapon on horseback.
4. 借花献佛 literally to make an offering to Buddha with borrowed flowers (flowers given by another), i.e., make a gift of something given by another.
5. 草字 a humble or self-deprecating term used to introduce one's courtesy name to another party in ancient times.
6. 里 *li*, ancient measure of length, 1 *li* = approx. 500m
7. 伯乐 a figure famed for his ability to judge the quality of horses. Refers to someone who is a good judge of talents. (Here referring to a master who recognises and appreciates his talents.)
8. 筚路蓝缕, 以启山林 From Zuozhuan, or the Commentary of Zuo 《左传》 i.e.; to endure great hardships of the sake of pioneering work.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 103 : BEAUTY



How was there still room for Zhou Gui to refuse when the words had already been laid out so clearly? Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan had hit them right where their weakness was, using both carrot and stick. Everything they spoke about was all the most pressing issues in Cizhou at present. The private banquet could only end here.

Zhou Gui personally saw both men back to their courtyard, then strolled back with Kong Ling with a lantern in hand. He asked with a worried frown, “What do you think?”

Kong Ling said as he strolled, “Difficult. Both of them are tough nuts to deal with. But what they have said so far is true. At present, the Empress Dowager is in charge of the imperial court, and Secretariat Elder is old and ill. With the recent rise of disputes within the Grand Secretariat, Jiang Qingshan’s transfer to the post of the Provincial Administration Commissioner of Zhongbo is no longer that certain. If they arbitrarily appoint an official from the noble clans over, then the good days in Cizhou will come to an end.”

“That’s what I think too.” Basking in the aqueous moonlight, Zhou Gui contemplated it for a moment and said, “I’m worried that if we agree too quickly, both of them will think Cizhou is too easy to control. But agree too slowly, and I fear that they will run out of patience and Cizhou will lose the chance to get back on its feet. It’s really hard to get a measure of this.”

“We might not necessarily be able to trick and trap Xiao Chiye by playing cat and mouse with him.” Kong Ling looked back at Zhou Gui. “We should make up our minds on this matter as soon as possible. Dragging it on too long will only prove to be disadvantageous to us.”

Kong Ling was right. They could still negotiate with Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan now because Xiao Chiye was currently in a hurry to pass through Cizhou. Considering the influence of Cizhou on the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path, Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan could not forcibly barge their way through, nor could they fall out with Cizhou. So, Cizhou was the one with the upper hand. But the longer Cizhou hesitated, the more it would be detrimental to Cizhou. This was because the group of bandits led by Lei Changming was a menace to Cizhou. If Lei Changming entered Cizhou’s territory to plunder them, Zhou Gui would have to ask the

Imperial Army for help. By then, Xiao Chiye would trade places with Cizhou and become the one with the upper hand.

“Seeing how Xiao Chiye isn’t bothered about trifles, he shouldn’t be the kind of person who will simply sit and watch from the sidelines.” Zhou Gui was still hesitating. “Let’s wait... for Qudu to make a move.”

“How rare of you to be this muddle-headed.” Kong Ling gave a long sigh. “Risking all the lives in a prefecture on just an assumption that he ‘isn’t bothered about trifles’. We may know a person’s face, but not his heart! If they raise their prices there and then, they won’t be this accommodating and open to negotiation as they are today.”

“It’s precisely because this matter concerns the lives in an entire prefecture that I’m hesitating.” Zhou Gui caught up with Kong Ling in a few steps. He shook his sleeves to extend his hands out and said to Kong Ling, “Chengfeng, is it really that easy to go independent and make yourself king? Think about the former Crown Prince. That’s truly a real fall from grace. Libei has revolted now, but if you think about it from various angles, how is this battle an easy one to fight? It’s not all that beneficial to Libei. They not only need to take the Biansha Cavalry into consideration, but also be on guard against Qidong’s advances. If the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path is cut off too, then wouldn’t they become a trapped beast in a cage? They can’t survive for long! When the time comes, Libei won’t even be able to fend for themselves. Then what should our Cizhou do? Won’t we end up at others’ mercy like meat on a chopping board? We will even have to live with the infamy of being a traitor!”

“With matters already coming to this stage, it’s impossible to think of escaping unscathed.” Kong Ling said in all earnestness. “You should think it over carefully again tonight.”



The moment Xiao Chiye stepped into the room, a graceful, delicate figure walked towards him. This fair-skinned maidservant with jet-black hair worn in a bun daintily knelt before Xiao Chiye, exposing a large portion of her nape through her low neckline. Smoothing over the lock of hair at her temples, she called out in a soft voice, “Your Lordship...”

Xiao Chiye did not look at her and moved to take off his outer garment. On hearing his movement, the maidservant hurriedly got up to take off the clothes for Xiao Chiye.

Shen Zechuan bumped into Xiao Chiye's shoulder, and Xiao Chiye grasped hold of him. Letting Xiao Chiye support him, Shen Zechuan lifted his chin slightly and gently kicked off his shoes.

Xiao Chiye said, "Go prepare some hot water. The Vice Commander is drunk."

The maidservant gathered her clothes around her and bent over to pick up Shen Zechuan's shoes. But Shen Zechuan lowered his little bamboo fan to lift her face up. She did not dare to move and could only look up along the fan at Shen Zechuan. She saw that Shen Zechuan's brows were slightly knitted, yet the corners of his eyes looked as though they were soaking with wet peach blossoms that accentuated the glistening in his eyes. A sense of inferiority overwhelmed her, and she hastily averted her eyes, not daring to look right at Shen Zechuan again.

Shen Zechuan said nothing. He merely took a few looks at her and moved his fan away. The maidservant deferentially put the shoes together neatly, then retreated quietly with her head lowered.

"Pretty?" Xiao Chiye waited for the door to close before he pulled Shen Zechuan closer into his arms and asked.

With his fingers over the bamboo fan, Shen Zechuan did not answer and merely stepped on Xiao Chiye's insteps with feet covered in clean socks. He pulled at Xiao Chiye's outer garment that had yet to be taken off and moved in closer. As Xiao Chiye led him, he saw the indolent expression on Shen Zechuan's face. It was a relaxed expression of one after having drunk wine. He lowered his head, wanting to kiss him. But Shen Zechuan leaned back slightly and did not let Xiao Chiye kiss.

The breaths of both men carried with it the sweet intensity of "On Horseback". All the weariness of being on the go the entire journey eased up during these few days of rest. Shen Zechuan always looked pale after leaving Qudu, but with Xiao Chiye's care and affection, he began to look like a jade stone that had been warmed up by his caresses. In Xiao Chiye's palms, he was both hard and hot.

"Kong Ling is Tantai Long's old subordinate. As long as Lei Changming is not eliminated, the anxiety in his heart will remain." Xiao Chiye helped Shen Zechuan to undress. He pulled off Shen Zechuan's clothes and caressed Shen Zechuan's lower back, even though the words from his mouth were, "Lei Changming is anxious to get his hands on grains."



Sooner or later, he will target Cizhou. As long as the stakes are conveyed to Kong Ling, he will think of a way to persuade Zhou Gui.”

“Hm...” Shen Zechuan could not take such a strong wine like “On Horseback”. His cheeks were flushed, but he was still gazing at Xiao Chiye and listening to him seriously. Yet the expression in his eyes revealed another kind of seriousness.

“Letting the Imperial Army take the place of Cizhou’s patrol feels a little like holding them under duress. Never mind if it’s just for the time being, but if it goes on for long-term, Zhou Gui will definitely not agree. It’s all thanks to Ding Tao this time for finding out so quickly that Kong Ling was once Tantai Long’s old subordinate.” As if Xiao Chiye could not read the expression in Shen Zechuan’s gaze, he muttered under his breath, “Hm?”

Shen Zechuan stood on tiptoe slightly, then dropped back down. The more calm his expression was, the more intense the scarlet grew. The potency of the wine made him sweat.

“Give me a kiss.” Xiao Chiye said in a deep voice. “I did as you said today and did not bully them the slightest.”

Shen Zechuan clenched Xiao Chiye’s clothes until it was all wrinkled. He endured it for a moment, then said, “I can’t reach you.”

Xiao Chiye’s heart thumped, and he lowered his head once more. Shen Zechuan wanted to kiss him, so he lifted him up and said, “Let’s take a bath first.”

Shen Zechuan raised his chin high and half-opened those lips moistened red by the wine. His tongue, which was wandering between his teeth, licked the corner of his parched lips. He was merely gazing at Xiao Chiye like this, and he set an entire body aflame with lust, seducing Xiao Chiye until the latter no longer teased him. In the past, he did not understand the air of extremely seductive allure he had about him, but with their constant intimate interactions, he seemed to have learned how to fan the flames of lust without saying a word.



Zhou Gui had only just woken up the next day when he saw Kong Ling leading the maidservant in. Stunned, he said, “What’s going on? Didn’t I tell you to stay by the marquis’s side and serve him well?”

The maidservant clutched her handkerchief and turned aside to hide her face as she said, “Your Excellency, shouldn’t one get it clear before taking

appropriate actions? Who do you think is the man standing beside His Lordship? I don't even dare to touch the corner of his clothes! Both of them have the hots for each other. Neither of them even looked at me in the eye!"

At first, Zhou Gui did not understand, but the color drained from his face soon afterward, and the handkerchief he was wiping his face with fell. He was a scholar over the age of forty who did not even frequent the brothels. Even the running of his household was very much in order, with a concubine he took at his mother's directive. In the past, he had only heard a little about other men's penchant for men. He never expected the relationship between Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan to be of this kind too.

"This... this!" Zhou Gui wiped his face and groused to Kong Ling, "Why didn't you remind me of this? Now we have offended him through and through!"

Kong Ling did not look too good either as he said, "How would I know..."

Both men looked at each other and sighed in unison. During the stalemate, they heard a young servant lad kneel outside the door and shout, "Your Excellency, an urgent report from last night. Lei Changming of Dunzhou has gathered 40,000 bandits and is heading towards our Cizhou!"

"Why are there so many people?" Zhou Gui's heart suddenly went cold. "Half a year earlier, he only had about 10,000 or so people..."

"It's truly the case that what you fear will come!" Kong Ling promptly said, "Quick, go and invite His Lordship over. Tell him we agree to last night's treaty of alliance!"



### **Author's Words:**

Ce'an 195cm. He's taller than his father and brother.

It's been hard following the updates. Thank you for reading.

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## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 104 : ELDER BROTHER



Lei Changming was a native of Chazhou. In his early years, he served as an armed escort with the others and carried out manual labor. He never studied or attended school. During the reign of Yongyi, the commander of the Duanzhou Garrison Troops took his younger sister as a concubine, and she pretty much gained favor in the commander's residence. Because of this, Lei Changming had a comfortable life for a period of time and spent all day at the gambling dens. A pity the good times did not last long. The Duanzhou commander was not a devoted man, and within a few years, he spurned Lei Changming's younger sister. With no one to repay all those debts he owed, Lei Changming could only set out once more to work as an armed escort.

At the end of the reign of Yongyi, Lei Changming took on a job from the Yan clan of Hezhou. During the journey, he risked his life to fight off the robbers and protect the youngest young master of the Yan clan, Yan Heru. Consequently, he got into the Yan clan's good books. In the reign of Xiande, after the defeat of the Zhongbo troops, he used money borrowed from the Yan clan to recruit men and buy horses. He then started a mutiny against the Duanzhou garrison battalion and killed off the commander that the Imperial Court had appointed at that time. From then on, he became a bandit of Duanzhou.

Lei Changming initially only had a few thousand men, but with the imperial court's passive course of action after the defeat of the troops, Zhongbo was never able to recover from the heavy blow. People who were reduced from being commoners to being bandits increased, and he gradually became an overlord of sorts in Duanzhou. To date, the troops under his command had already far exceeded the numbers of garrison troops soldiers in the various Zhongbo prefectures.

"Half a year earlier, Lei Changming had a total of 14,000 people or so in the prefectures of Duanzhou and Dunzhou." Zhou Gui held up his sleeve and pointed at the map for Xiao Chiye. "He used Mount Luo between Duanzhou and Dunzhou as his base camp and established his own nest of brigands. When the imperial court rebuilt the garrison troops of Dengzhou, they once tried to besiege Mount Luo, but they always returned empty-

handed the few times they tried. Thus, they gave up, and no one bothered about it anymore.”

As Xiao Chiye secured his arm guards, he leaned partially against the table to look at the map. He said, “He’s bringing 40,000 people to Cizhou. No doubt he still has to leave behind enough men and horses to keep guard at Mount Luo. So it seems that he has at least 60,000 soldiers and horses. This number is two Qidong commanderies’ garrison troops worth of men.

Although Xiao Chiye had no intent of blaming anyone, he still made Zhou Gui sweat. This was because the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo all fell under the jurisdiction of legitimately appointed prefectural prefects, and yet, in the span of six years, they simply just watched the bandits grow in dominance until they were on the same scale as a regular army.

“Although His Excellency has no dealings with Duanzhou and Dunzhou, there are usually field officials who would go forth to handle the military garrisons’ cases.” Kong Ling sat in his chair and said, “He has assembled this many people in just half a year, and to think we never got wind of it.”

“Your Lordship.” Zhou Gui said earnestly. “I originally thought that Lei Changming has merely 10,000 men or so, and besieging him to annihilate him would be merely a matter of a month or so. But now, he’s charging towards Cizhou with 40,000 troops, and we only have 20,000 men from the Imperial Army. I fear we are in a perilous position! Why not...”

Why not get someone to head for Libei immediately to pass the news to Xiao Fangxu and have him deploy the Libei Armored Cavalry troops guarding the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path south to provide reinforcements?

Xiao Chiye finished securing his arm guards, yet he did not speak. Zhou Gui still wanted to persuade him, but Kong Ling sensed something else from Xiao Chiye’s silence. Taking advantage of his action as he served tea, he pressed down Zhou Gui’s arm, and Zhou Gui promptly swallowed back his words.

“There’s no need for Your Excellency and Mister Chengfeng to panic.” Shen Zechuan sat on another chair. He was still looking at that courier report. “Lei Changming’s 40,000 men have to eat too. He can’t travel fast, and his logistics squad needs to carry along sufficient rations in order to sustain them as they stride across hundreds and thousands of *li* to Cizhou to fight a battle with us. Besides...”

A peculiar expression materialized on Shen Zechuan's face.

"This report might not be accurate either."

"Why does the Vice Commander say so?" Zhou Gui hurriedly lifted the hem of his robe and approached him to look at the courier report as well.

"This is an urgent report sent back personally by the official who went to Dunzhou to handle the bandit case. How can it be inaccurate?"

"He didn't see Lei Changming 40,000 soldiers and horses with his own eyes." Shen Zechuan mulled it over. "It's too hasty and sloppy to believe Lei Changming's words based on just the traces of earthen stoves. I suspect Lei Changming already knows that the Imperial Army has arrived in Cizhou. That's why he put up the banner of 40,000 men—to throw us into disarray."

"That's right." With his eyes lowered, Xiao Chiye said. "If he really has 40,000 people, the battle would be a lot easier to fight. A war of attrition depletes way too much resources. He would be in more of a dire strait than us."

"But he still has the support of the Yan clan of Hezhou." Zhou Gui said anxiously. "It was all because of the Yan clan's financial assistance that he was able to expand to such a scale. There is a river course in Hezhou that leads right to the granary in Juexi. It's easy to supply him with additional rations."

"How muddle-headed Your Excellency is." Shen Zechuan suddenly laughed. "If Lei Changming still has the Yan clan's full support behind him, then why would he be in such a hurry to rush to Cizhou? Have you forgotten that his purpose in coming to Cizhou is to get his hands on the grains?"

"He came once before the new year, and came visiting again a few months later." Xiao Chiye said, "This not only indicates that he might have fallen out with the Yan clan, but also that his assets back at Mount Luo are no longer enough to fill his tummy. It's the Chashi River to his east, and the Biansha Cavalry is even better at plundering than he is. He has no one to turn to, so he could only come repeatedly to Cizhou to demand grains."

"Then why did he have to wait until the Imperial Army arrived at Cizhou to make another trip instead of coming here earlier or later?" Kong Ling circled around the table, slowed down for two steps, and said, "Your Lordship's arrival in Cizhou is clearly disadvantageous to him."

“Because Han Jin is in the Imperial Army’s hands.” Shen Zechuan closed the report and stood up. He said, “It’s all because of the Yan clan’s help that he can survive this long. Now that he has parted ways with the Yan clan, he will have to seek new help if he wants to continue holding on to his mountain stronghold and keep on being his overlord. He’s a bandit. The more people he has under his command, the more troublesome it will be. Those living on the other mountains can live off the mountain,<sup>1</sup> but Zhongbo is poor and barren. Even if he digs out the entire mountain, all he can eat is soil. This person is very good at grabbing opportunities. He’s able to gain fame and fortune because he made the right choices at the three turning points in his life. He has soldiers, and Zhongbo just happens to be short of soldiers. However, he has no connections, and Ce’an just happens to lead the Imperial Army here to pass through Cizhou. If he is able to defeat the Imperial Army and save Han Jin, then he would be able to report this meritorious service of his to Qudu and seek a military official position in Zhongbo through the Han clan.”

“A good plan indeed, to have his eyes set on metamorphosing into a real official of the imperial court.” Indignant, Zhou Gui stomped his foot and said, “Is he totally showing no regards for the commoners of Cizhou?!”

“This is merely just a conjecture. We still have to trade blows with this person before we can get a better feel of him.” Xiao Chiye hung up Langli Blade and said to Zhou Gui, “Libei lies behind Cizhou. If Lei Changming can’t sneak through Cizhou and go around the back, then he won’t be able to surround the city and trap us. Your Excellency can then immediately get people to seal the city gate—even the dog holes have to be filled up and sealed. Those under his command are all a motley crew not registered in the household registers; they will not be able to guard against this.”

“By this, is Your Lordship going to fortify the city and face them off in a confrontation? Kong Ling looked to be in a spot. “Cizhou’s city walls are old. I’m afraid they won’t be able to withstand Lei Changming’s assault.”

“The Imperial Army can’t enter the city and defend to the death.” Xiao Chiye held his sword and slightly bared his teeth. “I’ll make a bet with you. Lei Changming will definitely not dare to charge head-on at my soldiers. This is what he fears.”



At dusk, Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan made an inspection tour of the city walls. Both men brought their blades with them and walked side by side atop the city wall.

“This city wall was last repaired during the reign of Yongyi.” Shen Zechuan attempted to push at the battlement of the wall, and earthen clay that had been eroded by the wind and rain tumbled to the ground.

“That’s because Zhou Gui is poor. He’s been urgently trying to resolve the issue of food these few years. Naturally, he would be too preoccupied to pay any attention to the city’s military defense.” Xiao Chiye picked up a chunk of earth and rubbed it into pieces in his hand. “The Imperial Army can stand before Cizhou to defend it, but it cannot retreat into the city.”

Xiao Chiye was well aware that Zhou Gui wanted to seek assistance from Libei, but he was unwilling to ask for help. He could return to Libei soon, but the arrangements for these 20,000 Imperial Army men he had brought with him were something he had yet to discuss with his father and eldest brother. He understood the Libei Armored Cavalry. Such a complete army like that would be unable to come to a swift acceptance of the Imperial Army—these two armies would predictably have to go through a very difficult bonding process for them to learn to get along with one another. If he opened his mouth at this time to ask for help and Xiao Fangxu came, then Xiao Chiye would never have the chance to shine again when he returned to Libei.

This battle was his first battle on returning home. He had to win it. He had to win it on his own.

The sunset clouds on the horizon spread out and tinted half of the sky red. Rows upon rows of houses with curling smoke lined the city amidst the clamorous buzz of human voices. Shen Zechuan lowered his hand to cover the center of Xiao Chiye’s head. Both men – one standing and one squatting – looked at the scene beneath them.

“Lei Changming can be considered a capable man.” Shen Zechuan said. “But you are the one who decides whether he is a bandit or an ambitious man.”

“Ambitious men are born out of troubled times.” Xiao Chiye put his arms on his knees and propped himself up. “I’ll take the Conqueror’s Bow with me.”

He stood here, like a lush tree bathed in the dimming light of dusk, like a mountain standing tall before the city wall. Shen Zechuan watched those

shackles gradually vanish. Poised and ready for action, it was time for Xiao Chiye to show his real mettle in this chaotic situation.

“When you return to Libei,” Shen Zechuan gazed at him. “His Lordship will realize that you’ve grown taller again.”

“I was already taller than him the last time I saw him.” Xiao Chiye smiled. “As a child, I thought my father was like a towering tree. He put me on his shoulder and lied to me that I’d be able to touch the clouds. My eldest brother wanted to sit on my father’s shoulder too, but he was already old enough to attend school then, and he felt that he had to maintain his dignity as the older brother, so he never said a word to my father and would be happy just to watch me sit.”

Shen Zechuan smiled too. He gazed back at the sky and said, “They all said that the Hereditary Prince looks like the Princess Consort of Libei.”

“Somewhat, I guess.” Xiao Chiye’s eyes reflected the entire sky of rose-tinted clouds. “Not as much as I resemble my father. Actually, my eldest brother was once miserable. When my father retired back sick to the Prince’s Residence, my eldest brother was only in his teens. All of a sudden, he had to fight a way out from those ferocious men. Tough. Initially, he was mocked the most for being unlike Father—he did not have a sufficiently strong and well-built physique. He once said to Zhao Hui...”

The side of Xiao Chiye’s face was calm and serene. He seemed to recall that day, but then a certain wave of sadness inexplicably washed over him. He turned his head and took Shen Zechuan’s hands. His Adam’s apple bobbed a few times before he said, “Us brothers are truly strange. I envy my eldest brother’s steadiness, and I also envy his composure. I used to think, ‘if only I had been born a few years earlier’. Then I would be the eldest brother, the Hereditary Prince. I would have been able to go galloping to my heart’s content. I wouldn’t have to leave Libei a single step. But one day, he came home wounded and saw me in the courtyard shooting arrows. And he said to Zhao Hui, ‘I really envy A-Ye’.”

“I thought my father and eldest brother would never feel pain and would never fall. They would shed blood and never tears. But on the day my eldest brother got married, he drank himself drunk. Yet, such a steady person like that gingerly took my eldest sister-in-law’s hands and got all teary-eyed at her. It was as if he had already anticipated the future. He saw her as his precious treasure. He would feel fear too.”



“There is nothing about me that is better than my eldest brother. If I had to say, then it’d be that I’ve totally inherited this fine physique from my father.” Xiao Chiye gripped Shen Zechuan tightly. “I never really understood in the past why he had to get all teary-eyed at my eldest sister-in-law. But now, I do.”



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#### Footnotes

1. 靠山吃山 literally, those living on a mountain live off the mountain. i.e., making use of local resources to survive or make a living.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 105 : CUNNING



Lei Changming arrived at the mountainous area a hundred *li*<sup>1</sup> away from Cizhou. It started to drizzle. He did not act rashly and march his troop on. Instead, he occupied the area to take a break and started to set up camp.

“They meant to fight a protracted battle.” Tantai Hu crouched in the grass and looked down. “He drags out the troops in such a long line that it’s impossible to tell how many soldiers and horses there are.”

“But their stoves are so densely clustered together that it makes me afraid just to look at it.” Ding Tao drew a circle at the spot where Lei Changming stationed his troops. “I went to the towns along the way to probe for information. All of them said he indeed brought more than 40,000 men this time. They took in all the bandits near this part of Cizhou on their way here.”

“It’s by mixing falsehood with truth that would make it impossible for others to distinguish between truth from lies.” Xiao Chiye rose and brushed aside the branch of leaves with water droplets on it. “If he really has that many people, why would he still need to recruit deserters and traitors? An army that’s about to fight a battle fears last-minute addition of soldiers the most. That will forcibly throw the long-standing rapport between the soldiers into disarray, thereby turning a ferocious army into a motley crew.”

“That’s what I surmised too.” Tantai Hu followed Xiao Chiye out of the forest. “The more he wants others to know he has 40,000 men, the more he has a guilty conscience. Master, he’s afraid of us.”

Xiao Chiye took off his cloak in the drizzle and tossed it to Ding Tao behind him. As he hung up his blade, he looked at Tantai Hu and said, “If he’s afraid, he wouldn’t have come. By doing this, he’s seizing the opportunity to intimidate us. He saw that we were from Qudu and wanted to scare us.”

A battle did not break out at the Nanlin Hunting Grounds because Qi Zhuyin led the Qidong Garrison Troops to suppress the rebellion. On the surface, it looked like it had nothing to do with Xiao Chiye. The Eight Great Training Divisions used to belittle the seemingly obsolete Imperial Army in the past back in Qudu. Although the Imperial Army had taken over Qudu’s patrols these few years, the substitution was due to a change of hands in

authority. They never fought a decent battle, and so they, along with Xiao Chiye, were deemed by Lei Changming to be lads who were still wet behind the ears.

“His underestimating of the enemy is to our advantage. But if we follow suit and underestimate him too, then we deserve to be beaten. Lei Changming is no ordinary man. He must have his own strengths to be able to dominate the southeast of Zhongbo.” Xiao Chiye flipped atop the horse, lifted the reins, and said, “Tantai Hu, six years ago, you escaped from Dengzhou to Qudu, and now we have returned. Let me ask you, do you still remember what I said when you led your troops to register and join the Imperial Army?”

The rain dropped into Tantai Hu’s eyes. He looked up at Xiao Chiye and said, “This humble subordinate would not dare to forget for even a moment. Master said that the humiliation of our nation has yet to be redressed, and the feuds of our families have yet to be avenged!”

“That’s right.” Xiao Chiye reined in the horse and lifted his eyes to look at the dense cluster of heads in the rain. He said in a quiet voice, “The people from Biansha carried out massacres in several cities of Zhongbo. Libei Armored Cavalry and Qidong Garrison Troops fought them off, but was this enmity avenged? To the Biansha Cavalry, this was merely just them riding their horses to and fro for amusement! What was that circulating around in Qudu? They said they’d rather be a dog than a man of Zhongbo! So how can we now just hand over the humiliation Zhongbo suffered under those slaughter blades to others to redress it for us?! We gallop all night without stopping in our dreams, and now, Lei Changming is the obstacle that stands in our way. The opportunity to battle with the Biansha Cavalry is right before our eyes—do we lose?”

Victory and defeat were commonplace in the military, but no army would be willing to keep losing forever. In the past six years, they have transformed from a motley crew lacking in cohesion and organization into a well-trained and combat-ready army. The Imperial Army was just like Xiao Chiye’s silhouette, buried among the golden sand as tens of thousands of worthless bugs in the crevices of Dazhou’s mighty army. Never mind how the others describe them as in the past. Never mind if they were slapped with the label of a good-for-nothing. They were finally about to reveal their true mettle from the gravel.

A sudden gust of strong wind blew the banner open. Tantai Hu pursed his lips tightly and said, "We must win."

The sound of rain swiftly grew urgent.

Tantai Hu wiped his eyes roughly and said in a hoarse voice as the shouts behind him gradually became a wave, "We must win!"

We must win!

From this time on to the moment they battled to the death, "we must win" *had* to become the Imperial Army's one and only creed. Faced up against their senior who had made a name for himself a long time ago, they had to draw their blades; they had to spur their horses on swiftly in an advance; and they had to defeat everyone standing in their way, one at a time—they could only win! The Libei Armored Cavalry could lose, as could the Qidong Garrison Troops. Even Lei Changming's forces could suffer a defeat. But the Imperial Army and Xiao Chiye could not. At the same time they broke free of their shackles, they also left their backer. If they could not win, then they could only die.

Xiao Chiye turned his horse around and wiped away the rainwater on his chin. It was as if he was a wolf who had caught a whiff of blood and meat. He drew out that blade which symbolized avarice and ruthlessness and said to the wolf pack behind him, "Time for us to eat."

The rain pitter-pattered down and broke up the water surface.



Lei Changming heard that the special envoy from Cizhou had arrived, so he received him in the tent.

"Mister Chengfeng." With a cloak around him, Lei Changming sat on the raised tiger seat and scrutinized Kong Ling. "It has been quite some days since we last met."

Kong Ling bowed in greeting and said, "The chief often comes to our Cizhou in the past. We're all old acquaintances, so why take up arms and create such a big stir this time?"

Surprisingly enough, Lei Changming was not a boorish fellow. There were no ornaments adorning his scarred arms, and his clothes were simple and plain. The broadsword he carried with him had already been polished until there were visible marks. If one were to suddenly look over, he was no different from the peasant commoners of Zhongbo who always had their face to the ground and back to the sky. He never studied before. He had the

aura of a bandit who bumbled his way around the martial fraternity all year round. But that seemed to be only a disguise, for he was quite perceptive.

Lei Changming did not feign civility with Kong Ling. He next fixed his eyes on Shen Zechuan and said with a grin, "Since we are old acquaintances, why did Mister Chengfeng bring along an Imperial Bodyguard when it's just for a drink?"

With a composed expression, Kong Ling said, "Didn't the chief bring such a large number of troops to put pressure on the city all to see His Lordship and Vice Commander Shen? Today, I'll be so bold as to mutually recommend both of you to each other. Your Excellency the Vice Commander, this is Chief Lei, Lei Changming, whose name is renowned in the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo. He's the one of highest power in the two prefectures of Dunzhou and Dunzhou. Chief, this is Vice Commander Shen, Shen Zechuan, an official in the Son of Heaven's inner ministerial circle whom Qudu personally made an exception to promote."

"I've heard much of your great name." Lei Changming said, as if he was a little interested. "Shen Zechuan. You're Shen Zechuan. I heard Han Cheng devised a scheme to seal the city and besiege you. You alone killed his remaining elite troops. Every strike of yours was lethal, and each blow was so fast it was hardly visible. Why are you hanging out with Zhou Gui and the others instead of following Xiao Chiye to Libei? Such a law-abiding Prefectural Prefect like him can't accommodate a killing machine like you, can he?"

"I'm also a law-abiding person." Shen Zechuan lifted his right hand slightly to reveal the side of his waist. "I didn't even bring my blade along to see you, Chief Lei."

Lei Changming raised his hand to wave back the guards who were pressing in because of Shen Zechuan's movements. He pointed at Shen Zechuan and said, "You don't even remove your blade when you see the Son of Heaven. Yet you do it wholeheartedly on seeing me." He laughed out loud in a booming voice, and said loudly, "Could it be that I'm even more honorable than the Son of Heaven?"

"The Empress Dowager is in charge now, and court discipline is lax. There has long been no such thing as the Son of Heaven." Shen Zechuan smiled. "The chief is a peerless hero. I naturally have to observe the etiquette."

“You are all people who have been in Qudu for a long time. Your words are all pleasing to the ears.” Lei Changming leaned against his seat and pried apart the sweet potato on the plate. He took two bites and said, “Spit it out. What do you want with me?”

“My purpose for coming to the chief’s tent today is to: firstly, pay you a special visit, and secondly, express my willingness to discuss with you about the future.” Shen Zechuan scrutinized the tent as he spoke, “Pitching camp here is, after all, not a long-term measure. If the Imperial Army doesn’t come, then is the chief going to keep waiting day after day?”

“You understand Xiao Chiye better than me.” Lei Changming finished his sweet potato in a few bites. “His father and eldest brother are all renowned generals. How bad can he be? I’ll wait for him to come to me for a discussion. Cizhou is only just this big. I can guess where he is hiding even without searching. I can’t enter Cizhou if he occupies Cizhou and refuses to leave! There has to be a resolution to this matter, right? I’ll wait for him. I’m in no hurry.”

“His 20,000 Imperial Army are skilled in horsemanship and archery. Their capabilities on horseback are no less inferior to the Libei Armored Cavalry. Fighting with him now would be detrimental to the chief instead.” Seeing those guards about to move again, Shen Zechuan let out a pre-emptive smile and said, “He is in the city, and has Cizhou granary for sustenance. The chief is outside the city, and can only rely on army rations from the backend to sustain the forces. The expenditure of 40,000 men is an appalling amount. The longer this battle drags on, the more the chief will lose out. I’m sure the chief understands this more than me.”

“So what? I can afford to dawdle. But the Imperial Army can’t, right? Xiao Chiye can’t live on Cizhou’s grains for an entire lifetime. The Prince of Libei is still fighting a war in Libei. Xiao Chiye is in a hurry to go home. I’ll only stand to lose money the longer this drags on, but it’s lives that hang in the balance for Xiao Chiye. He rebelled, but Qidong Garrison Troops didn’t. Qi Zhuyin only needs half a month to lead her troops here. When the Libei Armored Cavalry comes forth to provide reinforcement then, they will have a headache on both ends. Qi Zhuyin is not easier to fight than the Biansha Cavalry. This lass’s capability is something you people who have had frequent dealings with her know best. She even dared to set the Biansha’s throne on fire. It’s simply too easy for her to fight against one Cizhou. But, does Xiao Chiye dare to?” Lei Changming wiped his mouth.

His smile was casual, and the expression in his eyes was cool and collected. “Is Xiao Chiye even worthy?”

Shen Zechuan revealed a regretful expression and said, “If the reserve rations the chief has is truly adequate, then there’s no need for me to say a word more about it. Truth be told, it’s precisely because I’m worried about Commander-in-chief Qi’s arrival any time now that I thought of discussing a deal with you.”

Kong Lin turned slightly pale and walked two steps closer toward Shen Zechuan. He said, “Vice Commander, we have yet to...”

“What deal do you want to discuss with me?” Lei Changming interrupted Kong Ling.

Shen Zechuan said, “If Xiao Chiye is able to pass through Cizhou without a hitch, then it’s all good and well for everyone. But since the chief has come forth with your own soldiers, then that 20,000 Imperial Army of his is no longer my only choice. The deal I wish to discuss with the chief is precisely regarding the army rations. I still have 2 million silver in my hands, and I’m willing to invest it in the chief to be used for food rations expenditure this battle. But in exchange, you have to vouch for me before Han Cheng to preserve my life when you become an official in the imperial court in the future.”

Stunned, Kong Lin said, “Shen Zechuan! How can you dupe us?! Didn’t we agree that those 2 million will be given to Cizhou to rebuild the garrison troops?!”

“I only said I was willing to.” Shen Zechuan tilted his head a little and said to Kong Ling with sincerity, “I didn’t say I definitely would.”

Kong Ling grabbed hold of Shen Zechuan’s sleeve and said, “You lied to us! You treacherous lad!”

Lei Changming laughed again. With his hands on his knees, he said, “Are you for real? Shen Zechuan, if you really have that much silver, would you still have let the Imperial Army gnaw on mud the entire way while fleeing for their lives? You people are not plotting to deceive me, are you?”

How was Kong Ling still of the mind to listen to what he was saying? His face flushed red, and his goatee trembled as he said to Shen Zechuan in disbelief, “Was that impassioned speech of yours a lie too? You! You used Zhongbo’s calamity to lie to us and lay a trap. Are you still human?!”

“Every man has his own ambition.” Shen Zechuan smiled lazily.  
“Cizhou and the Imperial Army are already cornered like turtles in a jar. It’s natural for me to seek a new master. Mister Chengfeng, you of all people should understand it best.”

“If you can really produce 2 million silver,” Still sitting in place, Lei Changming said, “and help me to save Han Jin. Then I’ll take care of it on Han Cheng’s end for you.”

“I’ve already gotten someone to bring some silver over.” Shen Zechuan said. “So is this proof enough of my sincerity, chief?”



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Thanks to [AliceLiddell](#) for pointing out the typo!! <3

Footnotes

1. 里 *li*, an ancient measure of length, 1 *li* = approx. 500m



## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 106 : CRUDE



Shen Zechuan was unable to bring 2 million this trip, but he brought sincerity. Lei Changming looked at those few chests of silvers. They were all genuine stuff, stacked neatly in order. He grabbed a handful at random to get a feel of that heavy weight and said, “These few chests of silver are something that even the brothers under my command selling sugared biscuits can produce. Aren’t you looking down on me a tad too much?”

“The chief might not necessarily dare to accept it if I had really brought over 2 million.” Shen Zechuan had already taken his seat. He said, “Good deals are worth discussing over slowly. The ones who should be anxious at present are Cizhou and Xiao Chiye.”

Lei Changming waved a hand to get his men to drag Kong Ling out of the tent, leaving only his own guards and Shen Zechuan behind. From start to end, he remained unwilling to leave his seat. Without taking even half a step closer to Shen Zechuan, he said, “You and Xiao Chiye broke out of the siege in Qudu. You could be considered sworn friends who have been through life and death, so why did you fall out with him suddenly and come to beg me instead?”

“Since the chief knows of me, then you must have also known that Shen Wei is my old man. Shen Wei let the enemies into Dunzhou and caused a long-standing grudge to form between me and Libei. Xiao Chiye and I may be able to bury the hatchet, but Xiao Jiming may not necessarily be willing to use me.” Shen Zechuan looked troubled. “A man’s aspiration is to make a name for himself. Xiao Chiye is like a clay Buddha crossing the river who can’t even save himself. So how would he have the energy to carve out a path for me? There is some misunderstanding between me and His Excellency Han, but those are all minor issues that do not warrant the death penalty. As long as someone can vouch for me, I’ll be able to return to Qudu to serve the Imperial Court again.”

“So that means you still want to be an official, huh?” With both hands on his knees, Lei Changming said, “Brother, to tell you the truth, I want to be an official too. We used to hang out in the mountains and wilderness back then, and we lived pretty much a carefree life. But when all is said and done, it’s not a proper job. Every single one of our movements will come under close scrutiny by the Qidong Garrison Troops.”

“The chief and I have a common goal.” Shen Zechuan lifted his little bamboo fan slightly. “Isn’t this just perfect?”

“But, I’ve been deceived by scholars like you until it scares me now.” Lei Changming put on a look of dread. “This 2 million of yours are still in Cizhou. How are you going to get it to me? And that Han Jin too. How are you going to help me save him? Make yourself clear today, so I know how things stand. Only then can I truly take you under me.”

“The silver is not an issue. The chief can pick a trusted man to go to Cizhou and ask Zhou Gui for the money. He knows where the silvers are kept. As long as you can move it, you can take the money away now.”

“You think he would be willing to give me if I ask him for it?” Lei Changming rubbed his fingers together, as if he still wanted to touch those silvers.

“You have Kong Ling in your hands. That’s Zhou Gui’s trusted aide.” Shen Zechuan said with a smile. “You have 40,000 soldiers and horses too. How would Zhou Gui not dare to give you? He always wanted to be a good official who loves his people like his children. He won’t infuriate you at this critical juncture.”

Lei Changming looked at Shen Zechuan, as if he was getting a measure of him. The tent quietened down. It was all Lei Changming’s guards to Shen Zechuan’s left and right. He touched the teacup, but did not drink up. In this long stand-off, Lei Changming suddenly laughed and said, “I have ample reserve supplies. I’m not in a hurry to ask for money. It doesn’t matter if this 2 million is left there for a few more days. Men, serve tea to Young Master Shen. Our top priority is to discuss how to save Han Jin. after all, our meeting of Han Cheng in Qudu hinges on him.”



Kong Ling was locked up in a stable. He lay across the weeds and panted heavily, securely bound by coarse hemp ropes. The horse that was resting before him stuck out its hoof and discharged steaming hot dung. That stench made Kong Ling dizzy, and he tried to turn his head away to gasp for breath. The band of bandits surrounding him outside the stable roared with laughter.

Kong Ling shouted indignantly, “The traitor deceived me! Bah! A gentleman would rather die than be humiliated. Don’t even dream of using me to threaten Cizhou!”

Horsewhips jabbed at Kong Ling's face. He was covered with mud and horse dung all over, and being watched by these people all around him caused waves of giddiness to wash over him. He said with shame and hatred, "You people are in cahoots! You! Lei Changming! What good end will you come to by conspiring with such an unrighteous person?!"

But no matter how Kong Ling cursed and cussed, there were only roars of laughter all around him. He was a well-read and well-educated man. Whether it was Tantai Long or Zhou Gui in the past, they all treated him with courtesy. Who would not respectfully address him as Mister Chengfeng everywhere he went? But now, not only was he tied up in a stable, he was even ridiculed and laughed at by these people. He thought again of the snowy night when he fled Dunzhou. The face of these bandits gradually overlapped with the faces of the Biansha Cavalry, with vague sounds of laughter everywhere. Unable to restrain his emotions for a moment, Kong Ling started to choke with sobs.

"Patrol guards!" An officer suddenly walked out from the other end and bellowed, "What are all of you gathering here for? Is this old fart more important than the task of patrolling the camp? If the patrol is delayed, I'll see how all of you will get skinned! Move it, disperse!"

The surrounding people broke up noisily. Kong Ling shifted over to the edge of the stable and put his head against the railing to let the dripping rain water wash away the filth. He took deep breaths, as if he was breathing in fresh air. His goatee was so dirty that it had become a cake of mud.

People went in and out of the tent in the distance. When they lifted the flap of the tent, he could see Lei Changming preparing to host a feast to entertain Shen Zechuan. Kong Ling spat and closed his eyes in the rain. An unspecified amount of time later, someone gave Kong Ling's cheeks a light pat.

Kong Ling opened his eyes. It was the man he had seen earlier. This person seemed to be in his early thirties. His face was dark, and he had an air of toughness to him. He called out, "Mister Chengfeng!"

Kong Ling was alarmed.

"Don't be afraid. I'm Tantai Long's old subordinate. I used to hold a post in the Dunzhou Garrison Troops. I've met you once." This man forced a smile, then sighed and said, "Mister... really ought not to have ended up in such a state."

“Since you are Tantai Long’s former subordinate, how can you follow a bandit like Lei Changming to stage a rebellion?” Kong Ling said woodenly. “Tantai Long hated these villains the most when he was still alive.”

“I was driven into a corner.” This man said with a bitter smile. “After Dunzhou was recovered, the Imperial Court transferred the grains away and used it to fill up Juexi’s deficit. Those of us who survived were so starved that we had to chew tree barks. Although the chief is a bandit, he is righteous and generous. It’s only by following him we can have enough food to fill our stomachs. We have no choice.”

Kong Ling knew he was telling the truth, but words failed him, and he could only remain silent.

This man helped Kong Ling up and said, “I heard the intent of the chief earlier at the table. He’s prepared to use you to negotiate with the Prefectural Prefect of Cizhou. I was worried that you would be too strong-willed and could not bear the humiliation. So I found a chance to step out. Mister, I’ll take you away on horseback right now!”

Kong Ling looked at his sincere expression and said, “If you let me go, Lei Changming will definitely not let you off lightly.”

This man untied Kong Ling’s ropes and quickly said, “I’ll send you to Cizhou and come back to apologize. I was originally a loyal and righteous soldier under General Tantai’s command. But now, I’ve been reduced to a bandit just so I have food to fill my stomach. I can’t live with myself deep down. But the chief has been kind to me, so I can’t turn my back on him either. Mister, let me help you up the horse!”

After being helped up the horse, Kong Ling held his arm and choked with sobs, “You are a sensible man.”

The man got onto the horse too and draped a cloak over Kong Ling. With a shake of the reins, he led Kong Ling around to the main gate of the camp. There were still people patrolling in the rain. On seeing him, they all paid their obeisances to him. Without saying a word more, he flashed his token and brought Kong Ling out of the camp.

Both men had been galloping for only a moment when they heard the sound of berating behind them. It was soldiers in pursuit of them.

“This place is still a thousand *li*<sup>1</sup> away from Cizhou. Mister!” The man braved the rain to guide the way. “We’ll run without a break all night!”

Kong Ling swayed from the jolts and bumps. He clutched the reins tightly and followed swiftly after the man. The sound of pursuit behind him

never stopped. Branches in the dark night lashed at his face. Kong Ling did not even dare to look back. He endured the pain, determined to hurry back to Cizhou and waste no time in tipping off Zhou Gui!



Shen Zechuan ate very little. He ignored the singing and dancing in the tent and sat down at the lower area to drink wine.

Lei Changming had brought along quite a number of concubines with his troops in their march forward; many of them were women he had grabbed in broad daylight back in Duanzhou. He told one of them to go over and pour wine for Shen Zechuan, then urged him with great gusto as he sat on his seat. “Brother Shen, drink up! I bought plenty of excellent wine this trip. Drink as much as you want tonight.”

Shen Zechuan saw that Lei Changming had drunk until he was flushed in the face. His voice was growing increasingly loud, and he did not hold back as he teased the others. The woman in his arms had been pinched until her neck and shoulders were covered in bruises. Shen Zechuan raised the cup slightly and downed the wine without saying a word.

Lei Changming said as he ate the meat, “You’re the son of the Prince of Jianxing, Shen Wei. You never had to endure hardships since you were young, so you don’t know how valuable grains are. But you sure have the candor of someone from the marital fraternity by giving this 2 million at the mere drop of a hat! Brother Shen, not that I’m bragging, but I think you did well by throwing in your lot with me now! That Xiao Chiye is just a brat. He could still be of some use in Qudu, but now that he’s returning to Libei, what available path is there for him? He still has 20,000 soldiers with him. The Libei Armored Cavalry will definitely not take them in! Don’t tell me the Prince of Libei can still make him the commander-in-chief of Libei? That Xiao Jiming is the one who’s truly formidable!”

Not letting those women touch his wine jar, Shen Zechuan poured himself a cup of wine and said with a smile, “Yeah.”

Lei Changming gobbled down the pork shoulder and wiped his mouth before he said, “Speaking of these generals, I’m only afraid of Qidong’s Commander-in-chief, Qi Zhuyin! Of the four great generals of the world, she’s the only woman. I saw her once when I worked as an armed escort in Hezhou. What the fuck. Such a pretty lass, and yet the weapon she wields is an executioner’s blade! An executioner’s blade.<sup>2</sup> The blade Xiao Chiye uses is also an executioner’s blade, isn’t it?! One straight slash, and it can cleave

apart bones and flesh. What it relies on is real physical strength. It's also to do her a favor that I came to Cizhou this time. I'll capture Xiao Chiye on her behalf and send him back to Qudu. This will allow their Qidong to break with Libei without being directly involved. Say, with such a merit like this, will I be able to get a position as a general under her command?"

"I heard that Commander-in-chief Qi has five great generals under her command. Each of them is skilled in combat, and they are all men she single-handedly trained all these years over at the Qidong Garrison Troops." Shen Zechuan said. "If you really go over, you'll naturally come up top and be the big brother of them all."

Lei Changming boomed with laughter. He scooped up the woman in his arms and kissed her haphazardly in spite of the cries. He wiped his greasy hands clean on those silk fabrics and said, "It is from the mountains that I made my mark. I've been running all over all these years, and I've also fought some battles. Mention me, Lei Changming, in Zhongbo, and who doesn't know that I can fight? Brother Shen, you know Lu Guangbai of the Bianjun Commandery, right? Their Lu clan is poor as heck. He gives one the impression of being an unyielding man, and it's all by virtue of his vigor that he could keep up the desperate fights at Bianjun. He doesn't have any other capabilities. In my opinion, Lu Guangbai is the most incompetent one among the four great generals. He's called, what do you call it, the 'Fire Beacon Amidst Blowing Sand' or something. Bianjun lights up the beacon towers every year, so what's so special about this? Might as well vacate his post and let me take over instead. I guarantee I'll be way better than him!"

Seeing that he was drunk and starting to boast, Shen Zechuan lowered his fingers and gently righted the chopsticks on the table. He said with a smile, "He's indeed not very impressive."

"Men like Commander Zuo are the real heroes." Lei Changming poured wine into his mouth, which leaked over half of his body. Too late to wipe it, he tossed the wine cup away and said to Shen Zechuan, "He who took down the enemies' heads from a thousand *li* away, and he who struck fear in enemies' hearts with one arrow! He was all the storyteller in the teahouse in Hezhou spoke of in the past. Said he killed his wife to protect the city, and consequently, his hair rapidly turned white. Oh man, one can't help but shed tears to hear his story! A pity there was no avoiding the disillusionment of a hero, and he still ended up retiring early. Otherwise, he and I might even get to be sworn brothers!"

It was pandemonium in the tent, as if a host of demons were dancing and running wild within. Those so-called guards, deputy generals, all showed their true colors as they stood or lay down and pulled the prostitutes over to drink and make merry. Such an army like this has no military discipline to speak of. They were the same as Lei Changming—bandits who depended on weapons at the very beginning to plunder and loot.

Sitting among them, Shen Zechuan had a subtle sense that something was off .

Lei Changming should not be such a man. If he was this kind of short-sighted man who enjoyed life while he could, then how could he have stood out from among the crowd of bandits? What this man had on display was completely different from what Shen Zechuan had heard of him from rumors.

Lei Changming got up to chase after the prostitute and pulled her into his arms to fondle and grope. He drank the wine, sang some obscure farm song from Dengzhou, and danced and gesticulated with merriment like a bull that had rashly crashed its way onto the chessboard. He enjoyed himself to his heart's content, and drank himself drunk. But unexpectedly, he smacked his forehead and said as he pointed at Shen Zechuan, "Your mother is a dancer from Duanzhou! Brother Shen, quick, get up and dance for us!"



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Thanks [Peach](#) for the typo correction! <3

Footnotes

1. 里 *li*, ancient measure of length, 1 *li* = approx. 500m



- 2.
3. 鬼头刀 literally ghost-headed blade. It's a kind of blade used for beheading people sentenced to death in old times.



## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 107 : ODD

⚠ **TRIGGER WARNING: Mention of child sexual abuse.** ⚠

If this is a trigger/landmine for you, please stop reading now.

The sound of rain outside the tent grew softer, and the tent flap was opened, dissipating the heat within. Lecherous howls of the drunk men rang out from the camp in the deep of the night, while soldiers with arms around one another played guessing games. Lei Changming was so hot that he undid his clothes and laid his chest bare. His chest was tanned, with plenty of scars and a tuft of chest hair that grew unchecked like weed beneath his clothes. Drunkenly embracing the woman in his arms, he sang and danced, and even called out to Shen Zechuan, “Brother Shen, get up!”

At this point in time, the flap moved, and several servile and submissive soldiers entered to place down the food.

Shen Zechuan partially opened the little bamboo fan and stood up. The candle flames in the tent were not bright enough. He raised his hand to block the side of his face at an angle with the fan, then looked at Lei Changming and said softly, “What dance does the chief want to see?”

Lei Changming felt that Shen Zechuan was really good-looking. He was not only astonishingly beautiful when seen this way, but also so gorgeous that he overshadowed and outshone everything else in the room. Lei Changming drank the wine to embolden himself, then shoved the woman away and pounced on Shen Zechuan. He did not expect to trip over the wine jar at his feet and cut a sorry sight as he fell at Shen Zechuan’s feet. It was in this way Lei Changming sprawled on the ground and gasped for breath that reeked of wine. He wanted to grab the hem of Shen Zechuan’s robe, but he grasped at nothing but empty air. He let loose a chuckle and began to laugh.

“Smell nice.” Lei Changming stretched his neck out and sniffed the air hard. “You really smell so good. Brother Shen, come on. Help me up. I’ll dance with you. Dance whatever you like! Damn, so this is what others mean by the fragrance of a beauty!”

Shen Zechuan looked askance at him and watched him crawl on the ground like a pot-bellied hairy spider as he chased after the corner of Shen

Zechuan's plain, white clothes. For some reason, Shen Zechuan felt an extremely sudden wave of abhorrence wash over him in this absurdly comical moment. His hatred, which had broken free of its dam, was just like magma, so scalding that his fingers, which had been gripping the fan, went white.

His teacher told him to leave Qudu and return to Zhongbo. Yet the Duanzhou, which he once pined for, was successively handed over to men like these. Lei Changming and the others were just like personification of malice. They were the evil ghosts who had taken over the state.

Shen Zechuan lightly rested his bamboo fan at the side of his lips. He let out a smile and slowly took a step back. In the din under the flickers of ghostly shadows, he bent over slightly and said, "Come over."

Lei Changming originally wanted to climb to his feet, but now, it seemed like he could not care less as he crawled on his hands and knees towards Shen Zechuan. In his trance, he felt that what he was seeing was not a human being, but an untouchable, nocturnal demon. He salivated and swallowed his saliva before he realized that Shen Zechuan had a tiny white jade stone on his right ear. Someone had carefully polished that jade into a perfect sphere, and it looked exceedingly gentle on Shen Zechuan's earlobe under the glow of the light. It was the only accessory he had on his entire body, other than his bamboo fan.

"Brother Shen..." Lei Changming said with urgency. "Quick, help me up."

The soldiers set down the plates with their heads lowered. Then, with trays in hands, they stepped aside as if they were preparing to leave. The shouts and laughter of the men and women were like the drizzle which, in Lei Changming's ears, became another seemingly elusive world. He seemed to be a drooling jackal that had been chained and pulled towards Shen Zechuan by an invisible force. The tent was all upside down. Lei Changming felt a little dizzy from drinking too much.

Brother Shen.

Lei Changming chanted as though he was paying religious homage.

Shen Zechuan. Beauty. Brother Shen.

Lei Changming haphazardly tore away at his own opened clothes, feeling as if the scars on his chest were burning. He had never been like this before. His eyes were clearly opened, yet he seemed to be asleep. He was still crawling. It seemed as if he had finally gotten near to Shen Zechuan's

feet. He tilted his head up and let out a vague laugh as he tried to tug at the hem of Shen Zechuan's white-as-clouds robe.

"What a temptress..." Lei Changming reached out a shivering hand and murmured ingratiatingly at Shen Zechuan, "How ravishing can you be..."

Lei Changming killed people like flies in Zhongbo, grabbed countless women, and coerced many children. He was the kind of person who seemed to love beautiful and exquisite people by nature. He wanted to tear all those who were delicate, untainted, and even ignorant into bloodied, tainted masses. He committed much evil, and he even thought that ghosts would all take a detour on seeing him. He did not fear karma at all—they had done wrong, and yet they were still able to sleep well with dreams of limitless wealth and glory. They would not think back of all those bodies they had trampled into pieces. All those were like the clouds—people they once could not touch.

Lei Changming's vision was somewhat blurred. Shen Zechuan's face gradually became more and more vague. On the contrary, that round little jade stone increased in clarity until it turned into a little jade stone that he seemed to have seen before.

Little buddy.

Lei Changming once hoodwinked a child in this way. He pinned down the other party's limbs, and violated the other party in the pitch-dark tent. He still remembered drinking that day too. The scars on his chest were burning like this too. Those hands and legs he was gripping were so thin and slender that Lei Changming even had the thought to break them in his stimulated state. He bent and twisted them hard and watched as that rosiness turned pale until it eventually turned into a mess of rotten flesh.

Panting, Lei Changming pounced at Shen Zechuan several times and attempted to grab the latter, but failed. He shook his head hard. The cacophony of human voices gave him a splitting headache. He hastily crawled forward and bumped into a small table at the side. Wine and dishes splattered all over his half-naked body. He shouted, "Shen—"

The tent reflected in Lei Changming's eyes suddenly righted itself. Blood splashed over his cheeks. He opened his mouth wide. His body was still frozen in place, but his head had already gone rolling. It knocked against the wooden leg of the small table, its expression so vivid that it was nauseating.

The laughter in the tent came to an abrupt stop. The candle flames were still flickering. Everyone still maintained their initial actions, but they looked like they had all gone stiff and were already dead. Wind blew through the opened flap – revealing the drizzling scene outside where night was like the creeping silence – and extinguished the last of the candle flame.

Shen Zechuan placed Yang Shan Xue, which he had pulled out from under the cushion, and wiped it in silence. Fresh blood, removed from the blade, left behind a long red scar on the cotton cloth. He wiped it very slowly. No one saw when he had drawn the blade, so they could only appreciate the sight of him wiping it patiently.

Shen Zechuan inexplicably started to laugh. This laughter seemed to be the most unbridled one he had ever let loose these days. He kept the blade, held up his folding fan again, and stepped on Lei Changming's head to correct its position.

"Dancing, huh?" Shen Zechuan lowered his eyes and said to Lei Changming. "Are you even worthy?"



The soldier who was about to pee had only just let his pants down when someone sliced his throat and dragged him into the undergrowth. Small groups of Lei Changming's soldiers gathered at the foot of the watchtower to play dice, unaware that their own men were silently dwindling in numbers.

"Tell the mess cook to save some meat and serve a plate to us. This rain falls like diarrhea. It's so unbearable. It'll be too hard to bear if we don't drink a little wine!" The squad commander tossed the dice and lifted his head to yell at the man behind, "You go. Yes, you. You're getting in the way by standing here!"

With that, he lowered his head again. They put their heads together and chewed on the meat jerky as they tossed the remaining bit of copper coins they had left in the waistband of their pants into the bet, all of them hoping to get lucky.

"Ain't this hand way too cursed?!" One of them slapped his palm as if he was swatting at bad luck, then wiped and rubbed it on his thigh. He said, "I'm not playing anymore!"

"No!" Another one tugged at him. "That'd be no fun! We're entering the city tomorrow. Don't you need money to visit the brothels and get on

the pleasure boats? Give it another go! You might get lucky!”

“Bah!” The one who wanted to leave spat at the face of the other party. “With our chief’s reputation, do we still need money to enter the city and visit the brothels? Slutty whores don’t deserve to ask for money. We are already doing them favors by patronizing them! Who knows if they will spread some filthy diseases to me?! I’m not playing! Those in the tent seem to me like they are going to stay up all night. With the state they have drunk themselves into, I doubt they can even fight a battle tomorrow. I’m going to sleep for a few hours.”

As soon as this person turned around, he bumped into someone else. He hit his head on the armor and heard a “thwack”. The collision dazed him, and he blanked out for a moment before he started to push and shove at the other party. He cursed, “The fuck you blocking—”

There was a muffled sound of stabbing. This person did not even have the chance to speak when he fell forward with a blank stare. The forward trajectory of the body was blocked by the other party, and it fell back towards the crowd, who were still shaking the dice, and crashed into them. The dice promptly tumbled to the ground. The men were already in a bad temper from having to take the night watch, so they grabbed the man’s collar, wanting to hit him. But when they turned him over for a look, they saw those eyeballs of his bulging out in a glare—the man was already dead!

The Imperial Army swiftly drew their blades. Without giving these bandits the chance to react, they charged forth and cut them down. Blood splattered onto armors. Tantai Hu wiped his face and shouted, “Kill!”

Without the tip-off from the patrol squad, the soldiers that had already gone to rest in the camping grounds were caught off-guard by the Imperial Army. Leading his men, Tantai Hu charged into the tent and covered their mouths and noses, and stabbed them one at a time, leaving behind a mattress of crimson red. The surviving bandits ran out of the military camp in a panic. They did not receive any orders, and so they ran around flustered in the rainy night like headless chickens. The campsite was already completely surrounded by the Imperial Army. The moment those wily old foxes who had hung out in the martial fraternity all year-round saw those drawn blades, they instantly surrendered without a fight and crowded together as they waded across the muddy waters to kneel and beg for mercy.

Xiao Chiye spurred his horse over. Lang Tao Xue Jin trod its hooves before the crowd of people. The gyrfalcon descended from the sky and landed on Xiao Chiye's shoulder, bringing along a gust of bitterly cold wind as it closed up its wings. Xiao Chiye's well-built body was like an ink-black cloud in the rainy night that blotted out the light. His back was to that faint and distant candlelight in the tent, while his gaze was like a blade so cutting that those prying glances vanished in a fluster.

Tantai Hu was doing a headcount.

Xiao Chiye turned his horse around. His shoulders were already drenched. Meng tilted its head to look askance at that deadly still military tent, as if it knew that there were bloody flesh inside for it to eat. Shen Zechuan was not in the tent. He was standing outside, carrying an umbrella with his head lowered to look at his own bloodstained boots.

Xiao Chiye leaned down, and Meng hopped onto Shen Zechuan's shoulder. Shen Zechuan raised his head and met Xiao Chiye's eyes.

"This young master," Xiao Chiye lifted a finger and lightly scraped it across the tip of Shen Zechuan's nose. "Why are you standing here alone in the rain?"

Shen Zechuan spread his little bamboo fan open to show it to Xiao Chiye. He said a little sulkily, "My fan is dirty."

There were a few splotches of blood splattered on the feebly-opened fan, like red plums spilling over the words. It was unlikable, no matter how one looked at it. What's more, these words were written by Xiao Chiye himself. Ever since this fan was gifted to him, it never left Shen Zechuan's side, just like that blue handkerchief.

"The way those drops are splashed is pretty unique." Xiao Chiye's gaze never left Shen Zechuan's face. He said, "Give this fan to me. I'll make you another one."

Shen Zechuan inserted the fan at a slanting angle into Xiao Chiye's back collar and nodded his head. Xiao Chiye smiled at him and asked, "Was the feast delicious?"

Shen Zechuan shook the umbrella open to shield both of them and answered, "Passable. It's too noisy."

Xiao Chiye dismounted and took over the umbrella. He only covered Shen Zechuan, leaving half of his own body exposed outside in the rain. He lifted the tent flap with one hand and surveyed the interior. After a period of time, he said, "There's something odd with this camp."

Shen Zechuan raised his hand to cover up Meng, who wanted to fly inside, and said, “I don’t think he’s the same Lei Changming who is rumored to be able to subdue the two prefectures of Duanzhou and Dunzhou.”

Both of them were still talking when they suddenly saw Tantai Hu hurrying over to them. The blood on Tantai Hu’s body had yet to be wiped away. He did not look too good as he paid his respects to both men and said, “Master, their numbers don’t tally at all. I asked some squad commanders, and they couldn’t even say how many men they have under them. It was only after I pressed them further that I learned that they are all bandits Lei Changming had just taken in. They are not men he brought along from Mount Luo!”



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## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 108 : SILVER



No wonder it was all so easy tonight!

In that instant, Shen Zechuan came to an understanding about many matters. He abruptly looked back and was about to blurt it out when he held back and looked at Xiao Chiye.

“Laohu.” Xiao Chiye said swiftly. “Separate out two thousand men to guard this place. Ding Tao, get on your horse and go around to the northeast of Cizhou. Tell the men lying in ambush to head south immediately and block the road on the southern side of Cizhou. The rest of you, follow me back to the city.”

This strategy of luring the enemy away from his base had been planned for a long time already. Very likely, it was already in the works before Lei Changming left Mount Luo. Those reports that were sent back to Cizhou from Mount Luo were all vague statements, the most frequent of which was their sightings of the earthen stoves built by the bandits in Mount Luo. This turned the precise number of Lei Changming’s men into a matter of opinion. The mix of truth and falsehood, reality and pretenses, lured them into conveniently guessing that the 40,000 men were just a front. And so, they assumed that the other party would not dare to launch a surprise attack without careful consideration. No one would have expected the other party to harbor no intent to fight with Xiao Chiye head-on at all.

“It’s impossible for Kong Ling not to recognize Lei Changming.” Shen Zechuan got on the horse using Xiao Chiye’s arms as support. “I suspect at this point that all the rumors about Lei Changming are false. ‘Lei Changming’ is just this person’s ‘shell’.”

Xiao Chiye tossed the umbrella to Tantai Hu and covered Shen Zechuan up with his cloak. Then he put up his arms and turned his horse around. He said, “It’s useless even if he holds Kong Ling under duress. Most likely, he wants to rely on Kong Ling to open Cizhou’s gate. By doing this, he will be the one inside, and we will be the ones outside.”

Xiao Chiye was able to fight against Lei Changming’s “40,000 men” all because he still had Cizhou’s granary behind him to back him up. This allowed him to act promptly and swiftly cut down this mixed batch of soldiers who were already weary from being on the go. To think the other side knew their own shortcomings and did not fight with Xiao Chiye head-



on. Instead, they drew on their foes' strength to make up for their own deficiencies and turned Xiao Chiye into a stray dog in the wilderness. They reversed everyone's initial position, causing the Imperial Army to be stranded outside with access to the military provisions cut off.

"He has always been in the shadows all this while." Shen Zechuan said in the wind with his cloak around him. "He knows all our moves like the back of his hand."

"Cizhou is not our territory after all. He must have an informer in the city. Yet we know nothing about him." Xiao Chiye suddenly laughed when he spoke to this point. He tightened his arms around him and said, "This man sure is something!"

By now, the rain had subsided. Only the night breeze still carried with it a few threads of rain. Horses' hooves trampled upon mud as they galloped noisily towards Cizhou. However, no matter how fast they were, they could not catch up with the speed of the other party. Kong Ling had already arrived in Cizhou.

Kong Ling had been a weak scholar ever since he came out of obscurity to take up an official post, and he was almost forty-five now. His bones almost fell apart on impact when he reined in his horse, and he could hardly catch his breath as he slid off the horse to the ground. He let the man hold him up in support, then cupped his hands at the man and said, "It's, it's all thanks to you this time. Otherwise, the consequences would be unimaginable."

"Mister, you are too courteous." Even though this man looked competent and tough, he had been looking after Kong Ling the entire journey. "I'm afraid the pursuing soldiers behind us will be here in a flash. Mister, drink some water, and we'll move on. Once we reach the foot of the city gate, get them to open the gate as soon as possible!"

They rested midway in an inn that still had lanterns hung up, although it was not to stay overnight, but to allow Kong Ling – whose legs were still trembling – to drink some hot tea and take a breather. The sides of Kong Ling's legs were badly scraped, making it inconvenient for him to sit down. He held the bowl in the hall to gulp down. As they were resting, they suddenly heard the sound of horse hooves outside. Although the man did not stand up, his hand quietly fell upon the blade at the side of his waist. He turned slightly sideways to hide his face in the darkness and looked at the door.

A group of travel-worn travelers strode through the door, led by two men of similar stature. The strange thing was that this group of people were all tall and similarly well-built. Even though they were wearing the cotton clothes of commoners, they still had an imposing aura around them.

One of them removed his bamboo hat to reveal a face with stubble and a lock of hair hanging down over his forehead. He swept a seemingly nonchalant glance at the two men in the hall who were still drinking tea. With a smile on his face, he tossed out a bag of money and said to the innkeeper, "Staying for the night. One deluxe room and three wide beds. Any cooked food left? Give us some steamed bun and braised beef with *shaojiu* wine."

"We have money, so why do you have to be so frugal?" The other one removed his bamboo hat too. He was powerfully-built. He opened the bag of money and said to the innkeeper, "Deluxe rooms for all!"

A muffled cough rang out from the center that was surrounded by the men. An old man who was wearing a cloak all this while said in a lowered voice, "It's not easy for us to save up this money. We still have not reached the place. Let's endure it for one more day. Tianya. Let everyone rest after eating their fill. Don't goof around."

Qiao Tianya blew at the hair that had fallen and took the bag of money back from Fei Sheng's hands. He tossed it into the innkeeper's hands and said, "Do as I said earlier. Serve the wine and dishes as soon as possible, don't drag your feet. *Shifu*, you have braved the elements with us the entire journey, so how can we still let you sleep on the wide beds with us now that we are here? You are our elder. This is something we should do as a show of respect to you. Furthermore, if Master were to know that I let you sleep with us on the wide beds, he will definitely not be happy. Please take a good rest, and you'll be doting on us."

Not to be outdone after Qiao Tianya was done talking, Fei Sheng immediately said, "I was too insensible earlier. *Shifu*, let me help you up to rest. Once the dishes are served in a while, I'll bring them up to you."

Ji Gang's physical strength was not as good as it was before, so he did not turn Fei Sheng down and let Fei Sheng guide him upstairs.

Although Kong Ling did not know who these travelers were, he could sense that they were not one to be messed with. He was worried that they were also bandits, as they were all armed with blades. He thought about it,

then put down his teacup and said to the man beside him, "Warrior, I've had enough rest. Let's continue on our way!"

But before they could move, those travelers had already taken their seats. The inn was not big, and all the four square tables were fully occupied. No one knew if it was intentional or a coincidence, but Qiao Tianya sat down right beside Kong Ling and cut off Kong Ling's access path.

"Yo." Qiao Tianya poured tea for himself and said offhandedly, "Are both of you in a hurry to get on with your journey too?"

The man curbed his air of toughness, turning himself into an ordinary farmer. He rubbed his hands and smiled shyly, as if he was not accustomed to dealing with unfamiliar inquiries like this, and said, "Aye, I'm hurrying along with my eldest brother."

Qiao Tianya did not think to make way on his own initiative. He drank the tea and narrowed his eyes slightly, as if he was scalded, and said, "Where are you going? Perhaps we are going the same way. It hasn't been easy for us on this journey. Didn't some marquis in Qudu rebel? It's all men from the local authorities on our way here. They are all so good at fishing for bribes that we are forced to take a detour. Sorry about this chatty mouth of mine. I've gotten carried away. Where are you going?"

Kong Ling could neither sit nor walk out. His inner thighs burned with pain. Maintaining his composure, his goatee quivered a little as he replied in Dengzhou dialect, "Malian Town. You know of Malian Town, buddy?"

"The town near Cizhou, huh. Then we are going the same way. We're heading for the City of Cizhou ahead of Malian Town." As Qiao Tianya spoke, he put up an arm on the table. He stared at the man and said, "Buddy, you look familiar."

At this point, the man had already sensed that he was being watched. He glanced at the figures of these travelers in his peripheral vision. The wheels turned a little in his mind, and he more or less could make some guesses about them. But he thought that these travelers were Imperial Bodyguards disguising themselves to hunt down and capture Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan, and that they were only suspicious because of the blade he was carrying. So he relaxed to appear more simple and honest as he answered, "I'm a farmer from Dengzhou."

As he spoke, he fumbled around his bosom and fished out a crumpled travel permit and a hand-copied household register. There was the official

seal of Dengzhou on it. He opened it to show Qiao Tianya and said, "We are going to Malian Town to visit our elder sister who has married over. She has just given birth, and they are hosting a banquet."

"Oh, a joyous event." Qiao Tianya was even happier than the man was. He said, "I love kids the most! And when it comes to drinking wine, I love the ones at babies' one-month celebrations best!"

Seeing as Qiao Tianya was still prattling on, Kong Ling forced a smile and said, "The rain has stopped. In that case, we shall continue on our way. If not, it'll cost us money to stay here overnight."

On the other side, Fei Sheng had already come down the stairs. He did not notice it at first, but seeing as Qiao Tianya had never moved away after so long, he started to size up the man too. He suddenly flashed over and sat down behind the man, boxing him in from the front and back together with Qiao Tianya.

"What are you chatting about?" Fei Sheng picked up a steamed bun from the plate the waiter brought over and took a big bite out of it. He looked at them. "Look at how well you're hitting it off."

"Chatting about sons." Qiao Tianya moved the chopsticks over and said warmly, "Have both of you eaten? You didn't have the time to yet, have you? Then, come on, let's have our meals together! Waiter! Bring over two more pairs of chopsticks."

Kong Ling also sensed something off by now. He wanted to sit down and interact with them, but the teacup suddenly overturned, splashing tea over the man. The man hurriedly got up. As he hastily wiped himself with his sleeves, he said to Fei Sheng before him, "Sorry, sorry!"

Taking advantage of the opportunity, he squeezed past Fei Sheng and took two steps towards the waiter, pleading, "Buddy, lend me a towel to wipe myself with."

Fei Sheng had already stood up. He exchanged glances with Qiao Tianya. Their astute brothers, who had already taken their seats, all grasped their blades. Fei Sheng strode out from behind and bumped into the man's right back shoulder fast and hard. He pulled the man up by his clothes and said, "You did it on purpose, didn't you?"

The impact of the bump sent the man knocking into the table and chairs right in front of him. He almost lost his balance. His temples were drenched in sweat, and he was so anxious that he did not know where to put his

hands. He repeatedly bowed to Fei Sheng in a conciliatory manner and apologized, "Sorry, sorry..."

This man did not know martial arts.

Fei Sheng cast another glance at Qiao Tianya and shoved the man again. He yelled, "Just my fucking luck."

The man's entire body fell backward, tilting the table and chairs over as he crashed into them. He cut a sorry sight as the back of his head struck the corner of the table. Kong Ling exclaimed in surprise and said anxiously, "Why did you hit out at him? He's bleeding!"

Only then did Qiao Tianya feign to stop Fei Sheng. He said to Fei Sheng, "Forget it, forget it. We are all travelers. Why put others in a spot?"

Fei Sheng let loose a torrent of expletives and acted all like a bigwig as Qiao Tianya persuaded him to go back. He even glared at that man several times. Their party started digging into their food. Fei Sheng stood up again and said, "I got so pissed that I forgot I still have to deliver the meal to *shifu*!"

Kong Ling had already helped support the man to the entrance. The man touched the back of his head and came away with an entire hand full of blood. He glanced back at Qiao Tianya and the rest as if he was fearful of them, then hastily shrank his head back, looking all timid and afraid of incurring trouble. He untied the horse and walked off into the night with Kong Ling.

Only then did Fei Sheng drop his act and asked, "Why are you interrogating them? We are on the wanted list too. It's better to lie low now that we are about to reach the threshold of Cizhou; don't stir up trouble."

"I always feel like this man..." Qiao Tianya drank two mouthfuls of *shaojiu* and thought about it for a moment with a frown. "Is there really no reaction from him when you bumped into him?"

"Nope." Fei Sheng took two bites of the beef. "The person himself can put on an act, but once his body is accustomed to reacting swiftly, then it'll be very difficult to control himself from parrying a sudden blow. This man is pretty weird, but he indeed doesn't seem to be a martial artist."

"What if he can indeed control himself?" Qiao Tianya suddenly asked.

"Then he's a formidable one." Fei Sheng gestured with his chopsticks in the air. "He will have to be of the same caliber as Ji Gang-*shifu*. Think about His Lordship. With a body like His Lordship, there will be no way to hide it. His naturally-endowed physique has blessed him with explosive

strength. You have to be careful even when you approach him while he's asleep or you risk your own life, what's more touching him? This endurance can only be built up through years and years of practice. This man doesn't seem to be that old. So, I doubt he can."

Qiao Tianya ate the dishes and did not ask further. When they had eaten and drunk their fill, the innkeeper worked out the bill for Qiao Tianya. As he returned the silver, Fei Sheng had nothing better to do, so he felt it up and realized something unusual. The weight and relative purity of this silver were subtly different from the silvers they had brought out of Qudu, the ones that had been minted and directly issued by the Ministry of Revenue.

Although Fei Sheng was usually a competitive man who loved to fawn on others, his special skill was unrivaled. With his suspicions aroused by these subtle differences, he held the silver high and scrutinized it for a moment before he asked Qiao Tianya, "Zhongbo has had dealings with Juexi all these years. Most of the silvers in circulation come from Juexi, right?"

"So it is said." Qiao Tianya propped himself on the counter and turned his head aside to look at those silvers. "This kind of new silvers is rarely seen. The businesses they do are all shady scalping deals, and the general public typically won't dare to use silvers from Juexi directly. Everyone will exchange them into copper coins, or use silvers issued out from other areas. But with the state treasury empty during the reign of Xiande, there have been very few newly-minted silvers from the various areas. The only one who can still have very new silvers is the Xi—"

The silver warehouses of the Xi clan, who owned silver mines and mined silver.

If these money did not come from Shen Zechuan's hands, then it came from the people who schemed to empty out the Xi clan's silver warehouses. Regardless of whether it was the former or the latter, both were important to them!

Qiao Tianya straightened up in a flash and said, "Leave half of the men in place to keep night watch and take care of *shifu*. The rest of you, come with me. Fei the tenth, you were fucking wrong about him! Chase!"



### **Author's Words:**

Good morning, baby.

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Thank you [Alex](#) for the burning of brain cells!

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 109 : JINGZHE



Qiao Tianya led the men out of the inn in pursuit. There were already no traces of both men on the streets. Fei Sheng mounted the horse from behind, pointed to the west, and said, “Since he has been alerted, he should know that he can’t remain here for long; he definitely won’t be able to escape our eyes if he’s in town. In all probability, he will choose to leave the town and take a detour to hurry towards Cizhou.”

According to the information Qiao Tianya knew of, Shen Zechuan should still be in Cizhou. He stuffed that silver ingot back into his bosom. Before he could speak, he heard Ji Gang’s voice behind him.

Ji Gang gathered the cloak around him and drank up the bowl of medicine in his hand in one gulp. “Don’t stop for my sake tonight. Let’s head for Cizhou now. No matter what, we have to inform Chuan-er of this matter first.”

As this concerned Shen Zechuan’s safety, Qiao Tianya knew that Ji Gang would definitely not rest tonight, so he motioned for the Imperial Bodyguards at the back to lead the horse over. Ji Gang got onto the horse and straightened his back. Then, with a jerk of the reins, he led the men in a charge towards the town gate.



Kong Ling was miserable beyond description. Both his legs had been scraped until they were burning with pain. He did not say a word and followed with a frown behind the man’s horse. Just as Fei Sheng predicted, they did not linger further in the town, but left the town quickly with the man leading the way as they took a detour.

“Mister, please bear with it for a few more hours.” As the man spurred his horse on, he looked back to shout. “We will be able to reach the foot of Cizhou’s city gate before daybreak!”

Kong Ling panted as he nodded and said, “Seems like the road is full of forked paths around here. I don’t think they would be able to catch up even if they wanted to?”

“But the rain has already stopped.” The man’s stamina was so good that he did not even gasp for breath once the entire journey. He continued,



“Mister, there’s no way our trail can be covered up now. They are bound to speed up their pursuit of us!”

Kong Ling pulled at the robe on his knees. He gritted his teeth and said, “Continue on! Warrior, we’ll continue on our way! As long as we can reach the foot of Cizhou’s city gate, we can avert disaster.”

That might be the case. But the path they had been taking was very muddy after they diverged from the public road. With their hooves stuck in the mud, the horses could not run at their original speed, and so it was with difficulty that both men traveled. Looking at the man’s back, Kong Ling sighed and said emotionally, “It’s all thanks to your help this time. If you still insist on returning to Lei Changming after we arrived at Cizhou, I’ll select the best horse for you.”

The man let out a hearty laugh and said, “Mister, there’s no need to stand on ceremony. This is what I should do. I’m just a soldier who only knows how to fight and kill. There are some things that need to be done by lofty scholars like you. I hold you in great esteem, and I’m already content to be able to travel with you tonight.”

Kong Ling was taken by surprise. He found this man to be a righteous man and felt a lump in his throat. Then he remembered Shen Zechuan, the turncoat who switched his allegiance to the enemy at the critical juncture, and could not help but wipe his eyes with his sleeve and said, “To think there are still such good men like you in Zhongbo. There’s hope for Zhongbo’s rejuvenation yet! Warrior, may I know how I should address you?”

The man looked back and said, “My name is Piaopo. A crude and inelegant name like this isn’t fit to be heard by Mister’s ears. My parents are both honest people who make a living on the few *mu*<sup>1</sup> of fields they have. There was a drought the year I was born; that’s why my father gave me such a name.”<sup>2</sup>

Kong Ling hurriedly said, “Brother Piaopo is a righteous man. A name is but a momentary form of address. It sounds good to me!”

It was too dark for Kong Ling to see the path ahead. He did not know if the route Piaopo picked was too well-hidden, but there were really no soldiers in pursuit of them. Kong Ling pounded his thighs. After looking up at the sky several times, he finally saw the first rays of dawn on the horizon as well as the city walls of Cizhou at the end.

“Mister!” Piaopo suddenly pulled at Kong Ling’s horse and led him to ride alongside. “Tell the city officer to open the gate. We shall go pay our respects to His Excellency Zhou now!”

Both men galloped out of the path and trampled through the puddles of water. They had already arrived at the foot of Cizhou’s city walls. Kong Ling hugged the neck of the horse, his energy all spent. He smoothed his goatee to tidy it up, then lifted his head to shout in a hoarse voice, “It’s me!”

Heads popped out above the battlement of the city walls. A military officer was shocked to see Kong Ling and could not help but blurt, “Mister Chengfeng!”

“Quick! Go get His Excellency!” Kong Ling dismounted the horse with trembling legs. He handed the reins to Piaopo. “Tell him I’m back!”

“Open the city gate immediately.” Piaopo said. “Mister, then—”

Kong Ling nodded in response at the same time he gasped for breath. He bent over, with his hands on his knees, and said with a bitter smile, “Let me catch my breath. We are going to enter the city soon. It’s only when we meet His Excellency that we can clear all suspicions of you. Otherwise, we will still end up delayed by the city officer’s interrogation of you.”

Not long after, Zhou Gui hurried over. When he saw Kong Ling from above, he immediately said, “Chengfeng, what’s going on? Quick, open the gate!”

The city gate made a dull noise as several soldiers from within lifted the horizontal bar and pushed the city gates open, letting through the first rays of the morning sun through the gap. Kong Ling wiped his sweat and moved to stride in first. There was a section of bridle path behind the city gate. Zhou Gui hurriedly descended from the city gates and led his man to the head of the bridle path, wanting to meet and receive Kong Ling.

But Kong Ling, who had been walking in front, abruptly changed countenance and bellowed, “Shut the gates!”

The soldiers behind him who were still pushing against the city gate froze. But in that instant, Piaopo had already burst forth. He grabbed hold of Kong Ling’s back collar and dragged him back in a swift retreat. However, Kong Ling staggered and half-kneeled on the ground, dragging his body and waving his hands as he shouted at Zhou Gui, “This man is up to something! Zhou Gui, tell the men to release the arrows! You mustn’t let him go free!”

Zhou Gui had already taken a step forward. He shouted, "Take him down!"

That originally docile horse suddenly neighed. It raised its hooves and turned around to trample over the soldiers who were pushing against the gate. Piaopo flipped atop the horse, and the horse instantly crashed its way out of the city gate. He hauled Kong Ling with just one hand, causing Kong Ling's entire body to be partially suspended at one side of the saddle with his legs and feet scraping across the ground as he was forcibly dragged along.

Excellent strength!

Such strength was by no means inferior to Xiao Chiye.

Kong Ling was unable to break free as he was dragged along at high speed. His back hit the iron buckle at the side of the saddle, which knocked the wind out of him. That thin and frail chest of his seemed as if it was about to be perforated from the strikes. He was forced to look at the sky while he struggled with his arms and kicked out with both legs as the man's grip on him tightened increasingly. He said, "Zhou Gui... release... the arrows! This man has reinforcements!"

An irritated "tsk" escaped between Piaopo's lips. He suddenly lifted Kong Ling up by the neck and hollered at the soldiers surging out from the city gates, "Go ahead! Zhou Gui, release the arrows! We'll see if I die first or Mister Chengfeng dies first!"

Zhou Gui was but a mere civil official. At this startling change, he pushed away the guards and shouted, "Stop!"

Kong Ling had been strangled until his face had gone all red. He clawed at his collar with his ten fingers. Piaopo moved his head closer to him and said with a smile, "Mister is truly sharp. Weren't you still regarding me as a righteous man on our way here? So why have you turned against me?"

"Tantai, Tantai Long's soldiers!" Kong Ling gasped and said with difficulty, "are all from the three, three prefectures in the east. None of them is familiar with, with the roads in Cizhou!"

Piaopo burst out laughing. He settled down on the horse and said, "So I see. Mister is truly formidable. You were still acting with such sincerity earlier. But since I've already arrived at Cizhou, do you think you can simply settle the matter by tricking me into the city and killing me?"

He turned his head to the side and spat.

“Too late!”

With that, those pursuing soldiers who had vanished earlier came forth from behind. Although they did not have the uniformed armor expected of a regular army, their numbers were terrifying. They were all dressed in various kinds of clothes, holding up their broadswords and swords as they urged their horses through the woods and grasses in a straight charge forth. Kong Ling could not even catch sight of the end of their line.

“I told Lei Changming to tell you people a few months back that we want grains. Instead, you let the Imperial Army into the territory and let Xiao Chiye take over our granary.” Lei Jingzhe flung Kong Ling to the ground. Reining in the turning horse, he motioned to Zhou Gui, “Do you think you can scare me into retreating by relying on Xiao Chiye’s 20,000-strong Imperial Army? I repeatedly sent men to persuade you to surrender and pledge allegiance to me, but you keep putting off giving me an answer! Zhou Gui, you are now a traitor who financially aids the rebels. I’ll rid the people of a scourge by massacring Cizhou today!”

Zhou Gui looked at those more than 10,000 men, and his heart went half-cold. He even felt a little dizzy. He hastily held on to the person beside him for support and squeezed out the words through gritted teeth, “I can open the granary and give you grains. But you mustn’t hurt the commoners of Cizhou!”

Lei Jingzhe cracked the whip, and the bandits behind him roared with laughter. The hooves of his horse trod around Kong Ling, and those people surrounded Kong Ling, forcing him to roll and crawl. Lei Jingzhe pointed to Kong Ling on the ground with his horsewhip and said, “Now I’m the host, and you’re the guest. The granary is already mine, whether or not you open it up. The fuck you still dare to negotiate with me when I’m taking my men home to eat?”

Zhou Gui staggered a few steps and fumed, “We have already filled up half a granary worth of grains for you Mount Luo bandits last year when Cizhou was hit with famine. If not, how many people on Mount Luo would have starved to death?! Can’t you spare the commoners of Cizhou on account of this favor we’ve done you?”

“What nonsense are you spouting?” Lei Jingzhe’s expression suddenly underwent a change. He said coldly, “Lei Changming bought those grains last year with money at my behest.”

That was right. Lei Changming did indeed pay for the grains last year. But he bought half a granary worth of fine rice in Cizhou at the dirt-cheap price of unpolished rice. The total amount paid was so meagre that it was not even enough to send away a beggar in Cizhou.

Zhou Gui was so stunned by his brazenness and shamelessness that he could not breathe. Thumping his chest and stamping his foot in anger, he said, "You! Are you people still human?! Don't even think of entering the city today!"

Lei Jingzhe had already run out of patience. He knew that he would not be able to hide the truth at Lei Changming's end for long. The Imperial Army was very likely to be on the way already. So he lowered his voice and growled, "Zhou Gui, I merely want to enter the city to play for a few days. Must you insist on fighting with me against overwhelming odds like you would throw an egg against a rock?!"

Kong Ling trembled as he hunched over in the mud and let loose a sneer. With a fling of his sleeve, he pointed at Lei Jingzhe and let fly a torrent of curses, "Play for a few days? When have you ever kept your men under control of all the times you people entered the city? For each time Lei Changming comes, more than ten of the womenfolk in Cizhou would meet their end! Bah! You're clearly all rotten eggs, so what benevolent and righteous act are you putting on?! Everyone will die if we let you enter the city today, so we the folks of Cizhou might as well fight you to the death together!"

The horsewhip at the rear struck Kong Ling so hard on his back that his skin and flesh split apart. Kong Ling initially thought that they could take this man down at the city gate, but he never expected the other party's soldiers to be following right behind them. He was very much aware that his gullibility this time had brought a catastrophe upon Cizhou. Overwhelmed with grief and sorrow, he bent over the ground and started vomiting.

Lei Jingzhe rode his horse out and led his men in a straight charge towards Zhou Gui. He said, "Kill our way into the city. Once the imperial court's appointment order is issued, we will become the garrison troops of Cizhou who have eliminated the rebels for the imperial court!"

Zhou Gui saw that fierce horse charging right for him and those countless blades reflecting the morning rays behind him. With an unexpected burst of strength, and despite knowing that he should not do so,

he still spread his arms apart and bellowed, “Even if I die today, I cannot let you enter the city!”

Sunlight pierced through the clouds on the horizon, and that wave of golden light broke through the darkness like the raging tides. With his eyes wide open, Zhou Gui watched as those blades came rushing right towards him. In that moment, the ear-piercing sound of a string being pulled rang out, and that “twang” from close to the ground reverberated through the air as an arrow hurtled right for Lei Jingzhe’s head with a violent gust of strong wind following in its trail!

The Conqueror Bow stood firm and steady in the wind. Under the shocked gazes of all those around him, Xiao Chiye held his pose of pulling the bow. The opening of the bone ring on his thumb shifted, revealing the penetrating and forbidding eyes behind the bowstring.



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Thanks to [Alex](#) and [Ami](#) for the help! Muacks! <3

#### Footnotes

1. 亩, *mu*, or Chinese acre, measure of land equal to 0.0667 hectares
2. 瓢泼 his name literally means “heavy downpour”.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 110 : SON OF A CONCUBINE



Lei Jingzhe did not dare to be too complacent. Unable to dodge in time in his haste, he could only brandish his broadsword to ward off the blow. The arrow struck the blade with a loud clang, and the impact numbed Lei Jingzhe's entire arm. He promptly and decisively spurred his horse past Zhou Gui in an attempt to lead his men into charging into the city.

"Shut the gates quick—!" Zhou Gui was swept off his feet and thrown to the ground. Paying no mind to the sorry sight he presented, he lifted the hem of his robe and shouted at the city soldiers.

Pressing their shoulders against the city gates, the city soldiers bellowed in unison and shoved the gates towards the center to shut it. But Lei Jingzhe's horse was faster. His blade arrived at the same time as his horse, cutting down the men who were pushing away at the gates. He was just about to drive straight in to take over Cizhou, but in that critical moment, Lei Jingzhe felt a chill at the back of his head and swiftly bent the upper half of his body over. Following right after, the back of the horse sank as a youth of about sixteen or seventeen of age climbed onto it.

Ding Tao's slashed his palm towards Lei Jingzhe's neck. Lei Jingzhe turned aside to dodge it and backhandedly made a stab at Ding Tao's chest and abdomen. Ding Tao clung onto the saddle and slid down to evade the blade. His legs touched the ground, and he raced along with the madly galloping horse for a few moments before he hoisted himself up with his arms and clambered back up again.

"Hey!" Ding Tao gripped Lei Jingzhe's arm and raised a hand to fling a brush worth of ink onto Lei Jingzhe's face when he turned back.

For all Lei Jingzhe's plotting, he never expected such a move from the youth who had come to the rescue. He could no longer see his surroundings with the ink splashed in his eyes, but he had a keen sense of hearing. The instant Ding Tao launched a sneak attack on him, he sensed Ding Tao's movement, and in their confrontation, he hauled Ding Tao by the collar and flung him off the horse.

Ding Tao fell heavily on the ground and felt the stab of pain in his back. He yelled out in pain, but before he was done yelling, a horse's hoof came aiming right for him. Ding Tao hurriedly rolled over to dodge the hoof. But

as he rolled over, his back was inadvertently exposed right under Lei Jingzhe's eyes.

It's now or never!

Lei Jingzhe promptly hurled his steel blade out.

Ding Tao wanted to evade it, but a bandit who had caught up with them from behind grabbed hold of his ankle. He was forced to sprawl flat in the muddy water. He propped himself against the ground with both arms, wanting to lift himself up, but he was dragged down again. The steel blade was already right behind him. With his face all smeared with filthy mud, Ding Tao gritted his teeth and straightened up his upper body to shout at those in the city, "Open up the south gates! The reinforcements are here!"

Lei Jingzhe cursed in fury. But then he saw the steel blade he had hurled out intercepted mid-air by an extremely narrow sheath. The impact of the collision sent his blade hurtling off-course until it stabbed into the ground at a slanting angle and remained there.

Ding Tao was still badly shaken as he turned back for a look. The bandit who had been yanking his ankle earlier was already dead, his head separated from his body. Ding Tao immediately crawled up from the ground, hopped several times in succession, then poked his head out from behind Shen Zechuan and said to Lei Jingzhe, "You're dead meat!"

One side of the city gates had already been shut. Lei Jingzhe led his men to crowd at the entrance of the bridle path to squeeze their way through but was obstructed. He recognized the man blocking his path. The entire outfit of white peeking out from under the cloak was a color the other man had not changed out of after leaving Qudu. Lei Jingzhe's horse took a few steps back, but then, in the next instant, he brandished his whip and barged his way over. Shen Zechuan pulled off his cloak and tossed it into Ding Tao's arms, Lang Tao Xue Jin raised its hooves and charged forth. In the split second the wind rose, Yang Shan Xue had already left its sheath.

Lei Jingzhe's broadsword slipped out of his hand. Right before he was about to collide with Shen Zechuan, he drew out his subordinate's broadsword in passing. The neighing of the horse was just like the sounding of a war horn. The forces of both powers collided as the edges of their blades met and let out a shrill shriek in unison, the sound so piercing that it made one quake with fear.

Lei Jingzhe had encountered an opponent who was completely different from the ones he had faced in the past. That terrifying strength of his



seemed to have plunged into water. No matter how forceful and fierce he was in wielding his blade, it would all be neutralized by a force as gentle as water until it eventually dissolved into nothingness. The more he went all out, the more it felt like he was being led around by the nose by Shen Zechuan. Gradually, he found himself trapped into a vicious cycle in which he could never escape from.

Lei Jingzhe was very shrewd. He held up his broadsword and pushed back, pretending as though he was going to launch a sudden strike, but in the next instant, he turned around and fled.

The earlier opportunity had already slipped him by. He was already harboring thoughts of retreating at Ding Tao's "reinforcements are here" earlier, and it was also evident that his men had already been surrounded by Xiao Chiye. If he did not withdraw posthaste and insisted on staying on to attack the city, then he would be trapped in a situation where he was besieged on all sides; he would not be able to hold out for long!

"Retreat!" Lei Jingzhe took the lead and turned his horse in the southeast direction.

Shen Zechuan did not give chase. Xiao Chiye, who was still in the east, leaped onto his horse and led his men to follow after Lei Jingzhe in hot pursuit. Lei Jingzhe whipped his horse and tore off at great speed. Amid all the jolts and bumps, he looked back and pointed at Xiao Chiye from afar, then at Shen Zechuan, and bellowed savagely, "We will meet again!"

The bandits wore no armors, so their speed was faster. Plus, they were already good at fleeing to begin with. All of them dashed back to the mountain forest without any regard for battle formation. In the blink of an eye, all of them had fled helter-skelter, shouting loudly as they hid among the undergrowth.

Once again, Xiao Chiye lifted the Conqueror Bow. The sound of the string being drawn on that powerful bow that weighed a hundred catties was bone-chilling. Xiao Chiye's eyes stared fixedly at Lei Jingzhe's back. Lei Jingzhe was about to dart into the mountain forest, yet Xiao Chiye still seemed to have no intention of releasing the arrow.

With a cry, Meng whirled around and nosedived down to pounce right at Lei Jingzhe with its sharp talons held in a hook, aiming right for Lei Jingzhe's eyes. Lei Jingzhe knew that this did not bode well, and he was forced to slow down. He waved his hands to cover his face and turned around to dodge the incoming blow. At this precise instant, Xiao Chiye,

who was behind him, released his fingers. The arrow burst forth like a golden ray shooting out from the blazing sun, its afterimage and the wind trailing closely behind its tail. In just the moment it took to gasp for breath, it had already arrived right before Lei Jingzhe's eyes.

In this perilous juncture of life and death, Lei Jingzhe dragged over his subordinate beside him and leaned the entire half of his body back at the same time he exerted all his strength to shove the man before his own body. The arrow pierced through the chest of the subordinate, and the force of it sent Lei Jingzhe falling off his horse. He rolled on the ground, climbed to his feet, and tossed away the body, then got on his horse and continued to flee.



Zhou Gui met Shen Zechuan at the foot of the city gates. Not knowing if he should cry or laugh, he wiped his face and said, "What perfect timing! You came just in time!"

Shen Zechuan dismounted to help Kong Ling up personally. He said remorsefully, "I'm sorry to have made Mister Chengfeng suffer."

Seeing his impeccable etiquette, Kong Ling waved his hand. Supporting himself up, he looked at the Imperial Army and said, "There's no need for the Vice Commander to take it to heart. I'm willing to do whatever it takes to take down the bandits."

"But when all is said and done, I did not inform you in advance." Shen Zechuan turned his head back to call out to Ding Tao, "Go get a clean robe for Mister, and call the physician over too."

For Cizhou's sake, Kong Ling would not hold a grudge against Shen Zechuan. Although he still had some ill-feeling, he understood that there was a reason for Shen Zechuan's actions, and so he let Ding Tao support him as he bowed to Shen Zechuan. Xiao Chiye, who had also gotten off his horse, walked swiftly towards them.

"I never thought there would be another person behind Lei Changming." Kong Ling looked at the mountain forest. He had just survived a great catastrophe, yet he was still plagued by worries and anxiety. He said, "This man is heartless and skilled at disguises. He's also cautious to boot. Now that we have let him escape today, there will surely be trouble again in the future."

"If His Lordship and the Vice Commander had not arrived in time, Cizhou would not have escaped this calamity." Zhou Gui put down his

sleeves and gave both of them a long, deep bow.

“It was because Your Excellency showed no fear in the face of danger that bought us time.” Xiao Chiye turned his head aside to wipe away the dust off his face. He said, “The Imperial Army still has troops lying in ambush at the public road south of Cizhou. There are also troops stationed at the old camp Lei Changming left behind in the east to stand guard. He is already surrounded by the Imperial Army. It won’t be easy for him to escape.”

“It’s all thanks to Your Lordship’s reinforcements from the south that he eventually retreated.” Kong Ling sighed with emotion. “Your Lordship is wise. We’ll send someone to open the south gate right away.”

Xiao Chiye laughed and looked at Shen Zechuan. But he did not say a word.

Shen Zechuan said, “There’s no need for Your Excellency and Mister to rush. The Imperial Army’s reinforcements are still on the public road more than ten *li* away.”

Stunned, Zhou Gui looked at Ding Tao and said, “Then, that means...”

Ding Tao’s back was still hurting. When he saw everyone looking at him, he hurriedly nodded his head solemnly and replied, “They are still on the public road and are not heading towards Cizhou. On our way here, Young Master told me to yell that phrase when I’m in a desperate situation, saying that it’s a magical weapon that would lead us to victory. Sure enough, that man fled after I shouted it!”

Kong Ling faced Shen Zechuan and made to bow again. He said, “Vice Commander, please accept this bow of mine.”

Lei Jingzhe wanted to lure the Imperial Army away and charge right into Cizhou all because he feared a confrontation with Xiao Chiye head-on. This man was very smart. He did not know if Xiao Chiye had real capabilities to speak of, but he was unwilling to stake his troops on this gamble with Xiao Chiye at this point in time. That was why Shen Zechuan knew for certain that he would flee instantly as soon as he thought there were still reinforcements at the south. However, if an adult among them were to speak of “reinforcements”, they would not be able to convince Lei Jingzhe right away. Only Ding Tao, who yelled it out at the most critical juncture when his life was hanging in the balance, would be able to make Lei Jingzhe believe him without a doubt.

“My good lad.” Zhou Gui liked Ding Tao so much at this moment that he wanted so much to acknowledge the latter as his son. He patted Ding Tao several times and praised, “You make it sound so convincing that even I believed it!”

Ding Tao’s back was in pain, but he did not dare to voice it out, and so he could only endure it and nodded his head vigorously.

“I initially thought he was merely a bandit who had forcibly occupied the mountain forest.” Kong Ling walked into the city with them and said, “But his way of speaking throughout the journey here was really out of the ordinary. Although he claimed to be from a poor and humble background, I don’t think that’s the case. He had control over Lei Changming, yet he’s a generation younger than Lei Changming. I made several attempts to guess who he is, but I couldn’t figure it out.”

“He let Lei Changming be the chief, yet he could freely deploy these bandit-soldiers. This is a clear indication that this man is someone who moves around Lei Changming year in and year out. Seen from an outsider’s perspective, this man is likely a trusted subordinate or equivalent.” Xiao Chiye lifted his hand to lead Lang Tao Xue Jin.

“Not only that.” Shen Zechuan, who had given it some deep thinking last night, added, “Given Lei Changming’s headstrong character, he would not be willing to lower himself to be someone else’s chess piece. The fact that this man has such power and influence among the bandit-soldiers shows that Lei Changming had never suspected him before and believed in him completely. It’s much easier for blood kin to achieve such a level of trust with Lei Changming. Mister Chengfeng, does Lei Changming have any relatives?”

Kong Ling thought for a moment before he replied, “Lei Changming’s family is poor. I only heard that he has a younger sister who married the commander of Duanzhou’s Garrison Troops as a concubine. Later, Biansha invaded, and his younger sister and the commander were both massacred...” He sucked in a breath and said, “That’s it. His younger sister bore the commander a son.”

“The son of a concubine from the Zhu clan in Duanzhou.” Zhou Gui added. “I remember it now. When I was still a tax circuit intendant during the reign of Yongyi, I followed His Excellency to participate in the baby’s one-month celebration banquet. Although the child Lei Changming’s younger sister gave birth to was a son of common birth born of a concubine

of the Zhu clan, he was the eldest son—the first son of Zhu Jie, the commander of Duanzhou at that time.”

“If it’s really him, then it’s not surprising for him to have that kind of shrewdness.” Kong Ling turned his head to explain to Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye. “The value of the mother depends on her son, and mother and son lived well in the Zhu’s residence. But after Zhu Jie’s principal wife gave birth to a legitimate son of direct descent, they were both disdained and spurn by Zhu Jie.”

Just as Shen Zechuan was about to ask the name of this person, Zhou Gui suddenly exclaimed aloud and stared dazedly at Shen Zechuan.

“The Vice Commander’s mother was also present at the full month celebration banquet!”



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## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 111 : MOTHER



The moment the words left Zhou Gui's mouth, he felt he had been too presumptuous.

Shen Zechuan's birth mother was called Bai Cha, but she was not a lady of the Bai clan from the Qidong Cejun Commandery. She was called by this name because when she was still in the establishment, someone praised her for being "as pure as white jade, as if made out of porcelain; whether her face is heavily or lightly painted, she beats them all in the establishment." At that time, Duanzhou was still a well-known red-light district in Zhongbo, where the world's beauties gathered. The literati vied with each other to organize banquets to critique these "flowers", and came out with a "ranking list" for those in the establishments. Every season, they would deliberate over the commentaries and adjust the ranking of the beauties on the list.

Bai Cha was the "most popular flower" during the reign of Yongyi, and in all of five years, she was never dethroned from her top rank. Each time she listened to the commentary of the courtesans through the screen, everyone in Duanzhou would turn out en masse. When she danced for the Prince of Jianxing, Shen Wei, there would be huge crowds of people thronging the streets of the establishment. Countless people climbed onto the ridges of roofs or stepped on the shoulders of others, all just to catch a glimpse of that faint figure of hers through the layers upon layers of hanging drapes. Her beauty became more and more legendary in those odes of the flowers that others fall over themselves to sing. Even Emperor Guangcheng, who resided deep in the imperial palace, had heard of her. Wanting to take advantage of the emperor's inspection tour to catch a glimpse of this beauty in person, he had repeatedly asked Hai Liangyi, who was still the Grand Secretariat Deputy Grand Secretary back then, "*when will the inspection tour be scheduled?*"

Zhou Gui had previously seen Bai Cha during the Zhu clan's newborn baby boy's full-month celebration banquet, but he had only sneaked a peek at that legendary beauty through a gap in the screen. Lei Changming's younger sister was initially from the establishment too. Before she was taken as a concubine by the Duanzhou commander, she was an old-hand who could be considered a "mama" when coaching the fledglings. It was on

behalf of the girls of the establishment that Bai Cha went to attend the banquet and send congratulations.

This had all happened many years ago, and Zhou Gui's memory of it was already pretty vague. But when he looked at Shen Zechuan earlier, he realized that Shen Zechuan's side profile was rather similar to Bai Cha's, and so in a moment of excitement, he had inadvertently blurted it out.

Without a change in expression, Shen Zechuan said, "Then that's really a coincidence."

He was not intrigued, nor was he worked up. His memory of his birth mother was a blank piece of paper. Even though he had heard hundreds of rumors about her, there was no trace of her in his mind that was worth remembering. The role of "mother" in his life belonged to his *shiniang*, Hua Pingting, just like the role of the father belonged only to his *shifu*, Ji Gang. That was why he would go to great lengths to kill and destroy Ji Lei, who had harmed Hua Pingting. The two people who gave him life were never involved in Shen Zechuan's life. Bai Cha died early and never left so much a word for Shen Zechuan, while Shen Wei detested Shen Zechuan. The Princess Consort of Jianxing was in charge of all domestic matters in the residence. Before the age of seven, Shen Zechuan and Shen Wei had only met a grand total of seven times, and all of that had been during the family feast during the Spring Festival celebration. He and Shen Wei never even had an exchange of words that would have been expected between a father and son.

Shen Wei's loathing of him, however, was evident.

They were not like father and son; rather, they were more like mortal enemies born to abhor each other. Shen Zechuan's life in the Prince of Jianxing's residence was confined to a corner of an eave in the inner courtyard; he could not leave his own courtyard arbitrarily. His daily leisure activity was to sit on the veranda and count the white clouds that drifted past that small corner of the blue sky every day. When he was seven years old, he could already recognize a lot of words, and he learned all these on the sly by digging his way out of the dog hole in the courtyard every month to eavesdrop under the windows of the school Shen Zhouji and his other older brothers attended.

At that time, the power struggle between several of his older brothers, who had already come of age, was extremely intense. Even the various concubines of his father were scheming against one another. It was

pandemonium in the entire inner courtyard, so much that even Shen Wei himself was reluctant to return home and stay. He kept a mistress outside the residence, and lived there for several months in a year, turning a blind eye to the strife within the residence. Later, Shen Zhouji, who was a son of direct descent born by the principal wife, emerged victorious and sent all his brothers, who were born by the concubines and who had already come of age, away to the various prefectures to take up various respectable sinecures. The Princess Consort of Jianxing was worried that those sons born of concubines who had yet to grow up would later cause trouble again in the future. So she decided to send them away, ostensibly to settle them down in their ancestral home in Chazhou with a teacher hired to teach them. In truth, however, it was to eliminate the possibility that a son born of a concubine could ever compete for power again.

Shen Zechuan was the only son whom Shen Wei personally issued a directive to have him sent to the old residence in Duanzhou. Shen Wei even refused to let him attend school or even hire a teacher for him. In that residence, he was taken care of by a deaf and dumb old woman servant who was also hard of seeing, while a maidservant his mother had left in the old residence would take over the job if he stepped out of the residence. That woman was greedy for money. Every month, she would siphon off the silver allocated by the Prince of Jianxing and cut down on Shen Zechuan's meals. Three meals a day gradually became two meals a day until it eventually became one meal a day. What's more, these were all cold leftovers.

Shen Zechuan felt the hunger in his tummy when he thought to this point. He loosened his grip on Yang Shan Xue and said, "Ding Tao, help Mister Chengfeng inside to have a change of clothes. Ce'an and I will play the host today and invite both gentlemen to a meal. We will talk about it in detail during the feast."

Zhou Gui was not an articulate speaker, and Kong Ling was afraid he might say something else to incur Shen Zechuan's displeasure, so he hurriedly grasped Zhou Gui by the arm and let Zhou Gui support him into the city.



Zhou Gui was still turning around in circles after Kong Ling finished changing his clothes. He said anxiously, "Say, why did I go and mention that?"



“Really.” Kong Ling said, “Of all things to mention, you had to go and mention that. Doesn’t bringing it up make it seem like you are suspecting him of being involved with the traitors? Fortunately, both of them are not suspicious by nature. Otherwise, we would be in a quandary.”

“It was a slip in a moment of haste. I’ll have to apologize to the Vice Commander later during the feast.” Zhou Gui sighed and said, “He came to help Cizhou out of a fix. I can’t trample on his goodwill like this.”

“Don’t make a conscious effort to bring it up during the feast.” Kong Ling sat up and thought for a moment before saying, “If Shen Zechuan is such a narrow-minded person, he wouldn’t have come. If you take this matter too seriously and insist on apologizing to him, then it’d look like you and I are the ones who are bothered by it. Besides, he might not really care about this matter. Compared to his mother, Shen Wei is the one who is truly abominable.”

It was not appropriate for them to let Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye wait for long. So they only took a short break before setting off for the feast.

Despite it being called a feast, it was actually just a simple lunch. Everyone had been rushing on their way over last night, and then they had engaged in close combat with the bandits at the foot of the city today. Shen Zechuan took Kong Ling’s age into consideration and did not keep them further for social engagement. Once they were done with their meals, he let Kong Ling head back early for a rest.

Xiao Chiye had to make arrangements for the Imperial Army’s patrol, and he still had to dispatch someone to the old camp to keep in touch with Tantai Hu. By the time he was done busying around, it was nearly dusk. He searched around and found Shen Zechuan at the top of the city walls.

“There’s still work to be done after tonight.” Xiao Chiye climbed up to the top of the city wall and said, “I thought you were still taking a short break in the courtyard.”

“I slept for an hour.” Shen Zechuan turned his head back to gaze at Xiao Chiye. “There is still something on my mind. I won’t be able to sleep even if I try.”

Xiao Chiye inclined his head and patted Meng, who was perched on his shoulder, to tell it to go and play by itself. He did not have the time to change his clothes, and so there was still dust and dirt on him as he stood beside Shen Zechuan. He asked, “What can you see from here?”

Shen Zechuan looked at the rise and fall of the mountain forest. The impending darkness that was about to blanket the sky was still huddled among the shade of the trees, while the inclining orange-red sunset shone in the sky at a side. Meng soared among them, like a pebble running rampant among a sea of silk-tree flowers, stirring up clouds of waves.

“The future.” Shen Zechuan answered calmly. “In the future, Cizhou will be the button that connects the Libei’s merchant route. We’ll open up a bridle path in the southwest that leads straight to Hezhou, and it’ll end at the entrance of the berth in Hezhou. That way, from dismounting to embarking, all the commercial goods can arrive at Yongyi Harbor in half a month. The Xi clan’s fleets of ships can open up trading opportunities with local specialties internally and exotic rarities externally. The silver warehouses that had been cleaned out can one day fill up again. I do not begrudge those money or where they have gone; we will have even more in the future. Cizhou is also behind Dunzhou and Duanzhou, which have become the ‘gates’ of Zhongbo. If they want access to the grains and commodities in the future, then they can only live in harmony with Cizhou.”

“No doubt there is a need to strengthen defenses after the reclamation of Dunzhou and Duanzhou. The rebuilding of the garrison troops is of urgent priority. You have to be very careful in your choices. Let those you can trust and who are up to the task attend to garrison duties. But those who are capable might not necessarily be willing to submit to another. When the time comes...” Xiao Chiye turns around and points in Libei’s direction. “I’ll build an armored cavalry barracks on the southeast of the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path. If anyone dares to mess around, just send me a whistle, and I’ll lead my men right over.”

Shen Zechuan laughed and said softly, “Cizhou is too important to you and me. This city cannot be ceded over to anyone else. Zhou Gui is a good official, but he isn’t suited to be the prefectural prefect of an entire prefecture. He can’t save anyone by relying on zeal alone, especially in this situation where he is surrounded by a pack of wolves lying in wait on all sides.”

“We are short of people.” Xiao Chiye had been thinking about this matter ever since he left Lei Changming’s old camp.

If Cizhou were to be the starting point for both of them, then they would be increasingly stretched as the territory expanded. This strain referred to the lack of capable, right-hand men to administer official affairs.

If Qiao Tianya or Chen Yang was still around, then the perilous situation of Cizhou today might not have materialized, but their position that was currently not obvious would still gradually go on to reveal contradictions.

“Zhou Gui is suited to be the Tax Circuit Intendant of the Six Prefectures. His love for the people is fundamental. A man like this would never let officials and merchants collude for selfish gains when he goes around on an inspection tour. But he’s also too benevolent. He won’t and won’t dare to mete out severe punishments, that’s why he can’t suppress the local hoodlums. It was precisely because Kong Ling has an assessment of Zhou Gui’s character that he went to him to help him get rid of the obstacles in his way and to help him handle matters efficiently.” Shen Zechuan spoke unhurriedly. “If both of them can continue to work as one, then they would still be able to achieve plenty in the future.”

“That Lei Jingzhe.” Xiao Chiye asked. “What do you think of him?”

“This man must be defeated without a doubt.” Shen Zechuan moved along the battlements of the city wall and took a few steps forward. He said, “I also thought he was something when we left the camp. But I no longer think so after seeing his bearing and behavior today.”

“As expected, you and I are on the same wavelength.” Seeing as it was getting dark, Xiao Chiye moved next to Shen Zechuan and walked together with him. He said, “Lei Changming is his uncle related by blood. In order to get a head start in Cizhou, he left Lei Changming behind at the camp as an abandoned chess piece. In doing so, he might not be able to win his men over. And in his attempt to dodge the arrow when he was fleeing, he used the henchman by his side as a shield. From these two incidents, we can see that this man has no lack of shrewdness but is severely lacking in benevolence. If he wants to submit and pledge allegiance to Qudu and obtain an official position there, he will have to turn the bandits under his command into a regular army. But he still doesn’t seem to understand yet that being a bandit is very different from being a general. Prestige and trust are not something that can be accumulated by brutality alone. He keeps changing his orders again and again on the battlefield. As they say, a general does not retract the order he has given; he has to be impartial in dishing out rewards and punishments; and he must remain steadfast and unwavering, only then will he be able to lead and command the soldiers.<sup>1</sup> He is simply not cut out to be a general at all.”

“That’s why I’m more worried about Qi Zhuyin than this man.” Shen Zechuan hesitated before the stairs. He said, “The marriage alliance between Qidong and the Hua clan cannot be reversed. Now that Libei has rebelled, Qidong is the last crutch that Qudu has left to rely on. Within the next few days, Qi Zhuyin will no doubt receive a promotion and a noble rank. The empress dowager already has great admiration for her to begin with. Once her noble title is confirmed, it would be time for her to deploy troops north. No matter what, I have to turn Cizhou into an impregnable fortress before Qi Zhuyin arrives.”

“The Commander-in-Chief isn’t an easy one to fight. My eldest brother is the heavy cavalry, Lu Guangbai is the guerilla, while Qi Zhuyin is the cavalry and infantry combined. Having resided in the Cangjun Commandery for a long time, she won’t deploy the troops easily, but she has a tendency to launch a violent assault and storm the enemies. Back then when she penetrated deep into the desert to save Qi Shiyu, she was like the sudden onslaught of rainstorm that gave her opponents a jolt. It’s her usual practice to cut down foes with one blow to strike fear in the heart of others, so that when they faced her in battle, they will not help but be frightened.” Xiao Chiye mulled it over for a moment. “I want to fight a battle with her.”

Shen Zechuan looked at him.

Xiao Chiye patted his shoulder and said, “It’s not like I want to fight her now. The way you look at me is so fierce.”

Shen Zechuan took a step down the stairs. As if remembering something, he looked back and asked, “Where’s my fan?”

Xiao Chiye pinched his chin and strode down three steps with one stride. Then he crouched down before him and said, “Come on up, and I’ll give it to you.”



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#### **Footnotes**

1. 将无还令，赏罚必信，如天如地，乃可御人; From the Three Strategies-Upper Strategies 《三略·上略》 by Huang Shigong (黄石公)



## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 112 : CHASING THE STARS



The setting sun faded away, replaced by a scattering of stars that adorned the sky peeking through the tree branches. The Imperial Army's patrol squad made their rounds around the streets and alleys. Giving Shen Zechuan a piggyback, Xiao Chiye walked along the street shrouded under a cloak of shadows. It was a little hot this summer night, and Xiao Chiye had his ceremonial outer garment open as he walked at a speed that was not fast.

Shen Zechuan lifted his head high and put his chin on top of Xiao Chiye's hair. Xiao Chiye was too tall, causing the upper half of Shen Zechuan's body to be exposed to the moonlight. He only had to turn his head, and he would have been able to look over the wall into other people's courtyards.

"I'll head for the old camping grounds tomorrow morning and intercept his escape route from the east. He won't dare to head north, and there are troops lying in ambush to the south. I'll be back in three days, at the very latest." Supporting Shen Zechuan, Xiao Chiye said, "It has been a long time since we last got news of Qudu. We have to send someone to make inquiries as soon as possible. Only then will we know of Qi Zhuyin's movements."

"The marriage between Hua and Qi has been delayed again and again. To seek external aid, the empress dowager will not let Qi Shiyu wait any longer." Shen Zechuan estimated the dates and said, "The wedding will not be delayed beyond the eighth month at the very latest."

"Hua Xiangyi can go right ahead and marry all she wants." Xiao Chiye said. "As long as she doesn't have an heir, it's still Qi Zhuyin who has the final say in Qidong. She's going there to be the second wife,<sup>1</sup> and she's even younger than Qi Zhuyin. If she gives birth to a son, he will be Shi Shiyu's legitimate son of direct descent. Once Qi Shiyu croaks, mother and son will be the hidden obstacle that stands in the way of Qi Zhuyin from holding on to military power."

"The prestige of the commander-in-chief among the troops cannot be underestimated. Will she really fear a brother of direct descent who is younger than her by so many years?" Shen Zechuan thought and said, "If

she seeks peace back at home and lives in harmony with Hua Xiangyi, then she would instead save herself a lot of trouble.”

“It hasn’t been easy for Qi Zhuyin to be conferred a title. It’s evident from the setbacks she faced when she took over Qidong’s Five Commanderies. Not only is Qudu deeply uneasy over her gender, but even Qidong internal military administration officials had also begun to stir.” At this point, Xiao Chiye paused for a moment before he continued, “Besides, I have already handed over the genealogy records that I got someone to copy to Qi Zhuyin a long time back in Qudu. Just with this alone, she will never let Hua Xiangyi give birth to a child.”

As long as Hua Xiangyi’s standing in Qidong remained shaky, the empress dowager would never be able to turn the Qidong’s Garrison Troops into her own right-hand men. However, this was all based on the premise that Qudu still had no real emperor. If Qudu were to push forth a new emperor before winter arrived, then Qi Zhuyin would be on track to face off Libei.

“I’m worried about Lu Guangbai.” Xiao Chiye kept his relaxed expression in check and said, “After autumn, the Biansha Cavalry will cross the boundary into our territories to plunder food. This is the time when their horses are plump and well-fed, and they will choose to take a risk in order to better survive the winter. The Bianjun Commandery relies on Dazhou to allocate and distribute their military provisions. The Twelve Tribes of Biansha are well aware that they are poor, and they also know that the granary is built right in Bianjun, and it’s close to the camps. That’s why they would go after Lu Guangbai every time. Qidong’s military provisions this year were cut by half. He’s by far the worst off when it comes to surviving and defenses. My leaving of Qudu only serves to exacerbate the situation and make matters worse for him.”

But this was something that even Shen Zechuan had no way to help. If Bianjun’s position had not been so far east, and if there had not been Tianfei Watchtower and Suotian Pass stationed on both sides, then perhaps they could still send a message to Ge Qingqing, who was still in Juexi’s Yongyi Harbor, and get Xi Dan to think of ways to buy a batch of grains from Juexi and send it to Qidong through Hezhou as an emergency measure for Lu Guangbai. But Bianjun just had to be to the east of Cangjun. There were obstacles both to the left and right, and there was no other passage unless they transported it right under Cangjun’s nose. Qidong was not Juexi either.

Qi Zhuyin had set up layers upon layers of impenetrable defenses there. It was simply impossible to think of passing through it without so much a sound.<sup>2</sup>

Bianjun was just like the night watchman standing on the edge of a cliff. It was a place similar to a desperate and hopeless situation.

Finding the atmosphere heavy, Xiao Chiye turned a circle with Shen Zechuan on his back and said, "The utmost priority now is still to pursue and attack Lei Jingzhe. Once we manage to secure Zhongbo, it'll be easier to help Bianjun. As long as we can cross over Tianfei Watchtower, we will be able to arrive there directly. Why are you still sniffing when I'm reeking of sweat all over?"

Shen Zechuan wiped off the beads of sweat on the side of Xiao Chiye's neck with his fingers. He snuggled against his cheek and said, "Start running."

Xiao Chiye jerked him once and answered, "Too tired to run."

Shen Zechuan pinched Xiao Chiye's cheek and said, "If the Second Young Master can't *do* it, then I'll do it."

Xiao Chiye made a show of going to put him down and said, "Get down. This Second Young Master shall see how you are going to carry me back tonight."

Shen Zechuan tightened his arms around him. As he lifted his legs up, he said in all seriousness, "Why get so fired up over a minor matter? You can *do* it."

Xiao Chiye lifted him up again.

Shen Zechuan clung onto his back and edged his fingertips down along the front flaps of his clothes, pulling it down as he said into his ear, "Why can't Er-lang *do* it? Er-lang can *do* anything."

Xiao Chiye turned his head. He was surprisingly calm as he asked, "Where to?"

Shen Zechuan said, "To—"

Shen Zechuan had not finished his words when Xiao Chiye took a stride out with his long legs and broke into a run. Carrying Shen Zechuan on his back, he ran past the tree shades, stepping upon the moonlight of the summer night as he made his way into the alley where the lights were already extinguished. The patrol squad came and went, but they never noticed both men's figures. Xiao Chiye easily leaped across the small steps, where dappled shadows of trees fell upon his hair. There was a clatter as



their shadows crashed into and broke up the starlight on the ground, like the free and reckless wind among heaven and earth.

The young servant boy guarding the door to the small courtyard was still yawning. When he heard the knock on the door, he thought the marquis and vice commander had returned. With his clothes draped around him and with a lantern in hand, he went to open the door with a smile on his face. But it was empty on the other side of the door.

“A poltergeist?” The young servant boy blurted in a soft voice and poked his head out, but he did not see anyone to his left and right, so he quickly shrank back and trotted back to his room with his outer garment wrapped tightly around him.

The corridor was dark, with no lit lanterns. Shen Zechuan’s footsteps were in such disarray that he almost tripped Xiao Chiye. Xiao Chiye pressed Shen Zechuan up against the door panel and pulled off the ribbon, which Shen Zechuan had used to tie up his hair, as they kissed. The kisses left Shen Zechuan gasping for breath. He reached out both hands behind his back and felt around in search of the door lock.

“No key.” Xiao Chiye lifted Shen Zechuan slightly. His eyes pressed in close before him, and he looked greedily at Shen Zechuan. “Can’t enter.”

Shen Zechuan’s heels slid down along the back of Xiao Chiye’s waist, but then he raised his hand and pressed his palm against Xiao Chiye’s approaching chin to stop it in place. He breathed out a double entendre, his breath hot, “If you can’t enter, then you can’t *enter*.”

Xiao Chiye pinched Shen Zechuan’s mouth open and lowered his head to take in that sliding tongue. All of last night’s exhaustion from the rushed journey seemed to have been swept away clean. Shen Zechuan swallowed the saliva and listened to the creaking of the door panel from the bumps. He wanted to ease that jarring sound, so he pulled Xiao Chiye closer until the latter was right on him without the slightest gap between them.

“Let’s build a home.” Grinding against soft flesh, Xiao Chiye’s throat tightened as he said with a sigh that had escaped, “Here. Or anywhere else.”<sup>3</sup>

Shen Zechuan was sweating as he raised his head with misty eyes blurred by tears. He did not make a sound. He had not done it for a very long time, and he was being so stimulated tonight that he was trembling slightly. Just a few times, and it was all about to come out. He clenched the clothes on Xiao Chiye’s shoulder, creasing it as his chest heaved violently.

It was only when he calmed a little after a while that he said under his breath, “No. Can’t. In, into the room...”

But Xiao Chiye took this “no” as a reply to his earlier question and abruptly straightened his back, almost causing Shen Zechuan to cry out involuntarily.

“Why can’t Er-lang *do* it?” Xiao Chiye held Shen Zechuan firmly in his arms and pinched the latter’s face to correct its position. Then he said, ruthlessly and wickedly, “Er-lang can *do* anything.”<sup>4</sup>

Shen Zechuan’s words were cut off by Xiao Chiye’s kiss. The corners of his eyes quickly reddened, and even his half-exposed neck had gone red. He opened his mouth several times in an attempt to answer in between the kisses, but Xiao Chiye would not give him the chance. All he could do was to let other kinds of sounds loose. Sweat drenched through his clothes, and Shen Zechuan gradually found it hard to breathe. His forehead pressed against Xiao Chiye’s chest as the waves of ecstasy crashing over him made him dizzy. It was not even an hour, and he had already surrendered twice.



Xiao Chiye was done taking his bath only after Shen Zechuan fell asleep. Seeing the first glimmer of dawn outside the window, he did not take a rest but instead drank a cup of strong tea and crouched by the bedside to watch Shen Zechuan sleep soundly.

He still fell asleep, after all.

Xiao Chiye raised his hand to caress Shen Zechuan’s cheek.

Once he returned to Libei, he had to invite the Venerable Yigui over. Having turned it over in his mind from different angles after the episodes, his conclusion was that the frequent recurrence of Shen Zechuan’s illnesses – whether it was the cold or the epidemic disease – definitely had something to do with that medicine.

Too thin.

Xiao Chiye gazed at Shen Zechuan and thought in the silence that reigned.

Although he had also previously found Shen Zechuan thin back in Qudu, it was still much better than now. Shen Zechuan’s bout of illness after Qi Huilian’s death came and went quickly, but he had still yet to be fed back to health. There was nothing the entire journey here. Xiao Chiye held him, watched him, protecting his growing reliance on him every way he could.

Shen Wei and Bai Cha did not matter.

Xiao Chiye lowered his head and pressed up against Shen Zechuan's cheek as he stared, with deep hostility, at the sunlight which was attempting to cloak Shen Zechuan.

Shen Lanzhou was his—Xiao Ce'an's.



When Xiao Chiye spurred his horse out of the city, Zhou Gui and Kong Ling saw him off. Reining in the reins, he said, "I will return in three days, regardless of success or failure. The Imperial Army stationed here will stay put for the time being. The instant they detect Lei Jingzhe's trail, send someone to inform me posthaste. Although Cizhou's city walls are old and worn-out, you cannot simply just let it be and brush it aside. Lanzhou will explain the specific arrangements for reinforcements to both of you later."

"Rest assured, Your Lordship." Zhou Gui said. "All our men in Cizhou will go along with the Vice Commander's arrangements."

"As for matters relating to the reconstruction of Cizhou's garrison troops..." Xiao Chiye paused for a moment and said, "I won't concern myself with it. That will be military affairs Lanzhou will be deliberating over with both of you. The Imperial Army is only standing in as the authority on patrols. I can't overstep authority to handle it. So if there are any issues, please discuss them over with Lanzhou. I'm not at liberty to decide."

Kong Ling felt a warm buzz in his heart before it went cold again. They were originally worried that Xiao Chiye would use the patrols he was standing in for as an excuse to interfere with the reconstruction of the Cizhou's garrison troops. So he was relieved to hear him say so, but following right after, worries overtook him again. Xiao Chiye did not want Cizhou's military power. He would not accept Cizhou's remuneration, nor would he take Cizhou's grains. Then why did he go to the trouble of running all over to duke it out with Lei Jingzhe? He might as well head north and return home to live a free and unfettered life.

Kong Ling deliberated over his words, but before he could speak, he heard Xiao Chiye continue, "Since I've agreed to suppress the bandits for both gentlemen, I'll not renege on my promise. Your Excellency Zhou is willing to risk his head to let the Imperial Army pass through Cizhou. I naturally have to reciprocate this friendly sentiment. Moreover, the Imperial

Army's food supply these few days is being borne by the common folks of Cizhou. We have eaten your rice, so we will surely fight the battles."

Zhou Gui bowed to him in farewell and said, "Then we shall wait here for Your Lordship to return in triumph."

"There are a few more matters I'll just tell both of you at the same time." Xiao Chiye's horse took a few steps around as he looked at Zhou Gui and Kong Ling and said, "I do not have the intention to take a concubine in this life. Now that I'm temporarily residing at Your Excellency Zhou's residence, there's no need to send any more people to the courtyard. Man or woman, I don't want any of them. Moreover, we are currently bogged down with work; I don't have the spare energy to beat around the bush with you both. So I'm throwing this out here today to make it clear to both of you."

Kong Ling knew he was referring to the incident the last time, and he could not help but look embarrassed, stuck in a predicament where it would be inappropriate for him to smile or answer.

"Lanzhou has lived in Zhongbo for a long time, and it's inevitable that there will be someone bringing up old affairs. But, he, Shen Zechuan..." Xiao Chiye raised the horsewhip and pointed in the direction of Qudu, "... is the student of Qi Huilian, the Grand Mentor of the Crown Prince in the Eastern Palace; the last disciple of Ji Gang of Duanzhou; the former Northern Judge-cum-Vice Commander of the Imperial Bodyguards; and the head of household of my – Xiao Ce'an's – future residence. He has nothing to do with any other names."

This time, even Zhou Gui did not know how to answer. He was not a person who would fob others off or give others the run-around to begin with, and Xiao Chiye's words had rendered him dumbstruck. His mouth opened and closed as he said, "Uh, uh..."

Xiao Chiye turned his horse around and rode away with his gyrfalcon in tow.

It was a long time before Zhou Gui returned to his senses. Clutching his sleeves, he asked Kong Ling, "What, what did His Lordship mean by this? Then the Prince of Libei..."

"He has already laid out his cards on the table this clearly. He doesn't give a hoot about the troops in Cizhou. But don't mention Shen Wei." Kong Ling calmly wiped his sweat and said, "And don't bring up Bai Cha again."



This is the uncensored version with additional text from revised version thrown in (unless otherwise stated).

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Thank you [Peach](#) for pointing out the typo! <3

#### Footnotes

1. 继室 specifically the second wife after the death of the first principal wife. She will have legitimate status, unlike a concubine, and her son will be a *di* and not a *shu*.
2. Map
3. In the revised version, it is:
4. “Let’s build a home.” Xiao Chiye said in a low and deep voice right close to Shen Zechuan, with a tenderness he himself had never realized. “Here. Or anywhere else.”
5. The words Xiao Chiye left unsaid: Including *do* you.
- 6.
7. The can’t do (不行) mentioned throughout their conversation not only refers to Ce’an’s physical abilities (e.g., carry Lanzhou and run) but is also an insinuation of his sexual prowess, i.e., he can’t get it up/can’t *do* Lanzhou (◡‿◡)

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 113 : REUNION



Ding Tao sat cross-legged on the veranda, moving aside the fruits on the silver plate as he counted them over and over again. He stood guard here, preventing anyone from coming near. It was getting late, with a few rays of the evening sun still adorning the courtyard walls as bits and pieces of the setting sun peeked through the leaves of the Chinese scholar trees.

Shen Zechuan had just awoken. He had slept for too long and too soundly, so his back and waist were sore and aching. He felt exceptionally tired. He opened the door, blanking out for a moment when he saw Ding Tao.

Ding Tao scratched his cheek, feeling uncomfortable with the way Shen Zechuan was staring at him. He put the hand that was still grasping the fruit behind his back and asked with apprehension, “Young Master, d-dinner?”

Shen Zechuan held onto the door and stood there for a little while, before asking in a hoarse voice, “... What time is it?”

“It’s the hour of *you*.”<sup>1</sup> Ding Tao was surprisingly aware today, and he quickly followed up with, “Young Master has slept for the entire day! Master left the city at the hour of *mao*<sup>2</sup> earlier. His Excellency Zhou and Mister Chengfeng went to send him off together.”

The corners of Shen Zechuan’s eyes were still a little red, and under the lingering reddish-orange glow of the evening sun, he looked as if he was drunk. He was pale to begin with, and Ding Tao found the way he looked when he lowered his eyes to slip on his shoes really handsome.

“Still no word from Juexi?” Shen Zechuan went down the steps, but he was not in a hurry to leave. Instead, he stood under the Chinese scholar tree and tilted his head up slightly to look at the sky as he slowly recovered from the lingering effects of last night’s exertion.

“No.” Ding Tao followed behind Shen Zechuan. Seeing as Shen Zechuan did not look back, he seized the opportunity to hastily stuff the other uneaten half of his fruit into his mouth and gobbled it down ravenously.

Shen Zechuan did not see any sign of Meng, and knew that Xiao Chiye had brought it along with him. He turned back, startling Ding Tao so much

that the latter choked and coughed. Shen Zechuan paused for a moment, then said, "No one is going to snatch it away from you. Take your time."

Ding Tao was choking so much his eyes teared up. As he waved his hand, he tugged at the front of his clothes and said with difficulty, "Y-young Master, cough! Are we going to look for His Excellency Zhou? His Excellency and Mister Chengfeng had taken their dinner in the front hall and are presently discussing matters."

Shen Zechuan nodded and said, "Let's go."



Zhou Gui had just finished his meal. At present, he was having a discussion in the study with Kong Ling and the various Cizhou officials of differing ranks. When he heard that Shen Zechuan had come, he immediately got up and dismissed the others.

"His Lordship has told us that the Vice Commander is feeling unwell today, so we thought that we would only be able to discuss military affairs tomorrow. We didn't expect the Vice Commander to come over today still." Kong Ling showed Shen Zechuan a seat, then sat down after him so that he would not feel awkward. He faced them slightly and continued, "Although it's still the sixth month, the trees we have planted in the residence are all tall, lush trees; it's often cold at night. The Vice Commander is used to Qudu after staying there year in year out. Now that you're here, you have to take care of your health."

Shen Zechuan took a sip of tea to moisten his throat, easing up the dryness and hoarseness a little until it was not as obvious. Only then he said, "Mister Chengfeng is right. Mister said that we would be able to discuss military affairs tomorrow. Have both of you already drawn up a charter today?"

"Ever since the Vice Commander agreed on a treaty of alliance with us, I have gathered the advisors along with the various ranking officials in Cizhou over these few days to draft up a simple copy." With a hand on his knee, Zhou Gui watched as Kong Ling got up to hand a book to Shen Zechuan. He continued, "These are all tentative. We will still need the Vice Commander's approval for the specifics. Take a look. If there's anything inappropriate, we can lay it all out for further discussion tonight."

Although he said that they were waiting for Shen Zechuan's approval, he also said they could "lay it all out for further discussion". This meant that most of the content within this book was actually already finalized.

Such was the awkward situation in which Shen Zechuan had found himself in right now. He had the money, but no other real powers on hand to speak of; Xiao Chiye's attitude was the key to the fact that he could even be at the discussion table with these two. Zhou Gui could thank him or even hold him in high esteem, but he would not hand over Cizhou's policy-making power to him. Because what they had agreed upon was a treaty of alliance, not a pledge of allegiance.

Shen Zechuan read the book amidst the silence in the study. Only Ding Tao was on the outside, teasing his sparrow; there were no servants walking about to disturb them. As Kong Ling drank his tea, a sudden uneasiness overtook him. He maintained his composure as he studied Shen Zechuan's expression, but he could not discern any sentiments on Shen Zechuan's face. He then looked at Zhou Gui, who was already letting his expression betray his urgency. He could not help but think to himself.

This Shen Zechuan was still young, yet he was an extremely deep and shrewd one. After spending several days together, Kong Ling still could not tell whether he was a willing party or not; there was no way they could find an appropriate way to deal with him. So the drafting of this book was also meant to sound out his intention as well.

It was only when the sky had slightly darkened that Shen Zechuan closed the book. He rubbed his fingertips against the teacup without saying a word.

Kong Ling was the adviser, so when they were engaged in a serious discussion of official affairs in the study, he could not overstep his authority and bypass Zhou Gui. At the same time Zhou Gui got him to light the lamps, he turned slightly to his side to face Shen Zechuan and deliberated over his words, "So what does the Vice Commander His Excellency think?"

"Your Excellency has also recorded the price fluctuations of the daily necessities of fuel, rice, oil, and salt in Cizhou over the past few years in the book, and the accounts are all clear enough that there won't be a problem estimating next year's approximate expenditure. I've also seen that Your Excellency has also written about the proportion of military pay and provisions to be allocated for the garrison troops in the future. Your Excellency has worked day and night tirelessly, taking all the various aspects into consideration." Shen Zechuan said with a smile.



Zhou Gui let out a light sigh of relief; he did not know why he was so strung up. Upon hearing Shen Zechuan, he then replied, "This book is not something I alone can write; I still have Chengfeng and my fellow officials to thank for this. Then, shall we begin to discuss the defenses of the city walls?"

Shen Zechuan's fingertips paused in place. He said, "There's no rush. I have some questions."

To which Zhou Gui hurriedly prompted, "Please, go on."

"Going by Your Excellency's estimation of Cizhou's next year approximate expenditures, there is also a remuneration of 16,000 *dan*<sup>3</sup> of grains for the 20,000 Imperial Army troops other than the rebuilt garrison troops. The total sum for both armies is 110,000 *dan* of grains." Shen Zechuan pondered it over. "This is allocated according to the amount of bumper harvest in Cizhou last year, and it's also what had been saved up for the original number of people in Cizhou at present. But I can see that Your Excellency still has a remaining ten thousand *dan* of grains left unmarked."

"That's right." Zhou Gui answered.

Although Xiao Chiye said he did not want any remuneration, they could not really not give any for real. This 16,000 *dan* of grains was only enough to last the 20,000 Imperial Army troops two-and-a-half months. This was more than the monthly amount they allocated to the 20,000 Cizhou garrison troops. Although they were unable to supply a year worth of grains, they had already done their best.

Zhou Gui was worried that Shen Zechuan found it too little, so he said with sincerity, "It is with the hope that the Vice Commander and His Lordship can understand that I showed Cizhou's accounts to the Vice Commander today. Because of the instability in Dazhou this year, our grains from last year were all successively allocated to Libei and Mount Luo. This is something that we could not have foreseen. We had the Juexi's granaries to assume responsibility for the supply of military provisions in the past years, but now this responsibility has been split between the two prefectures of Cizhou and Huaizhou. I don't know about Huaizhou, but our Cizhou really had to skimp and save in order to be able to ship out the grains. It's not that I'm complaining to the Vice Commander, but to tell you the truth, we are gritting our teeth as we shoulder the burden of the temporary supply of grains from Cizhou to His Lordship's 20,000 Imperial Army. But even then, we will only be able to hang on for a couple of months. Fortunately,

it's nearing the autumn harvest, and we will be able to make it till then after counting the days, that's why we are still not at the stage where we are at the end of our rope. I would like to ask the Vice Commander to intercede with His Lordship on behalf of Cizhou regarding this 16,000 *dan* of grain. It's not that we want to go back on our words by shifting it to next year, but there is really too much to consider."

There was already an imprint of a frown permanently etched between Zhou Gui's eyebrows given how he was always knitting his brows in worry. He rose to his feet and paced for a few steps in the open space before he said to Shen Zechuan.

"Cizhou is a place where the people's livelihood is at the mercy of the elements. But who could say if Heaven would still be willing to grant us food next year? Seeing as Dazhou has already come to this stage, I fear that once war arises next year, the fertile farmlands that Cizhou had just cultivated would be destroyed in just a moment. When the time comes, even the common folks in the city will not be able to eat their fill. And we won't be able to afford to provide for the garrison troops even if we established one. We kept a surplus of military grains not only to keep them as emergency life-saving food relief but also as preparation for the Libei Armored Cavalry. Vice Commander, it's not that we are not willing to take out big sums of money for His Lordship to use, but the Libei Armored Cavalry is the first line of defense guarding against the Biansha Hanshe Tribe. It's a fact that they are more important than the 20,000 Imperial Army troops."

"Half of the reason why Cizhou is willing to sign a treaty of alliance with both of you is that I was thoroughly heart-broken and disillusioned by the Wei clan's military provision case. It's also because His Lordship is the second young master of the Xiao clan that dispelled many of my misgivings. I did this favor not just for both of you, but also for the Hereditary Prince. Although the Vice Commander has promised that we can still continue to use the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path, I still have to leave myself a way out. After all, Juexi is Dazhou's granary. To the various clans, that is a place of strategic importance. The Vice Commander covets it, and the Empress Dowager, even more so."

"Everything I have just said to the Vice Commander is heartfelt words from the bottom of my heart." Zhou Gui finally paused. He slowly bowed to Shen Zechuan and continued, "No one has it easy trying to make a living

in turbulent times. I'm the Prefectural Prefect of Cizhou, and to me, Cizhou's safety is of utmost importance and priority. His Lordship and the Vice Commander have helped Cizhou out of a spot this time, and I will not hesitate to go through fire and water for both of you. If Cizhou still has a bumper harvest this year, then we can still add on to this 16,000 *dan* of grains next year. But Cizhou really can't supply the Imperial Army in the same way we are supplying to the Libei Armored Cavalry. I'll be frank with you. If Biansha were to invade us in autumn, or if Libei is hard-pressed for grains next year in spring, then Cizhou will allocate the grains to Libei Armored Cavalry first before we allocate it to the Imperial Army."

The candle flames in the study were not very bright. Zhou Gui lived frugally, eating and dressing simply. Other than the time he had to entertain Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye, his entire family would usually have common dishes for their meals. They even cooked tree barks during the years they were hit with disasters. Cizhou currently seemed to be the most prosperous and well-off place in Zhongbo, but in truth, it was still in shambles compared to compared to the other lands. His willingness to take out the grains was a great load of pressure on his shoulders. Zhou Gui's suggestion that they request the aid of the Libei Armored Cavalry the first time Xiao Chiye left the city was not made on the spur of the moment; it was an idea that was already deeply ingrained in his mind.

The defeat of Zhongbo's troops had been said countless times, both implied and stated, but outsiders would never experience and share the same pain as those who had been through it. Zhou Gui even developed posttraumatic symptoms because of the troop defeat case. If he so much heard a whistle at night, he would toss and turn all night in a constant state of anxiety. The defeat of the Chashi River along the boundary was really too tragic. *Massacre, massacre*—this word made its way back to Qudu from Duanzhou. Everyone was reading this word aloud back then. But to Qudu, *bloodbath* was merely a smudge of ink on the memorial. To Zhongbo, however, the destruction of properties, loss of lives, and ruin of families were all too real.

It was all because of the Libei Armored Cavalry that Cizhou had a narrow escape. In the eyes of Zhou Gui and everyone in Cizhou, the Libei Armored Cavalry was far more important than the Imperial Army. Xiao Jiming led his godly troops down to save them, and "River of Ice Armored Cavalry" was thus the death exemption token in the face of the Biansha

Cavalry at the two borders to Dazhou's north and east. Lei Jingzhe dared to angle for Cizhou, but he did not have the intent to settle down for long; he was even ready just to rob Cizhou's grains and leave to seek credit right away from Qudu. What he feared was precisely Xiao Jiming's deployment of his troops south again.

Xiao Jiming suffered a loss and was wounded in the military provisions case. But none of them had seen it with their own eyes. Those who were waiting for him did not dare to believe it, while those who feared him did not dare to bet on it. If the old-school senior officials headed by Hai Liangyi feared Xiao Fangxu, then the one those juniors down the ranks feared more was Xiao Jiming.

Silent reigned in the study. The candlelight flickered.

Shen Zechuan felt his back and waist aching. There were still traces of Xiao Chiye's bites on his collarbone, which had been covered up by his collar. Strangely enough, even at such a serious and solemn moment, he remembered Xiao Chiye's sweat-drenched face, Xiao Chiye's strong arms, and Xiao Chiye's kisses that wandered around his neck as Xiao Chiye gasped for breath.

He remembered everything about Xiao Chiye. The only thing he could not think of was a way in which Xiao Chiye was inferior to Xiao Jiming.

Shen Zechuan was silent for only a few moments, and his mind wandered for only a fleeting instant. He said, "I understand all that Your Excellency has said. We will return the exact same amount of the grains that Ce'an and I have temporarily borrowed after our arrival here next year."

The color promptly drained from Zhou Gui's face. He tried to explain, "Vice Commander, that's not what we..."

"The issue I wanted to discuss with Your Excellency is not that the grains you are allocating to the Imperial Army are too little, but that it's too much." Shen Zechuan motioned for Zhou Gui to sit and lay it out with clear reasoning, "The fact that Cizhou is willing to allocate so much grains for the Imperial Army's use is proof enough of your sincerity. But as we mentioned at the beginning, the Imperial Army will only use the grains from Cizhou at this point in time. The Imperial Army has a supply channel for future military provisions, so it doesn't need to draw from Cizhou's granary."

Zhou Gui felt foolish and did not dare to interject arbitrarily, so he looked at Kong Ling and said, "Chengfeng is the one who supervised the

drafting of the book, so there are some matters that he understands better than I do. Chengfeng, explain to the Vice Commander.”

Holding on to the back of the chair for support, Kong Ling rose to his feet. Instead of explaining, he asked, “The Vice Commander is so certain that the Imperial Army would not lack grains in the future, and you also said that the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path can still be used as usual. We really can’t think of any countermeasure that would allow us to do this. Would the Vice Commander be so kind as to explain to us? Otherwise, we will still have to ask the Imperial Army to accept this batch of grains.”

Shen Zechuan gently stirred the tea in the teacup with the lid and said, “Before this, I still want to ask both of you if Cizhou is going to live off the land in the future?”

Kong Ling replied, “Cizhou is limited by its geographical position. If not, then how can we survive?”

“What I see is the exact opposite of Mister.” Shen Zechuan put down the teacup and said, “It’s true that Cizhou was initially in a non-ideal position. There’s Libei to the north and Chazhou to the south. It is obstructed by Dunzhou and Duanzhou to the east and restricted by Dancheng to the west. It doesn’t dare to move as it pleases, and it can’t move at will either. But that was when Cizhou was still subordinated to Qudu. You are now on good terms with Libei. Dancheng can no longer rely on Qudu’s power and influence to force Cizhou to carry out orders. Meanwhile, Dunzhou has been occupied by the bandits, and a purge is imminent. With these, the three-sided walls enclosing Cizhou have already collapsed. The remaining Chazhou is not an obstacle, but an opportunity.”<sup>4</sup>

Zhou Gui wanted to get up again. His robe had already gone all creased from his kneading of it. He asked cautiously, “You mean...”

“Chazhou lies along the waterway that can lead right to Hezhou. After the defeat of the troops, the merchants in Hezhou who had come from all over took advantage of the opportunity to peddle the grains at exorbitant prices in Zhongbo, earning quick and huge profits from bandits of all sizes. It would be truly a shame if this route is only used to make someone else rich.”

“But bandits are also currently in power in Chazhou. What’s more, Chazhou has relations with the Yan clan of Hezhou. They won’t let our Cizhou use the route to do business without good cause.” Kong Ling was

growing anxious as he spoke. “Besides, what can we sell? Compared to Hezhou, Cizhou is a remote hinterland.”

“Grains.” Shen Zechuan said.

The moment he said that, Zhou Gui jerked to his feet and exclaimed, “No! Isn’t that the same as those conscienceless thieves who conspire with the Juexi officials and merchants to resell public grains for profit?”

“Your Excellency, please calm down.” The expression in Shen Zechuan’s eyes was too calm; so calm that Zhou Gui could not help but sit back down. He said, “The reason why there are people in Juexi and Hezhou reselling grains at exorbitant prices is that there is a shortage of grains in the various lands of Zhongbo, of which Chazhou is the worst hit. In Qudu, one tael of silver can buy you two *dan* of grains, while the same tael of silver in Juexi can buy you one *dan* and five *dou*<sup>5</sup> of grains. But in Chazhou, one tael of silver can buy you only two *dou* of grains. The money the bandits in Chazhou have on hand is all fleeced from the remaining commoners in Chazhou. Because of this, the law-abiding citizens registered on the household register cannot survive, and consequently, they are forced to take risks out of desperation. The number of people who are reduced to being bandits will only increase with time. Your Excellency, this is also the fundamental reason why Lei Changming—that is, Lei Jingzhe, is able to rapidly expand his troops to this number within six months. So, if Cizhou is willing to sell grains to Chazhou at a fair price slightly higher than Qudu, it would be helping Chazhou instead.”

“But,” Kong Ling frowned slightly. “If we sell the grains to Chazhou, then there will no doubt be a shortage in the granary. If we only have silver in our hands, then won’t we be in the same plight as Chazhou is in now? When the time comes, the conscienceless grain merchants in Juexi and Hezhou go even further in trying to fleece money from us.”

“Hezhou is far away. Even if Cizhou wants to do business with it, there’s no hurry to do so in these one or two years. I had some understanding of Huaizhou when I left Qudu. Huaizhou contributed half the effort in the preparation of the military provision this time, and they have an abundance of grains in their granary. Dicheng, which is on the outskirts of Qudu, lies to the southwest of Huaizhou, and it leads directly to Juexi’s harbor too. Huaizhou just happens to lack money if it wants to conduct businesses through Dicheng. Cizhou can first sell the grains to Chazhou, then buy it back from Huaizhou at a price lower than Chazhou. The surplus

silver can be used as a subsidy for other areas, while the granary can maintain its abundance of grains at all times. This can give the Libei Armored Cavalry, or Cizhou, some leeway at the crucial moments.”

The Imperial Bodyguards had an assignment to “keep track and record”, which is to take detailed records of the commodity prices in the streets and alleys. When Shen Zechuan was in office as the Northern Judge, he was in charge of the Imperial Bodyguards’ military craftsmen and could leaf through the Imperial Bodyguards’ annual records of the various areas. Ge Qingqing initially wanted to have it copied down, but Shen Zechuan spent the entire night memorizing it all down. He had been prematurely on guard against the unknown future and had not been willing to put all the important stuff down on paper that easily. As it turned out, he did right. They left Qudu in such haste that they had no time to bring anything else along. But all the records, files, and old registries and books he had read before went with him when he left.

Zhou Gui was lost in thought. He contemplated it over and over again, then said, “If Huaizhou isn’t willing...”

“It’s feasible! Luoxia Pass lies to the east of Huaizhou. It can transfer out local specialties from the frontiers of Libei, and it’s a linear route to have them transported to the harbor.” The more Kong Ling thought, the more excited he became. He could not help but walk a few rounds, then he slapped his thighs and said, “That’s right! We should have done it a long time ago! If Cizhou still doesn’t know how to adapt to the circumstances, then won’t it still be trapped in the same cage as before? This is workable!”

Shen Zechuan never answered the question of how he would keep the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path in use, but Kong Ling was already too preoccupied to bother about it. In the candlelight, he seemed to see a new lease of life for Cizhou. From what had happened with Lei Changming, he had thought Shen Zechuan to be a man who would stoop to deception and trickery. But now, he had forgotten all about it. He wanted to grab hold of Shen Zechuan to say his proper thanks, but then, when he extended his hand, he remembered Xiao Chiye, and so he hurriedly retracted them and said, “If we do this, then even if we have an over-surplus of grains in the next few years, we would not have to fear it growing mold in the granary.”

“Then, let’s discuss the garrison troops.” Zhou Gui said from across the table. “And the defenses of the city walls.”

Shen Zechuan drank his hot tea. He had yet to open his mouth when he saw Ding Tao, who had been outside the study, poked his head in and waved his hand vigorously at him.

“What’s the matter?” Shen Zechuan rose to his feet and walked over to the door.

Ding Tao had gone out earlier, and he had been running until his entire head and face were drenched in sweat. He opened his mouth and said, “Young Master, Young Master! They’re here!”

Zhou Gui and Kong Ling came closer too. One moment, they saw a very worked-up Ding Tao. The next moment, he suddenly closed both eyes and burst out crying. As if sensing something, Shen Zechuan walked out of the door in a daze. Sure enough, Ding Tao said as he choked with sobs, “Young Master! The brothers are back! Qiao Tianya is back too! And that Ji —”

Shen Zechuan was already taking large strides out to the courtyard. It was already completely dark outside, and he was still holding the teacup in his hand. As he walked, the tea spilled and scaled his fingers until they were slightly red, but he did not seem to notice; he had completely forgotten about it. He pressed on and walked outside the residence. It was a short journey, but he was sweating all over.

There were several carriages for the transportation of goods parked outside the residence, and a few tall figures were standing all spread out under the lanterns. The shorter one still in his cloak was turned sideways as he stood while resting beside the carriage.

Shen Zechuan’s chest heaved. The rims of his eyes were already reddened, but he forcibly held himself back, unwilling to lay his emotions bare here.

Ji Gang turned around for a look on hearing the movements and saw Shen Zechuan. He forgot all about the stone steps before him and nearly tripped. He revealed a headful of disheveled white hair and opened and closed his lips. Before he had even called out the name, he was already in tears.

“Chuan...” Ji Gang was just like a child with white hair. Even as he was miffed with himself for being inarticulate, he was also anxiously beckoning to him. “You, you...”

Shen Zechuan descended the stairs in two steps and stepped forth to support Ji Gang by the arm. Ji Gang turned his hands around to grab hold of



Shen Zechuan's arms instead and sized him up and down. In this life, he was first an Imperial Bodyguard in Qudu and then a blacksmith in Duanzhou. Later, a great catastrophe befell him, and he lost both of his wife and son to the grim reaper. Even so, he would still push himself to put on a tough act before others. But now, on seeing Shen Zechuan, he could not control the tears from gushing from his eyes.

"Chuan-er..." Ji Gang wiped his tears with his rough fingers and looked at Shen Zechuan over and over again. All the thousands of words he had to say became a single line of "*as long as you're fine.*"

He was travel-worn, and he had thinned down quite a bit. Qi Huilian was dead, and he had been feeling apologetic about it. At the same time, he feared Shen Zechuan would have a rough time after leaving Qudu, and so he had traveled at top speed the entire journey, unable to eat and sleep well. All those suffering piled up over his already hunched back. He had long ceased to be the Ji Gang who was renowned in the world. But this emaciated body of his was still willing to shelter and shield Shen Zechuan from the elements. For this son, he could travel thousands upon thousands of *li*, and he could fight the great heroes of the world. He really had nothing else to ask for; he only wanted to see Shen Zechuan alive and well.

"Why have you become so thin?!" Ji Gang could barely control himself from saying.

"*Shifu.*" Shen Zechuan's voice trembled. "Why has *shifu* lost so much weight?"

"I'm too old to bear any torment." Ji Gang hastily wiped his tears and said happily, "I'm all good now that I've seen you!"

Qiao Tianya brushed the shattered teacup aside and knelt on one knee. With the intent to ease the poignant moment, he said with a smile, "Although it was a few extra months worth of journey, this mission was smoothly accomplished. Master, how about a reward of a meal and wine? *Shifu*, let's take a seat before we talk!"



The courtyard that was not big to begin with was all filled with people. Kong Ling told the kitchen to cook up some hot dishes and set up a table in the courtyard, whereupon he used "On Horseback"<sup>6</sup> to treat the newly arrived Imperial Bodyguards and Libei guards to a dinner.

Qiao Tianya chased after Ding Tao's plump sparrow with a pair of chopsticks and said, "We've all gone thin from the running, but you fed it

until it's all fat. Are you planning to make it into a dish for us to enjoy with wine?"

Ding Tao was initially happy. But on hearing him, he scooped up the sparrow and said sharply, "No!"

Gu Jin was starving. Even in the intervals when he was busy shoving rice into his mouth, he did not forget to extend his chopsticks and hit Qiao Tianya's chopsticks back. He said in a muffled voice, "You need a spanking or something? Why do you have to insist on bullying a kid?"

"Your share of the food during the journey was never deducted." Chen Yang said as he sat and drank the wine. "So why are you still this hungry?"

"Brother Gu gave out all his food to the children begging along the way." It was then Fei Sheng socialized with them. He knew that everyone would be fellow comrades in the future, so he chose his words and picked the nice things to say, "Brother Gu is quite the chivalrous one to dig out a good amount of copper coins to buy steamed buns for them."

"Help others in an emergency, but not if they are in constant poverty," Chen Yang said earnestly with good intentions. "You really have to change that habit of yours where you go all soft-hearted when you see others weep. There's a shortage of food everywhere now. I'm not telling you to refrain from doing kind deeds, but you really need to know your limits."

"You spent all your money?" Ding Lai sprawled over the side of the table and said, "Jin-ge, didn't you say the last time that you would hand it over to me? I'll save it all up for you to marry a wife. I've long said to leave it with me. I remember it very clearly." As he spoke, he fished out his little book. "It's still written here that you drank wine and borrowed three copper coins from me during the spring festival three years ago. Of course, I don't care about this bit of money. I don't care. Really, *ge*, I'm just..."

Gu Jin ate to his heart's content. He stuffed the cotton he always brought along with him into his right ear, then turned to the left and said, "Wine from back home? Give me a jar."

"Only three cups." Qiao Tianya had already stopped eating earlier. He said, "You have to go with me to report to my master in a moment. Look at you drinking yourself drunk. Are you forgetting how His Lordship punished you the last time? At this time, I'd advise you to act with prudence."

He was usually laughing and joking. But he was the Vice Commander of the Imperial Bodyguard in the past, and he really gave off an imposing

air when he played the part now. His tone was mild, but his words were not as pleasant to the ears.

Gu Jin frowned in irritation, but he still nodded his head and said, "It's just a craving; I haven't had a drink for months."

Gradually, Ding Tao stopped chattering. He was the youngest among these people, and they usually saw and treated him as a younger brother. None of the elder brothers had ever been stingy in buying him candy. As such, he was not afraid of anyone and would dare to get close with everyone. He was born a discerning person, one who was particularly sensitive to the exchange of emotions between people. He could sense that the various older brothers did not seem to be as relaxed as they looked on the surface, so he held his little sparrow in both hands and behaved himself while he sat at the side, making neither noise nor fuss.

When they were almost done with their meals, Kong Ling arranged for some people to clear out the courtyard so that the guests who had been on the road all this while could rest. As it was already midnight, Shen Zechuan sent Ding Tao to lead Ji Gang away for a rest. The few at the head all had matters to report, and so they stood in successive order on the veranda and prepared to take turns to enter.

"Come on in all at once and take a seat. We can discuss it together if there's something you need to say." After all of them had entered, Shen Zechuan sat in the main seat and asked Chen Yang first, "Did the preparation of the military provisions go smoothly?"

Chen Yang sat upright and organized his choice of words for a moment before he said, "No. As Young Master had expected before I left, the officials of Huaizhou tried every means and way to stonewall and stall the preparations. The war in Libei was intense at that time, and Master's two-days deadline was just around the corner. I was burning with anxiety. It was a guard of Luoxia Pass, His Excellency Jiang, who stepped forth to vouch for me that Huaizhou was finally willing to release the grains. Fortunately, we made it in time for the deadline, and the Provisions Bridle Path leads right to Libei, so the military affairs were not held up." At this point, he fell silent for a moment before he continued, "I saw the Hereditary Prince back in Libei. He's severely injured. When he heard that Master was caught in a heavy siege back in Qudu, he wanted to lead the troops over to receive him. Unfortunately, His Lordship the Prince overruled him."

Shen Zechuan did not ask for further details. Instead, he turned to Gu Jin and said, "You came to Cizhou to transfer grains back then. Zhou Gui isn't that hard to deal with compared to the Huaizhou Prefectural Prefect. So why are you still looking troubled now?"

Gu Jin looked somewhat taken aback to be called. Everyone present could notice his absent-mindedness. Shen Zechuan looked at him. Gu Jin replied, "... It's true that I did not encounter any difficulties when I came to Cizhou to supervise the preparation of military provisions. I went along with the troops to deliver it to the frontline well in advance, and I even saw His Lordship the Prince at the eastern range of Hongyan Mountains."

He did not speak quickly, and when he stopped, he hesitated for a very long time.

"I heard that Master had left Qudu, so I've been waiting for him to return home. It was when I saw Chen Yang in the army later that I knew Master had stopped over in Cizhou. And so I rushed over."

Libei was just to the north of Cizhou. By all reasoning, they should have been faster than Qiao Tianya.

Shen Zechuan tapped his fingertips lightly on the tabletop. He skipped over it and said to Qiao Tianya. "How about you? Tell me the details."

Qiao Tianya propped up his arm on the chair handle and answered very quickly, "I hurried on my way to search for *shifu* and teacher on Master's order. I traced the trail in the inner chamber of the Xue's residence and discovered that Xue Xiuzhuo had moved *shifu* over to the Donglong's broker house, but there was no trace of Mister. We were a step late... and we could not get out of the city gate, so we could only go into hiding in Qudu." As he spoke, he looked at Fei Sheng. "It just happened that he was also leading his men to hide from the noble clans' searches. We tried every means possible to get out of the city, but Han Cheng had the city so tightly guarded that not even a drop of water could get through. We really had nowhere to go, so we hid at His Lordship's Plum Blossom Residence. As luck would have it, it was in the Plum Blossom Residence that I found the layout blueprint of Qudu's public ditches that His Lordship had tricked out of the Pan clan."

This item was obtained by Xiao Chiye from Pan Lin when he had hosted a banquet after being promoted to a nobility rank. At that time, he was prepared to keep it for himself as a contingency measure. But by some

unexpected turn of events, it became the key for Qiao Tianya and the rest's escape from Qudu.

"We crawled our way out from the public ditches." As Fei Sheng spoke, he reached a hand out to gesture with his fingers. "The public ditches in the various streets are all newly dug. I don't know if this was His Lordship's intent, but they are all narrow on the outside and wide inside. There are even candles and field rations stored in the dry spots. Over fifty of us relied on these field rations to circle around the Eight Great Training Divisions for more than ten days before we finally came out of Qudu at a place near Mount Feng."

"After we emerged, we realized that there were strictly enforced checks on public roads between Qudu and the eight cities. So we pawned off the gold, silver, and jade pendants on us and disguised ourselves as traveling merchants. We made a detour from the south of Chuancheng to Chazhou, then hurried from Chazhou over to Cizhou." Qiao Tianya said. "When we arrived at Chazhou half a month earlier, we heard that Han Cheng had already sent the imperial heir into the palace. But news was sparse after leaving Chazhou, so we lost track of what happened after. As for other details, we'll have to wait for Ge Qingqing's letter."

No one disturbed Shen Zechuan as he contemplated it over. He heard the sound of Ding Tao walking on the veranda and waited until Ding Tao walked to the door before he said, "Both of you are tired. So go with Ding Tao and take a rest for tonight."

Fei Sheng was a discerning man who could take his cues. He was not in a hurry to lay his loyalty bare tonight either, so he rose in one smooth move, took his leave of the master together with Qiao Tianya, and withdrew out of the room.



The candle flame flared a little and flickered for a moment.

Gu Jin never lifted his head to utter another sound. He sank in the darkness, with the shadows from the candle flame cast upon the side of his face like two of villains scuffling with one another.

Shen Zechuan was surprisingly cool-headed as he said, "Did something happen to both of you in Libei?"

Chen Yang lifted a hand to partially cover his face and propped up his elbow on the chair handle. He said, "... I've been staying close to the Hereditary Prince, so nothing really happened to me. It's Gu Jin."

Gu Jin undid his clasps in the unbearable silence, took off his upper garment, and turned around, thereby exposing his entire back right before Shen Zechuan. He said, "These matters should have been reported directly to Master, but Master will only be back a few days later. As per Master's instruction back in Qudu, I can report to Young Master's first. I arrived at the area where the war was the most intense. His Lordship and Commander-in-Chief Zuo are both safe. After the conclusion of the military provisions investigation, I temporarily took up my original position as the vanguard of the reconnaissance squad, dealing with the cavalry of the Hanshe Tribe every day. I can't remember which day, but we ran into an ambush when I was leading the squad back from the eastern mountain ranges."

That back was already festered. The more severe spots had already been scraped away. Blood could still be seen seeping through the bandaged areas.

"I was hit by an arrow, but I managed to escape. I initially thought it was someone from the Hanshe Tribe, so I led the remaining 200 men and skirted around the grasslands where the Hanshe Tribe lurks to make our way back through the Tudalong Banner's<sup>7</sup> swamps. But who knew, we got ambushed again that very night at Tudalong Banner." Gu Jin pulled up his clothes over him. As he secured the clasps, he said, "Young Master, I was initially a scout. It's because of this pair of eyes and ears that I could be chosen by His Lordship the Prince as a guard. I may not be as good as I was before in all these years I've stayed in Qudu, but after Master's admonition, I no longer dared to be negligent, especially on the battlefield where I tread with a lot more caution. That night, my marching route order was directly issued. I've never discussed it with anyone. Yet we got ambushed both times. So I started to suspect that there's a spy from the Hanshe Tribe in the squad."

"While escaping the second time, I discovered there was snake venom on the arrow. This poison had been smeared on Ding Tao's steel needles in the past. It's something that came from the Hongyan western mountain range. My back was festering pretty badly, and we were being closely pursued through the swamps. Then I was also bitten by some poisonous bugs. I couldn't hold out, and a fever broke out at dawn."

At this point, Gu Jin stopped.

He spoke dully, and he paused many times as if repeatedly confirming to himself in case he said one word wrong. He knew the implications of his

upcoming words.

“Our horses all drowned in the swamp. I couldn’t walk on anymore. The Libei Armored Cavalry’s Changzhu camp lies about ten *li* or so south of Tudalong Banner. Strangely enough, no one was on patrol that day. I had my trusted junior general head back first while I remained where I was to wait for reinforcements. But no one came even after I waited from dusk to dawn the next day. I was worried that the spy would make use of this chance to enter Changzhu camp, so I pushed myself to hurry back. I barely escaped by the skin of my teeth back to the camp, but I was stripped of my blade and held in custody. I spent the entire night in the prison shack where the Biansha prisoners-of-war were detained. On the second day, I was taken to the front tent to be put on trial with the general of Changzhu camp, Guo Weili, presiding over it.”

Gu Jin omitted the details of the trial. He had no wish to recall it either. That was, to him, not physical pain, but a mental collapse of sorts.

He continued in a very, very soft voice. “They said I was in covert communication with the Hanshe Tribe to wipe out the vanguard squad even further east in the Tudalong Banner. They stripped me of my rank in the military and wanted me to confess if I had done so on someone else’s instructions. I can’t confess to something I have never done. I questioned Changzhu camp why they overlooked both of my consecutive requests for reinforcements, and they claimed that they never received it. According to military law, I would have to undergo a joint trial by three generals and have the current commander-in-chief give the go-ahead in person before I can be executed. But Guo Weili kept insisting that the Hereditary Prince have yet to recover from his severe injuries, and they had the authority to act on his behalf. If not for Chen Yang arriving in time that day, I would not be standing here before Young Master now.”

Shen Zechuan picked out the candle wick with a silver needle, and the flame extinguished. He stared at that candle, which seemed to be shedding tears. In just an instant, countless thoughts had already flashed through his mind. He did not even need to be reminded by Chen Yang and Gu Jin to remember, from the letter of appointment by the Ministry of War, that this Guo Weili was a person Xiao Jiming had single-handedly promoted.



Xiao Chiye followed the trail left by Lei Jingzhe and pursued him all the way to the north of the old camping grounds. He dismounted to grab a

handful of soil, then looked ahead and slightly narrowed his eyes.

Tantai Hu surveyed the mountain range and said, "They are going to step across Libei's boundary line if they continue on north; they won't dare to head there, so they can only split up and flee. Master, I suspect he is leading us on a wild goose chase. It's too strenuous to keep chasing after them like this."

"He's indeed doing just that." Xiao Chiye loosened his grip. "And they are fleeing in small groups. Naturally, we can't catch them all in one fell swoop with a large net. But if we split up now, we will fall into the other party's trap. He's unwilling to fight me head-on because he can't handle the momentum of the Imperial Army. He's worried that his own men will lose focus and morale. They are familiar with this area, so they try every means possible to lure us into splitting up into small groups so that they can break through our defenses one by one."

"We don't have enough cavalry." Tantai Hu examined the terrains. "This brigand is really too crafty!"

"No rush." Xiao Chiye stood up.

Meng returned from his patrol and landed on Xiao Chiye's shoulder. It stood together with Xiao Chiye in the night breeze. The wind rustled the grass, scattering a few strands of willow leaves before him.

"Of the five arms, only fire is the most intense."<sup>8</sup> Once again, Xiao Chiye got on his horse. "I want a fire so blazing that he has nowhere to hide."

Tantai Hu followed suit and got on his horse. He said, "But there are more lands than trees here. If set aflame, I fear the fire will spread to the grasslands of Libei."

Xiao Chiye laughed out loud on the horse and said to Tantai Hu, "I'm not asking you to burn this place down. Go to the big towns and small villages along the way and get them to put up bulletins announcing that whoever harbors the bandits will be executed with immediate effect. If they inform the Imperial Army, they will be rewarded copper coins per bandit reported. I'll pay as much as they report. And tell them too, Cizhou is about to issue a conscription notice. If they go, three meals a day will be provided if nothing else, and informants who have been rewarded cash from the Imperial Army will be given priority. Since Lei Jingzhe doesn't want to be found by us, I'll make him expose himself."



Tantai Hu was hesitant, but still said, “But didn’t we run out of money...”

“Go report the figures to Lanzhou.” Xiao Chiye urged his horse on, then reined it in and looked back to say, “This Second Young Master can’t even dig out some copper coins?”

Tantai Hu looked embarrassed.

Xiao Chiye twirled his thumb ring and said with an unfeeling expression, “Oh.”



T97’s Words:

Three chapters in one.

A word about the grains. Here, 1 *dan* ≈ 90kg. Qudu has a special supply granary, so the price of grains generally will not fluctuate too drastically. Officials have monthly income subsidies. In comparison, the price of goods in Juexi is high. 16,000 *dan* can roughly last the 20,000 Imperial Army troops 2.5 months. But this is based on the premise that there’s no war and the Imperial Army has no cavalry and will not be on the move constantly. It’s a rough calculation I made. Of course, it’s also possible that I was off in my calculation orz.

Thank you for reading.

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SPECIAL THANKS TO

CEO Lanzhou + All of Zhongbo Mart’s minions

[Eggy](#), [Rie](#), [Lam](#), [Lin](#), [Yunyun](#), [Dee](#), Lianyin

+ [Alex](#) for burning brain cells!

Footnotes

1. 酉时 hour of *you*, i.e., 5-7 pm based on the system of two-hour subdivisions used in former times
2. 卯时 hour of *mao*, i.e., 5-7 am based on the system of two-hour subdivisions used in former times
3. 石 *dan*, dry measure for grain equal. 1 *dan* = approximately 90kg (see author’s note)
4. [Map](#)

5. 斗 *dou*, a dry measure for grain equal to one-tenth of a 石 *dan*
6. A strong wine from Libei, as mentioned in Chapter 102
7. 旗 *qí* banner, administrative subdivision in inner Mongolia equivalent to county in China
8. 五兵之中，惟火最烈 From *Jixiao Xinshu*; New Treatise on Effective Military Discipline 《纪效新书》 by Qi Jiguang (戚继光). It is a military treatise or manual written in 1560 by Qi Jiguang, a Ming Dynasty General famous for defending China from the Japanese pirates' invasion.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 114 : INTENSITY OF FLAMES (REVISED)

Guest Translated by: [Tea<3](#)

Edited by: Lianyin

Having gone hungry for a whole day, Lei Jingzhe squatted beside the pigsty with a bowl in hand. He shoved those hard-earned corn<sup>1</sup> noodles into his mouth and gulped them down. One of his subordinates was also squatting next to him. He was a little imp around the same age as Ding Tao, but as strong as a young ox. He gobbled down his food just as ravenously as Lei Jingzhe did.

A head poked out of the opened kitchen window, and the man used a stir-fry spatula to bang on the pot rim and yelled, “There’s some soup broth left. Do you want to drink it? If you do, then get your ass over here quick!”

“Yes, yes, we want it!” Before Li Xiong had even finished swallowing the noodles in his mouth, he was already hurriedly running to the window. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand as he brought his bowl next to the pot. His eyes never once left that clear soup.

“You have quite the appetite there.” The cook scraped the bottom of the pot. “Tell your older brother to get down to work and find some honest job to do. Then you wouldn’t have to starve to this extent!”

“My bro is going to do great things!” Li Xiong saw the soup was about to drip from the side of the bowl, so he swiped his fingers around it and put his finger into his mouth to suck it clean.

The cook was a strong man in the prime of his life, too. He pulled his apron and wiped the sweat on his forehead. Looking at how strong and good-natured Li Xiong was, he wiped the sweat off for him too while he was at it and said with disapproval, “Your face is as dark as the bottom of a pot, and there’s no one at home to take care of you. Hey, you there. What are you busy with all day? At least clean this kid up a bit!”

Lei Jingzhe smiled simply at the cook. He was still chewing the pickled vegetables. Li Xiong trotted over and poured the soup into Lei Jingzhe’s

bowl as if he was offering up a treasure. He said solicitously, “Bro, you eat it!”

“Good lad!” Lei Jingzhe did not stand on ceremony as he tilted his head back and drank it in one gulp. When he finished drinking, he looked up at the sun above his head; it was so scorching that it was making him sweat. He squeezed his stinging eyes shut, shifted his feet, and cursed under his breath, “Fuck his mother!”

“Fuck his mother,” Li Xiong imitated him. He stood up and shielded Lei Jingzhe from the sunlight.

Lei Jingzhe propped up an arm on his knee and asked, “How is it outside?”

Li Xiong stretched his neck out and looked around. He answered in a small voice, “They’re still searching!”

Looking irritable, Lei Jingzhe hung his head down, exposing a scorpion tattoo on the back of his neck that was currently dripping with sweat. He had dispersed his people after he had fled from Cizhou, taking only this silly lad he had raised from childhood with him as he sneaked his way into a small town along the public road. He had sat and watched as the Imperial Army was led on a wild goose chase all over. He was waiting for Xiao Chiye to run out of patience so that he would disperse his own soldiers and come after him himself. Who knew Xiao Chiye was not impatient in the slightest? Instead, he had set this fire along this road, letting it blaze until all the people were burning with anxiety and panic everywhere.

“Bro, the reward money of the Imperial Army’s money is so pathetic.” Li Xiong said with bewilderment. “It’s not enough to even get the brothers some wine. Why are there still so many people going?”

“It’s precisely because the reward is small.” Under Lei Jingzhe’s sweat-sheened brows were a pair of extremely bright eyes. “The price he’s offering is exactly right.”

If Xiao Chiye set the reward money right at the price of a couple of taels of silvers, then the commoners would not necessarily be willing to be his informants. Zhongbo had been hit with many disasters in recent years. The bandits ruled by force, so the higher the reward, the more it suggested that it was no easy feat to do what was asked of them—that it was a task that might jolly well cost them their lives. But a few copper coins were worthwhile. They only had to inform the Imperial Army upon discovering traces of the bandits, and no one would know about it. It was just a few

copper coins, and it was normal to spend it all in an instant. Even if this group of bandits came back to seek vengeance, they would not be able to track anyone down.

“Then what should we do?” Li Xiong drenched in sweat from head to toe. He looked at Lei Jingzhe. “Bro, why don’t we just fucking go ahead and do it! He only has 20,000 men.”

Lei Jingzhe was feeling restless too. He could not be clearer about Xiao Chiye’s intentions. Xiao Chiye wanted to force them into making a move out of restlessness so that they would not be able to sit still and continue hiding. But he was extremely clear-headed. He knew that the people he was leading were a motley crew cobbled together from the two prefectures in the east. None of them had received formal military training. They would end up battered and defeated the moment they lost their current advantage and faced off the well-equipped Imperial Army. However, it was not an option to keep hiding either. Lei Jingzhe could hide, but could those rowdy subordinates of his hold it in?

Lei Jingzhe was sweating. He stared at the muck under his feet and said, “That person is a little underhand. He won’t play a game with me by the rules of benevolence, justice, morality, virtue, and the likes. I don’t think he has even set up defenses in the north at all. He just wants to jostle us over. He knows very well that it’s Libei in the north, and he’s betting that we won’t dare to go there.”

But damn it!

Feeling stifled with pent-up frustration, Lei Jingzhe spat.

He really did not dare to go!

“We’ll wait for one more night.” Lei Jingzhe suddenly stood up and said, “Go, tell Liu’er to notify the brothers who are still in the town tonight that we’ll leave if the situation doesn’t look right. If worst comes to worst, we’ll just retreat back to Mount Luo first. I have all the energy to play a war of attrition with Xiao Chiye!”



Xiao Chiye was eating a few steamed buns paired with pickled vegetables. He sat on a wooden stake used for tethering horses and watched as the soldiers issued paper slips that could be used to exchange for copper coins to the commoners who came to tip them off.

“Master.” Tantai Hu walked over and said, “He really is something to scatter his people everywhere. How is he going to issue his orders this way?”

He can't be going around knocking on their doors one by one, can he?"

"As the bandit chief, he naturally has his ways." As Xiao Chiye spoke, he scratched Meng, who was perched on his shoulder. "The gyrfalcons raised in Libei are also able to pass on military intelligence swiftly."

"We caught quite a number of them." Tantai Hu said. "What shall we do with them?"

Xiao Chiye said, "Kill them."

Tantai Hu turned to look at that other side, then looked back at Xiao Chiye. He said quietly, "But I heard that some of them are gentlemen from respectable families. Kill them all?"

Xiao Chiye looked at Tantai Hu and said, "Since they went to Mount Luo to join the bandits and submit themselves to Lei Jingzhe's command, they should have expected such a day to come. I'm here to eradicate the bandits. There is no reason for me to show mercy to the enemy forces. Besides, let me ask you. Humans are all born with a mouth. If every one of them says that they are from a respectable family, then who do you believe, and who do you not?"

Tantai Hu said nothing.

Xiao Chiye stood up and watched as Meng flew away. He said, "I know you're thinking of the Biansha Cavalry. But Laohu, benevolence should not be used in the wrong place. You've been in the army for a long time. These are originally words I shouldn't have to make a special point of telling you. Are you not able to figure it out yourself?"

Tantai Hu lowered his head and made to kneel.

"Remain standing." Xiao Chiye patted his shoulder. "You are now a general leading the soldiers, not a squad commander standing guard at the main city gate of Dengzhou. Don't get your position all wrong."

Xiao Chiye was generous, but he was also quite exacting. The guards around him all knew when to advance and when to retreat. He could even make Chen Yang feel worse than if he had been whipped the last time the latter had sat on the sidelines. However, guards and generals were two different things. Why did Xiao Chiye not let Chen Yang lead the troops? There was no doubt that Zhao Hui, the person by Xiao Jiming's side, was a valiant general. Xiao Chiye obviously had other considerations in mind.

Xiao Chiye did not fly into a rage, nor was there a change in his countenance, but Tantai Hu was already looking quite ashamed. None of them could get a handle on Xiao Chiye's true moods and emotions, but with

just a relaxed tone like this from Xiao Chiye, Tantai Hu had already begun to reflect on his own shortcomings.



Credit to [Tea](#) for image! <3

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### **SPECIAL THANKS TO**

Guest Translator: [Tea](#) <3

(Edited by Lianyin)

Footnotes

1. 苞谷面 noodles made out of maize or corn

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 115 : DESTINY

Translated with: [Dee](#)<3

Swing after swing of the Imperial Army's blades pressed in towards them. The soil under their feet was already soaking wet from the splashes of blood. A bandit who was still alive was pinned to the ground. He listened to the never-ending screams until even his pants were wet with piss. The back of a blade pressed up against the back of his neck. His nose and mouth were smeared all over with bloodied water, choking him until tears and mucus flowed. He cried in terror, "I don't know. I really don't know!"

Lei Jingzhe was suspicious by nature, and he was very secretive about his whereabouts when he was in Mount Luo. Other than his trusted aides, no one else knew his exact hiding place.

Tantai Hu scraped away the bloody mud on the soles of his boots and said, "Since you know nothing, then why are you wasting our time? Drag him away!"

Both of the bandit's arms were bound behind his back, and the Imperial Army dragged him by the rope to the execution spot. He kicked out both legs, looking at those headless corpses lying on either side of him. The back of the blade that had been pressing against his nape was already turned over, and the sharp edge of the blade made him tremble all over. He watched Tantai Hu lift his blade and suddenly burst out bawling. "Liu'er! Sir! I know where Liu'er is!"

Tantai Hu asked, "Is this person a trusted aide of Lei Jingzhe?"

"Yes, yes, a trusted aide!" The bandit's chest heaved as he stared wide-eyed at that blade and said. "Liu'er is our 'carrier pigeon'. He is the one who passes on all the orders issued by Lei Jingzhe! It was also Liu'er who sent someone to pass me the message telling me to bring the men to hide out in the west!"

After having been here for half a night, Tantai Hu finally managed to pry out some information. He lifted the man and asked, "Where is this Liu'er now?"



“In Bianshui Town.” The bandit answered. “The information I received a few days back came from Bianshui Town. If you go look for him now, you will definitely find him!”

Bianshui Town was just a few *li* away, but on second thoughts, Tantai Hu felt that it did not bode well. They had searched through that place many times, and in all probability, they had already alerted the enemy. He hurriedly released his grip on the man and strode away to report to Xiao Chiye.

The Imperial Army promptly changed direction and raced to Bianshui Town. They set up a heavy siege outside the town, then searched from house to house and detained all the recent arrivals with questionable origins who were not registered in the household register. The bandits were identified one by one, but there were no traces of Liu’er and Lei Jingzhe.

Seeing as dawn was about to break, the bandit feared that Xiao Chiye would take out his anger on him, so he racked his brain to offer suggestions. He said, “Liu’er has plenty of followers; they are all his snoops and spies. Every time he heads out for battles, they will spread out all around him to facilitate the relaying of updates to Lei Jingzhe. Now that they are not here, it’s most likely because they have gotten wind of it and fled. You have blocked off access to the south, and we don’t dare to head north, so we can only retreat east. If you give chase now, you’ll definitely be able to catch up to them!”

Although Tantai Hu despised a spineless coward like him who would sell out his master for his own benefit, he still reported the information as it was to Xiao Chiye. Xiao Chiye considered it over for a moment on his horse before he said to Tantai Hu, “Take half of your men and chase after them along the eastern side of the mountain forest. They are now birds that will be startled at the mere twang of a bow-string. Just intimidate them a little, and they will be in such panic that they won’t be able to turn around and meet the attack head-on as usual. You just need to hit them hard. Those remaining thousand people are all scattered soldiers without contact with their commander. They won’t be able to hold their own against you.”

Tantai Hu acknowledged his orders, only to see Xiao Chiye gathering the remaining men. So he asked, “Since that’s the case, wouldn’t it do for Master to wait for me here? Why make another trip?”

“Look at Lei Jingzhe’s behavior and demeanor, and you should know that he’s not only suspicious by nature but also terrified of death. Whatever

we can think of, he can think of it too. If heading east is the only way for them to take, he will not go along with such a large contingent of troops. That is too big a target; it's too obvious." Xiao Chiye wound up his horsewhip and said, "Since he dared to use Lei Changming as a live target earlier, he will similarly dare to use these remaining thousand people as live targets as well. You may set your mind at ease and head east. I'll go block him."



It was scorching hot these two days. The sun was so blazing that it made the bandits burning with anxiety even more restless and uneasy. They squatted in groups in the mountain forest. Seeing as Lei Jingzhe had been slow to show himself, they loudly questioned Liu'er, who was standing on a rock. "Master Liu is also a part of the council, so you would be clearer than us when it comes to news of the second-in-command. What is the situation now? Tell us!"

Liu'er stuffed tobacco into his pipe but did not manage to find a flint. He squatted on the rock and looked up at the clear, cloudless sky. It was too bright to take in everything at a glance. He clicked his tongue and said, "I'm here to deliver a message, aren't I? That is, go home!"

"The Imperial Army has captured a few hundred brothers under my command, and I still don't know if they are alive or dead now. I'm waiting for the second-in-command to come up with an idea to save them, and he's telling us to go home just like this? Isn't this just tucking our tails between our legs and subjecting ourselves to bullying?!" A man with a booming voice stood up and said with discontent. "We were all big names back in Mount Luo, and we followed him to Cizhou so that we would have no lack of food and water. In the end, we have all become cowards like tortoises hiding in their shells. This is really fucking pissing me off!"

"Isn't this all because we are down on our luck." Liu'er not only looked like a shrewd old monkey, the way he handled matters was also similar. He had a lot to complain about regarding Lei Jingzhe's current order, but he would never voice it out, so he said in an attempt to smooth things over, "Even if you return to Mount Luo now, you will still be a big name there. Whom among us can take it lying down? But there will be times when even a horse will stumble. It's no big deal if we suffer from the occasional defeat. All you have to do is report the number of people you have lost to the

council later and get the second-in-command to make it up to you, as well as allocate some silver to you. Surely he won't shortchange you."

"Do I look like I give a damn about that bit of silver?" The man spat. "I'm heartbroken for those brothers! Do you think people are that easily replaced nowadays? Didn't you see the public notice posted by the Imperial Army? Cizhou wants to rebuild its garrison troops. There are meals and fields to be had. Why would anyone give up a decent job in a regular army and join us? They got a screw loose up there?! Moreover, our numbers are much greater than the Imperial Army. We should have just fought them the first time we encountered them at the foot of Cizhou's city gate! But he feared this and that. The fuck he's afraid of?! This is just great. We haven't even met them head-on, and we have already inexplicably lost!"

Sounds of agreement rang out all around at his words.

Creases formed at the corners of Liu'er's eyes. He said, "The second-in-command is just being cautious. The Imperial Army is well-equipped. Look at those armors that are so polished they shine. We might not necessarily be their match if we really come to blows."

"They just look impressive on the surface!" The man wiped the phlegm he had spit out with the sole of his shoe and said, "What kind of troops is the Imperial Army? How many battles have they fought? They can't fight for nuts! They only fought once with the Eight Great Training Divisions at the gate of Zhongbo. Can that even be called a battle? That's called a pissing contest! Whoever the fuck stands the longest wins!"

Laughter broke out all around.

The man noisily cleared his throat and tugged at his collar again to reveal a reddish chest. He said, "As I see it, we are not in a hurry to leave. Cizhou is such a big gold mine. If we miss it this time, it'll be harder to lay our hands on it the next time! The Imperial Army goes around posting notices everywhere to get the common folks to tip them off. But at the end of the day, they are still afraid, no?! If not, then let them bring it on! We are now all gathered together, and we have at least five or six thousand people. Just engaging in guerrilla warfare in the mountains alone will be enough to make the Imperial Army suffer!"

Liu'er did not kick up a stink with him or make a decision. He rubbed the pipe in his hand and said, "The second-in-command said to go back, and you still want to fight them. Then go notify him yourself."

“He wants to be a cowering tortoise and hide his head under his crotch. Where am I supposed to go looking for him?” The man sneered. “He doesn’t even dare to show his face. Why? Afraid there’s an Imperial Army spy among the brothers? Bah!”

The man that Lei Jingzhe had used as a shield that day when he fled was none other than this man’s prospective brother-in-law. His younger sister was just as burly as him, and she had been previously unable to find a suitable person to marry. It had not been easy to find a man who treated his younger sister well this time, and they were even ready to have the wedding at the year of the year. But who would have expected Lei Jingzhe to use him as a shield this trip! He hated Lei Jingzhe for being hard-hearted, and he also resented Lei Jingzhe for subjecting them to this kind of frustration they could only bottle up.

“I’ll repeat the second-in-command’s words.” Liu’er stood up and pounded at his waist with his pipe. He said, “We are now the vanguard squad. We don’t have many people, but we are still different from those minor bandits we came across on the way. As long as we can get out of Cizhou’s border within five days and arrive at Dunzhou’s relay station, we can be considered to be back in our own territory. By then, we will have nothing to fear even if the Imperial Army wants to continue pursuing us.” On seeing the fury on that man’s face after he was done speaking, he continued, “Of course, the second-in-command is still hurrying on his way here. Whether we leave or stay is open to discussion.”

They were initially bandits gathered from various mountain strongholds. Although Lei Changming was usually a headstrong man, he was very generous to the brothers, showering them with meat and wine, money, and women. Even if they made a mistake, they only had to plead for mercy for the matter to be dropped. But Lei Jingzhe was different. Not only did he rarely show himself, he was also rather severe in meting out punishments. Eight or nine out of ten wrongdoers who ended up in his hands would all meet their ends. He relied on inspiring awe to lead these bandits. Those who feared him outnumbered those who respected him. Now that everyone had fallen into dire straits together, it was inevitable for them to start harboring other intentions. One could take turns to be the emperor, so why not the chief of the bandits? *He who is capable is qualified!*

Seeing how Liu’er was a weathercock who did not want to offend both sides, the man said, “Fine, the second-in-command won’t come, and he tells

us to flee by ourselves. I'm of the view that he can be unrighteous, but we can't be unrighteous! The Imperial Army is still at Bianshui Town, right? Liu'er, don't you fucking leave any traces behind! Let's take this place as our camping ground and carry out harassment in small groups. We are used to climbing mountains. As long as the Imperial Army gathers manpower and turns around to fight us, we will run back. Forget it if they don't enter the mountain, but if they dare to pursue their way in, then we will take all of them down and not let anyone return alive! As long as he's human, he will not be able to hold out if we keep up with this war of attrition against him for a few days. When the time comes, we'll charge our way down in one burst of energy and beat the shit out of him! The City of Cizhou will still fall into our hands as long as the Imperial Army is afraid, no? So how about it? Do we do it or not?!"

The remaining people were all fired up by his words. They had been living like vermin detested by all these few days. Not only were they killed by the Imperial Army, they were also subjected to bullying by unarmed commoners. They could neither eat nor sleep well. Where had they ever had to endure this kind of hardship back in Mount Luo? So they promptly chimed in and shouted,

"Do it! We'll follow Big Bro Ding's lead!"

Pleased, Ding Niu laughed out loud. He nodded in satisfaction and said, "We all have brothers who have been captured by the Imperial Army. This revenge must be taken! If Xiao Chiye dares to kill one of our men, we'll kill ten of his to give vent to this wrath of ours! Who knows, when the time comes for us to take him captive and occupy the city of Cizhou, maybe even Xiao Jiming will try to cozy up to us!"

The bandits were in high spirits, and for a moment, everyone was talking all at once about the good life they would have after occupying the City of Cizhou. Ding Niu was on cloud nine after being praised, and he increasingly felt confident that this plan would work. He was already thinking about bringing his younger sister over and finding her a husband, one who had to be better than the one who died! But then he had a better idea—*this Xiao Chiye works fine too!* He was not only impressive-looking, he was also taller than him, had a great physique, and came from a good family background.

At this point, Ding Niu was already thinking about children and grandchildren. But then he saw the disciple on sentry duty at the foot of the

mountain scrambling his way over. The latter's face was pale with fright as he announced, "The Imperial Army is here!"

Liu'er slipped his way into the blades of grasses, wanting to flee. Ding Niu grabbed this wily old fart, lifted him, and demanded with a glare, "You tipped the Imperial Army off?!"

Liu'er hunched over, his long arms dangling, his white eyebrows almost trailing to the ground. He hurriedly shook his head and said, "Not me. How can it be me? I wouldn't have come if it were me!"

Ding Niu put Liu'er back on the ground. He steeled himself and said at the top of his voice, "Great! Since they have come calling at our door themselves, then we shall go and meet them!"



Lei Jingzhe spurred his horse on and galloped on the road. He had already skirted around the mountain forest at the east and was on his return trip back. More than half of the Imperial Army troops would be held up with Ding Niu, Liu'er, and the rest of the group as his cover, while the remaining had to stay behind to guard the southern side of Cizhou as well as the villages and towns along the way. He was the fish that had slipped through the net.

Lei Jingzhe had only brought along the silly lad, Li Xiong. He did not want the rest of them. It was not because he trusted Li Xiong that he was willing to take him along, but because this lad was silly enough, and Lei Jingzhe had single-handedly brought him up all by himself. Li Xiong was the most obedient lad, and Lei Jingzhe could tell what he was thinking at a mere glance.

Lei Jingzhe rode a horse, while Li Xiong ran on foot. He ran with great vigor and had no trouble keeping up as he followed behind Lei Jingzhe's horse. They had already been running all night, and Li Xiong was still naively waiting to meet up with the rest of them.

"Take a drink of water." Lei Jingzhe tossed the water bag to Li Xiong as he reined in his horse. "We won't be resting en route today."

Li Xiong opened the lid and gulped down more than half of it in one breath.

On seeing this, Lei Jingzhe cursed. "You stupid brat! If you drink it all up now, then what are you going to drink at night? You're going to keep whining about wanting to pee later with this much water in your stomach!"

Li Xiong wiped his mouth with a smile and patted his stomach. He said, "I won't, bro. It'll be gone after a run!"

Lei Jingzhe hung the water bag back on the horse's back. He asked, "Are you hungry?"

Li Xiong shook his head and said, "I stuffed myself so much last night that I'm still full! We'll be able to eat meat once we're back in Mount Luo."

Thus, Lei Jingzhe did not linger further and continued hurrying on his way with Li Xiong in tow. They had helpers in Dunzhou, and the Dunzhou relay station could pass on his message to deploy the bandit soldiers who were still guarding Mount Luo. Lei Jingzhe was in such a hurry because he still had some misgivings. He wanted to arrive before news of Ding Niu, Liu'er, and the others' capture made its way back. Otherwise, should the news arrive first, half of the trust and reputation he had built up throughout the year in Mount Luo would fall into shambles. By then, it would not be as easy as it was now to deploy the men.

The road checks along the way gradually grew lax until it was not as strict as it had been within ten *li* or so around Bianshui Town. The number of the Imperial Army troops grew fewer and fewer. By the time Lei Jingzhe passed by the vegetable fields manned by troops, he could no longer see any signs of the Imperial Army. At night, they rested by the side of a stream. Li Xiong speared a few fishes and roasted them for Lei Jingzhe to consume. Without seasonings or herbs, these fishes were fishy and bitter to the taste. But Li Xiong ate them with relish and fell on his back to sleep after eating his fill.

Lei Jingzhe did not dare to leave the campfire behind, so he covered it with soil. Gradually finding it harder to hang on as he had not had any sleep for a day and a night, he leaned against a tree and fell asleep. Lei Jingzhe slept for an unspecified amount of time before he was startled awake. He propped himself up on the ground, stilled his breathing, and listened to signs of activity within the forest with rapt attention.

The wind was a little strong tonight. Tree branches swayed from the force of it, rustling the leaves in intermittent bursts. Li Xiong was still sleeping, his snores thunderous. Lei Jingzhe listened for a long time. Although he could not see anything amiss, he was already starting to feel suspicious. He kicked Li Xiong awake and gestured with his hands for Li Xiong to get the horse.

As Li Xiong untied the reins, he suddenly had the urge to relieve himself. He never stopped for a break in the morning, and he had fallen right asleep at night. Unable to hold it in, he whispered to Lei Jingzhe, "Bro, I want to pee."

Lei Jingzhe clicked his tongue and made a gesture as if he was going to thrash him, then motioned for him to hurry. So Li Xiong went behind the tree and loosened his waist sash. The sound of water splashing rang out. Having seen no signs of movement so far, Lei Jingzhe relaxed a little. He pulled the horse, and when the horse snorted, he suddenly realized something off. Why was there not even a chirp from the birds or insects?

Li Xiong was not done relieving himself when he heard Lei Jingzhe hissed. "Leave!"

Li Xiong exclaimed in acknowledgment, then tied his waist sash in a hurry and broke into a run after him. Lei Jingzhe lashed out hard with his horsewhip and charged at random among the shadows of the trees. The tree forks swaying in the wind loomed like demons brandishing their claws and baring their fangs as they came surrounding him from all sides.

Lei Jingzhe fled until he was sweating. He did not know why he was sweating. His back had gone all cold from the wind. He did not even care to look back at Li Xiong; he only wanted to leave this forest as fast as possible. The horse under him was already exhausted from the running. No matter how he whipped it, it did not run as fast as it did in the daytime.

The sounds of footsteps came trampling noisily towards him. It was as if Lei Jingzhe was being chased by some gargantuan behemoth. He crashed headlong through the net of trees and charged out of the forest, but following right after, he forcibly reined in the horse and gasped for breath as he looked fixedly ahead.

The hem of Xiao Chiye's clothes fluttered backward in the wind. The gyrfalcon was perched on his shoulder, its head tilted to the side. Darkness seemed to spread out from behind him. It weighed down heavily on Lei Jingzhe's limbs, swallowing them and rendering him immobile; his entire body was frozen stiff on the back of the horse.

A raspy sound escaped from Lei Jingzhe's throat. He snapped back to his senses and thought of turning around, but the Imperial Army was all around him. Xiao Chiye had deliberately hidden his men in the forest; as a result, Lei Jingzhe could not guess how many men he had brought along—



this was a counterblow to Lei Jingzhe's initial deception, so that Lei Jingzhe would similarly experience the absurdity of being played.

"Go ahead and run." Xiao Chiye said in a deep voice.

Lei Jingzhe released the reins and put both hands up. He said, "You win. I concede defeat."

Lang Tao Xue Jin threw its head back and neighed. Xiao Chiye said nothing.

Lei Jingzhe slid off his horse slowly, keeping both hands up to indicate that he had no thoughts of fighting it out to the death. He seemed to be very well-aware of the situation. After landing on the ground, he removed the broadsword at the side of his waist and looked at Xiao Chiye as he bent over to put it on the ground. Then he said, "We can still talk."

His interest piqued, Xiao Chiye said, "Go on."

Lei Jingzhe calmed his panting. Surrounded by the cold glints of blades, and with beads of sweat dripping from his temples, he said, "You're going back to Libei, so you won't reside in Cizhou for long. Killing me now won't stop the Mount Luo bandits from making a comeback. Instead, it will plunge Dunzhou and Duanzhou, which have only just stabilized, back into chaos. Why not let me go to keep the situation in both prefectures stable and give Cizhou enough time to rebuild its garrison troops?"

The cawing of a crow rang out from the sky. Meng braced itself. With a spread of its wings, it took to the air, glided through the wind, and swooped into the billowing trees. The atmosphere at the bottom subsequently grew tense. Lei Jingzhe kept looking at Xiao Chiye all this while, as if to prove that he was confident of success, that it was not the end of the road for him yet.

Xiao Chiye lifted a hand and laid his palm at the side of his waist.

Both men stood facing each other. In the very instant Meng pounced and ripped into the crow, Lei Jingzhe abruptly kicked up his broadsword and flung off its sheath. He rolled forward. With a strong burst of strength in his legs, he sprang up high into the air and cleaved the broadsword down towards Xiao Chiye right in the face. Blade collided violently against blade, sending sparks sputtering as they scraped against each other in a mighty show of power.

The scorching weather that had persisted for several days dissipated in the wind. Skies that were still clear and boundless in the morning were now overcast with dark clouds. A few bean-sized raindrops came pelting down,

followed by the sudden arrival of a rainstorm, as if Heaven could not bear the heat and had sent it to scour the filthy world.

Li Xiong, who had lost track of Lei Jingzhe, circled around for a long time before he finally heard the subtle sounds of fighting in the rain. He brushed aside the branches and leaves with all his might and trampled upon muddied water as he chased his way towards the sound. The moment he rolled out, he came right in front of the Imperial Army wielding their blades. He was unarmed, but in a moment of desperation when he saw Lei Jingzhe in a disadvantageous position under the curtain of rain, he bellowed and turned around to wrap his arms around a bare, withered tree as thick as the rim of a bowl and swung it up.

“Bro!” Like a strong, charging bull of limitless strength, Li Xiong sent the Imperial Army on one side scattering all over in total disarray.

Xiao Chiye did not expect Li Xiong to have such strength. He swung away from the trajectory of the tree Li Xiong was brandishing. Lei Jingzhe, who had already been struck with the blade, saw his opportunity and retreated immediately to Li Xiong’s side. Li Xiong’s extraordinary strength was innate, and it was even more terrifying than Xiao Chiye’s. He swung the tree to ward off all those blades and swords and shouted, “Bro, I’ll carry you on my back!”

Lei Jingzhe jumped onto Li Xiong’s back. Supporting the tree, Li Xiong bellowed and charged a path out of the encirclement. He was not afraid of blades and swords, and he did not fear Xiao Chiye either. Newborn calves were all of such a temperament; there was only his big brother Lei Jingzhe in his eyes! Li Xiong did not even feel the pain when he was slashed in the arms. He kicked over the wall of people before him and broke into a mad dash in the torrential rain with Lei Jingzhe on his back.

Blood dripped off Lei Jingzhe, staining Li Xiong’s back red.

Li Xiong wiped his face and cried, “Bro! Don’t die!”

Lei Jingzhe was not a person who would simply resign to his fate. He did not have a pleasant time back in the Zhu clan in Duanzhou. His father failed his mother, so he changed his surname and called himself Lei Jingzhe from then on. He ran into danger many times on Mount Luo, and he had always been able to wait for things to take a turn for the better. But Xiao Chiye was just like the sudden rain that came out of nowhere this night; he was the edge of a precipice he had never foreseen. He thought it should not

be the end of him just yet, yet he could only watch as the turns of events tipped the balance against him.

“Damn it...” Covering his wound, Lei Jingzhe said, “Shut up!”

Li Xiong listened to the sound of horse hooves behind him and dashed off with his teeth clenched and his face tilted up. This lad was truly unusual; even ordinary horses could not catch up to him. But Xiao Chiye’s Lang Tao Xue Jin was extraordinary. In the blink of an eye, it had already caught up right behind them.

Li Xiong did his best, but as he leaped across the stream, he suddenly cramped up. He was still growing, and he lost his balance when he landed on his feet. Consequently, he fell. As he sucked in a breath from the pain, he dragged Lei Jingzhe up, still intending to carry him on his back to flee.

“Xiao Chiye!” Knowing that there was no escape for him, Lei Jingzhe said, “If you are willing to spare me, then it’s possible for the bandits of Mount Luo to come under your command! I still have some influence left. I can still be of some use!”

Xiao Chiye flung away the drops of blood on Langli Blade. Lang Tao Xue Jin stamped its hooves twice before it broke into a sudden run.

Lei Jingzhe twisted Li Xiong’s face over. There was already a change in the timbre of his voice amidst his violent gasps. He did not want to die. His grip tightened on Li Xiong’s hand as he said, “Xiong-zai,<sup>1</sup> kill him, kill him!”

Li Xiong rubbed away the rainwater on his face. With one limping leg, he spread both arms open and stabilized his lower body, wanting to throw off Lang Tao Xue Jin. With his sturdy body trembling, he looked at Xiao Chiye, then let loose a bellow and charged over. He wrapped his arms around Lang Tao Xue Jin’s neck, causing Lang Tao Xue Jin to neigh. He did not know too many martial art moves, but there was a flash of his leg in what was clearly a wrestling technique of the Biansha Tribes as he flung Lang Tao Xue Jin over into the muddy water.

Xiao Chiye grabbed Li Xiong, who had a youthful-looking face, up by the collar. As the latter struggled and pounded on Xiao Chiye’s arms, he shouted, “Bro, run!”

Hauling Li Xiong along, Xiao Chiye watched as Lei Jingzhe rolled down the muddy slope. He did not give chase. Li Xiong made to bite him with his teeth, and Xiao Chiye wrung his back collar to hurl him right to the

ground face-first so that his nose and mouth were stuffed into the mud puddle, choking him until he was violently struggling all over.

“Tie him up.”

Li Xiong heard Xiao Chiye say to the Imperial Army, who had arrived later. And then he was knocked unconscious with the back of a blade.

The rainstorm stopped after a while. Tantai Hu arrived from behind on horseback. Xiao Chiye just happened to be wiping the mud off Lang Tao Xue Jin’s body. When he saw Tantai Hu, he removed the half-arm fabric sleeve used for wiping with one hand and beckoned to Tantai Hu.

“Master.” Tantai Hu said. “I’ll lead the men to outflank him from the southeastern side right away. He won’t be able to run far.”

But Xiao Chiye asked him, “Have all the bandits in the forest been captured?”

Tantai Hu thought that Xiao Chiye wanted to do a headcount and was ready to turn back to get his subordinate to bring over the book. But unexpectedly, Xiao Chiye said as he wiped away the mud on his fingers, “It’s all good as long as you’ve caught them. There’s no need to show me. Go get ready. We’re returning to the city.”

Tantai Hu was taken aback. Seeing that Xiao Chiye had already picked up the saddle to put it on Lang Tao Xue Jin, he walked a few steps with him and said, “Master, isn’t letting him go just like this akin to letting the tiger return to the mountains and setting the stage for future disasters?”

As Xiao Chiye wiped the mud on the saddle, he said, “I’m not only going to let him go, I’m going to send him off with great fanfare. Get a few squads of men to follow him. He has been stabbed; don’t let him die on the way. Send him all the way into Dunzhou’s territory. There’s no need to bother about the other matters.”

Tantai Hu only had to use his brain a little to understand his intent. He grinned and said, “Then I’ll go. Master, I’ll bring dozens of men. I’ll be sure to escort him back to Dunzhou within three days.”

Xiao Chiye looked on with cool detachment in the direction where Lei Jingzhe had fled. A dripping wet Meng landed back on his shoulder and combed through its bloodstained feathers. Xiao Chiye used the handkerchief that he had used to wipe the mud from Lang Tao Xue Jin to clean Meng’s talons. He said, “Lift it properly. I’ll wipe them clean for you. Otherwise, if you see Lanzhou upon returning and trample mud all over his shoulders, I’ll have to wash his robe.”



**T97's Words:**

2 chapters in 1. Thank you for reading.

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Footnotes

1. 崽 a child (sonny, lad) or young animal. 熊崽 (Xiong-zai) would literally mean bear cub.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 116 : CHEN YANG



If Xiao Chiye said he would return in three days, then he would return in three days. When he hurried back to the foot of Cizhou's city gates in the middle of the night, the city gates had already been opened, with torches brightly illuminating the city walls. The Imperial Army held the captives in line and entered. Zhou Gui had cleared out the prison in the south for the Imperial Army to hold these bandits in custody. He received Xiao Chiye and said, "Your Lordship has been working hard! The soldiers are tired after having eradicated the bandits. I've already gotten men to prepare meals for all. Everyone, this way, please."

Xiao Chiye dismounted and said, "Thank you, Your Excellency, for going to the trouble."

Zhou Gui followed Xiao Chiye in and said with a radiant expression, "I saw General Tantai's report that the bandits have been taken captive in the east. They have been completely disbanded. And Your Lordship personally went after Lei Jingzhe. This is truly... truly marvelous!"

Xiao Chiye had already caught sight of Shen Zechuan, and Shen Zechuan had also seen Xiao Chiye. A few guards were following behind Shen Zechuan, and Qiao Tianya was carrying a lantern in hand; they had obviously been waiting for a long time. Still speaking to Zhou Gui, he said, "I shall have a detailed discussion regarding Lei Jingzhe with Your Excellency in the study tomorrow morning."

Zhou Gui thought Xiao Chiye was tired from being on the go, so he hurriedly nodded and said, "sure." Kong Ling was more perceptive than him. Although he was not used to it, he also knew that they were getting in the way, so he threw out a random excuse and led Zhou Gui away.

Chen Yang stepped forward to take the horse. The guards behind all kneeled on one knee and said, "Congratulations to Master on your triumphant return!"

Xiao Chiye undid his arm guards and took off the Conqueror Bow and said, "You may rise. Have you been waiting long?"

Shen Zechuan took the lantern over from Qiao Tianya and turned around to walk with Xiao Chiye along the street. He answered, "Quite a while."

Xiao Chiye lowered his fingers and took the lantern over from Shen Zechuan's hand, while Shen Zechuan took the arm guards Xiao Chiye had just taken off to look it over.

On seeing this, Xiao Chiye said, "These are old stuff from a few years back. The metal was cast by Libei, and the leather strings on top were supplied to the Eight Great Training Divisions right from Qudu. It came apart from the chafing the last time I drew the Conqueror Bow here. I'll think of a way to replace it before I return to Libei."

The leather strings used for binding on the arm guards were indeed worn out. Shen Zechuan hooked it several times and said to Qiao Tianya. "Take it and put it aside first."

Noting that both of them were moving in the wrong direction, Xiao Chiye could not help but cast a sidelong glance where the Zhou's residence was. Then he looked at Shen Zechuan and said, "Have we moved out?"

"Of course, we have to move out." Shen Zechuan went up the stairs. "It's not convenient to keep staying in Zhou Gui's residence. He just had a grandson at the beginning of the year, and his entire family is crammed into two courtyards. It's too much of an inconvenience to them. I had someone ask around a few days ago, and it just so happened that a residence here caught my eye."

Both of them had already entered the wide alley as he spoke. The slabstone path led right to the main entrance. Xiao Chiye sized it up and said, "It's next to the main street, and it's close to Zhou Gui's residence. It'll be convenient to discuss matters during normal hours. You've chosen an excellent location."

"There's a drawback." Shen Zechuan said as he led Xiao Chiye across the threshold. "It's too big. The smattering of men we have aren't even enough to fill up these few courtyards."

Xiao Chiye saw a horse platform<sup>1</sup> made up of stacked bricks set up before the residence. The wooden carved door pillars were crude, and its patterns were not as fine and meticulous as the ones in Qudu and Juexi; rather, it was more the style of Libei and Biansha. Five courtyards in a compound were really too big for both of them. When Qi Huilian was still the Grand Mentor of the Eastern Palace, the residence he had been bestowed upon was about the same size as this. They would not be able to fill it up even with the addition of servants. Besides, both of them had no heirs or concubines. The stone walls looked a little old, but the double-

eaved roof cut an imposing sight. It did not obstruct the light either. It was just the way Xiao Chiye liked it.

“No issues there.” Xiao Chiye stepped through the door and held Shen Zechuan by the hand. “Shifu can take one courtyard, while you and I can share a courtyard. The few of them buddies can have a courtyard. If more people join us in the future, we can split them up according to status. There will be a day we get to see it filled up when we are seventy or eighty years old.”

“The backyard is empty.” Shen Zechuan said. “But we will need to add men to the rear yard and the side rooms flanking the principal room. These courtyards are all connected to one another, so it won’t do for us not to have someone keep watch. It’ll be a bit more troublesome when they are on shift duty.”

As both of them were at the head discussing what they should acquire in the future, Ding Tao was at the back recording down the routes in his book. He whispered, “Although this residence is not as big as our Prince’s residence in Qudu, it is too circuitous. If I were to live at the back, it would take me half a month just to remember the directions.”

“What are you afraid of since we don’t let you take up a mission alone? And you always have Gu Jin around to lead you.” Qiao Tianya said. “This residence isn’t cheap, but my master doesn’t even blink an eye at the price. He sure has deep pockets.”

With a sorrowful expression, Ding Tao wrote a few more words and said, “You don’t understand. It’s precisely because Gu Jin is leading that we will get lost. Sigh, Jin-ge is really a strange one. As a scout in the military, he can remember all those unfamiliar places clearly when he’s investigating matters outside, but not so when he returns to our own home. Eight or nine times out of ten, he will turn into the wrong courtyard. Back at home in Libei, he will often end up somewhere else. I’m telling you, there’s an older sister in that residence called Cuilan, a maidservant of the Consort of the Hereditary Prince. She’s really gentle. Every time Jin-ge makes a wrong turn, she’s the one who leads him back. She even gives me candy. In any case... hmphasdfghjkl!”

Gu Jin clamped an arm around Ding Tao and gagged his mouth shut. He cast a few glances at Qiao Tianya and said, “Hear no evil.”

“I haven’t heard any part that’s ‘evil’.” Qiao Tianya looked astonished and applauded softly, “On the other hand though, you have just shot



yourself in the foot.”

“... It’s hard to plant bamboo here. I’ll look for others after a few days.” Xiao Chiye looked back and said to the few of them. “Who is on the night watch tonight?”

All this while, Chen Yang seemed to be preoccupied, but on hearing him, he said, “I’m on guard alone. The few of them are on shift duty these few days.”

Xiao Chiye knew from this that Chen Yang had something to report to him, so he nodded and did not ask further. He already knew that there was an issue when he entered the city and saw Chen Yang’s expression as the latter received him. The hot water was ready when he returned to the courtyard. During the interval Xiao Chiye was taking a bath, Shen Zechuan got someone to warm up the meal.

The weather was hot, and the doors to the principal room were wide open with bamboo blinds hung up to keep out mosquitoes. The window screens were all newly replaced, and there was a round-bellied copper vat placed on the veranda with two red carps in the clear water and three or four lotuses floating on it. Several green plants that had been planted in the courtyard were bathed under the warm light emanating from the room. They clustered around Chen Yang, who was sitting in a daze.

Chen Yang was wearing an old robe. Their clothes had all worn out after they rushed the entire journey here. Shen Zechuan had asked Zhou Gui’s principal wife to look for a tailor to take their measurements one by one. After a period of time, they would all have new sets of clothes to change into.

Chen Yang and Zhao Hui were of the same age. But Zhao Hui already had a family and an established career, while he was still a head of guards who lived together with the other brothers. He seemed to be the most sophisticated of them, but in truth, he was also rough around the edges. He was sitting under the eaves at present, getting quite a number of bites from the mosquitoes. Yet he felt troubled as he continued to deliberate over how he should report to Xiao Chiye in a while.

The bamboo blinds opened up partially. Shen Zechuan had already changed into his regular clothes. He said to Chen Yang, “You’ve been guarding the city wall entrance at night, and you still want to sit here and let the mosquitoes feast on you. Come in and have dinner with Ce’an first.”

Chen Yang rose to his feet in compliance and followed him in.

Xiao Chiye had yet to come out. The meal was very simple; they rarely had lavish meals. Now that Ji Gang was back, he kept a tight watch on their food. All the ingredients to be used and nourishments to be taken were arranged according to the recipes he and Qi Huilian had decided on back at Zhaozui Temple. The few of them guards loved to drink, as did Ji Gang back in the past, and the dishes he made to go with wine were exceptional.

Chen Yang sat on his knees on the mat, and the maidservant set the dishes on the small table in front of him.

It was quiet inside the room. Chen Yang sat with his head lowered and listened as she withdrew out of the room. Shen Zechuan sat at the head. He was not as restrained as Chen Yang was. The wide, white robe he was wearing shifted along with his moments and revealed his wrists, consequently diminishing some of the exquisiteness his appearance had given him. Instead, there was something relaxingly unpretentious about it.

If both of them were to remain here together for long, perhaps they would both end up subconsciously affected by the other.

Shen Zechuan at this moment felt to Chen Yang like Xiao Chiye when he was quiet—they both gave off a vibe that could gradually put one at ease.

“Contrary to expectations, it won’t do you any good to worry too much.” Shen Zechuan set down the wooden chopsticks and said without looking at Chen Yang, “Just report according to the facts. No embellishment, no rephrasing. Tell him as it is. He will naturally have his own thinking. It is often said that those deeply involved in a matter often lack the detachment to see the whole picture. But in truth, that’s not necessarily so. As the one involved, he understands it far more than anyone else. He has perhaps even thought of it way earlier than you did.”

With his head lowered, Chen Yang bowed to him in silence.

“If you underestimate him, then you are underestimating yourself.” Shen Zechuan said unhurriedly. “He chose all of you out of millions of people, but didn’t all of you also choose him out of millions of people too? There will still be rainstorms to brave and turbulent seas to navigate in the future. If you are going to keep hesitating and wavering like you are tonight every single time for every single matter, then, sooner or later, you will not be able to keep up with his pace. They only recognize the Xiao Chiye of six years ago. But what you are seeing is a Xiao Chiye that has been tempered over these six years to the way he is now. Chen Yang and Zhao Hui are both

the sunlight,<sup>2</sup> and Xiao Chiye and Xiao Jiming are both the wolves of Libei. So what are you still afraid of? Don't let your time in Qudu befuddle you. All of you have long been on par with them."

Chen Yang sat on the mat with his head lowered, and an indistinct sob escaped his throat as his fingers curled slightly. He did not say a word for a long time. He thought his own matters were of no importance, so he did not mention it. Although he did not suffer a gross injustice like Gu Jin, he could still sense the cold treatment he had been given back at home. He had been tossing and turning these few days precisely because he did not know how to bring it up to Xiao Chiye. He was even secretly relieved when he left Libei with Gu Jin.

When Chen Yang left Libei, he was in no way inferior to Zhao Hui. He always tried to win credit in every matter, as he was the most fearful of being perceived as being inferior to Zhao Hui, so he kept raising the bar for himself. But when he went back to stay for half a month, he unexpectedly had the notion to avoid Zhao Hui.

He was afraid.

At some point, he thought he had already lost.

He was Xiao Chiye's trusted aide, and also an aspect that others would use to compare Xiao Chiye and Xiao Jiming. The moment he started to harbor such a fear, then Gu Jin and Ding Tao who were the next in line would inevitably be affected too. They would no longer be able to be placed on par with Xiao Jiming's guards. To a Xiao Chiye who was about to fall under the harsh scrutiny of Libei, this was a heavy blow.

Xiao Chiye was not anyone else. He was not Xiao Fangxu, nor was he Xiao Jiming. He was his own person. His most arrogant traits were his fearlessness in forging ahead and determination to win. For Chen Yang, following him would be just like chasing after the tempestuous wind. Shen Zechuan was right. If Chen Yang were to feel fear at this point in time, then he would, sooner or later, be left behind. Because the one he had chosen at the very start was a Xiao Chiye who had the guts to remain all alone by himself in Qudu.

Xiao Chiye's hair was still wet when he emerged with his regular clothes draped around him. He could not help but be taken aback when he saw Chen Yang bent over the ground with his shoulders trembling. He looked at Shen Zechuan, who spread his hands out slightly and gave him an innocent look.



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SPECIAL THANKS TO

[Peach](#) for correction! <3333

#### Footnotes

1. 马台 a stone stool or platform to make it easier for one to dismount from horses. Usually placed at the left and right sides of the main gate of well-to-do families.
2. Chen Yang (晨阳) literally morning sun, and Zhao Hui (朝晖) literally morning sunshine

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 117 : FAVOR & INTIMIDATION

Translated with: [Lin](#) & [Dee](#)<3

Xiao Chiye's loose outer robe was half-opened, revealing the unclosed collar of his inner garment. When he sat down, he blocked off much of the light. There was still moisture on his body, and he felt a little more comfortable after wiping his face with a clean handkerchief. He then rapped a bent finger thrice on the floor and said to Chen Yang, "What's the matter? Sit up and talk."

Chen Yang promptly rubbed his face clean with his arm and sat straight up. He said, "We encountered some incidents during this return trip to Libei. I'm reporting to Master first, as I do not dare to make a decision arbitrarily."

Xiao Chiye picked up Shen Zechuan's chopsticks and listened as Chen Yang recapped what happened. Shen Zechuan left the table midway to take a bath. Xiao Chiye finished the rice in his bowl and sat for a moment without showing any intent to ask for another helping. He asked, "How is Gu Jin's injury?"

"We called for a physician after we left Changzhu camp. Gu Jin's fever subsided during the journey, but the wound on his back is festering badly. Ji Gang-shifu took a look at it last night and told Gu Jin to abstain from certain foods. He also gave him instructions on several matters and said that he would be able to recover if he recuperates for about a month." At this point, Chen Yang paused for a moment before continuing. "Fortunately, his eyes and ears were not hurt."

Gu Jin's eyesight and hearing far exceeded that of the average person. It was a one-of-a-kind natural talent among these guards. This matter would be a lot harder to resolve had he been wounded in his eyes and ears. If that happened, then even Xiao Chiye would not be able to swallow this injustice, let alone Chen Yang.

"Tudalong Banner is a domain the Changzhu camp of the eastern mountain range would patrol daily. It's originally quite a distance away

from the Hanshe Tribe. To think Gu Jin's vanguard squad actually retreated all the way there." Xiao Chiye had gathered plenty from Chen Yang's statements. He said astutely, "This shows that the Libei Armored Cavalry has been retreating. The battles Father and *shifu* are fighting aren't going smoothly."

The insects' cries on summer nights created quite the din as it drifted through the bamboo curtains, and it was so hot both inside and outside the room that it made one restless.

Xiao Chiye looked at the candle flame for a moment and said in a hushed tone, "Eldest brother's incapability to lead the troops is a heavy blow to Libei Armored Cavalry. Father promptly came out of retirement to boost the troops' plunging morale and soften the impact of the word 'defeat'. But he has not been on the battlefield in person for nearly fifteen years. On the other hand, his opponent, Amu'er, has never left the front line of the Hanshe Tribe in these fifteen years. Times have changed. Relying blindly on Father is not the way to victory. I often say not to have a change of people right before the battle. Even the best general has to build up a rapport with his soldiers over time. All of Father's troops fifteen years ago have been replaced, and those who can stage a comeback with him are few and far between. The ones he is leading now are a new school of military officers and soldiers who are already used to Eldest Brother's style of handling matters. Both sides need to mutually adjust to each other during a critical battle, and this is not an easy thing to achieve."

When Xiao Fangxu established the Libei Armored Cavalry, the word "Armored Cavalry" was the best description of the Libei Army. At that time, Libei was unable to catch up with the Biansha Cavalry's horses, so Xiao Fangxu adopted the measure of making them 'heavier'—he not only had the soldiers all armored up, but even the horses of Libei too. Such an army was a terrifying force to behold in a frontal assault. Like the mighty torrents of the mountains, the impact of the collision was able to annihilate their foes in a blink of an eye. There was simply no time for the Biansha Cavalry to draw their machetes, and even if they did, they could not stab through those armors. Even the ferocious Hanshe Tribe was not willing to fight a drawn-out war with the Armored Cavalry. Their light and swift mobility was their only remaining advantage. And it was on this basis that Xiao Fangxu kept piling on more weight to armor up the Libei Armored

Cavalry until he eventually forged the Libei Armored Cavalry into a real “wall of iron”.

When Qi Zhuyin led the Qidong Garrison Troops through the territory, the sounds of their horses’ hooves boomed like thunder. But when the Libei Armored Cavalry did the same, the sound they generated was not just “like thunder”, but real “thunderclaps”. That weight could make one lose the courage to continue fighting just from the sound of it alone, so much to the extent that no one could find the Libei Armored Cavalry’s weakness for as long as five or six years.

However, Amu’er was also a fearless warrior who, among his constant engagement with the Libei Armored Cavalry, made use of their “heaviness” to the fullest. As long as the Hanshe Tribe’s cavalry was fast enough, they would be able to loot, retreat, disperse, detour back, and encircle the foe in that order, like a swarm of blood-sucking flies that, despite being unable to penetrate through those solid and sturdy armors, would also emerge unscathed. The way Lei Jingzhe gathered the bandits together to harass the Imperial Army was precisely an imitation of the Hanshe Tribe’s way of combating the Libei Armored Cavalry. It was just that Lei Jingzhe did not have horses that fast, nor soldiers that strong.

It was at this time that Xiao Jiming took over the Libei Armored Cavalry. The first decision he faced back then was whether to retain the weight of the Libei Armored Cavalry. In the eyes of the veteran generals, he was a lad who was still wet behind the ears, and his refined and humble personality was one aspect of him that the veterans who were used to Xiao Fangxu could not stand. He made a completely different choice from Xiao Fangxu—he reduced the weight of the Libei Armored Cavalry, making the “wall of iron” thinner, but equipping it with the mobility to turn around quickly. And thus, the Libei Armored Cavalry shifted from being a heavy cavalry into a cavalry that veered towards being a little more armored up.

It was with this change that Libei began to possess the characteristic of “fast”. This was where “River of Ice Armored Cavalry” originated from, and it was also the fundamental reason he was able to stride across the borders of two territories in one night. They were able to keep up with the Hanshe Tribe’s speed. Coupled with the constant refining of their battle formations, they became even tougher to deal with. The new school of generals was all selected by Xiao Jiming. Their working style was mutually compatible with Xiao Jiming’s, and they were already used to Xiao Jiming’s

receptiveness to their suggestions—Perhaps, they respected Xiao Fangxu just the same on an emotional level, but they might not necessarily be able to adapt to Xiao Fangxu.

Respect alone could not win them battles. The light in their eyes as they looked up to the legendary god of war would be worn down again and again as they mutually butted heads with one another. In the end, the glorious Prince of Libei would also fall off the pedestal on which he had been placed on to become a myth that had faded into obscurity along with the tides of change. When that time came, the legend of the Libei Armored Cavalry would also come to an end. They would become a bunch of disorganized soldiers plagued by mutual discord and internal strife among themselves. A concentrated force excessively dependent on a centralized command was an advantage, but it was also a shortcoming.

Qi Zhuyin was the commander-in-chief who had intensively studied the Libei Armored Cavalry the most. She was very well-aware of the drawbacks in the Libei Armored Cavalry's reliance on its commanding officer. That was why she had been trying her best to avoid leading Qidong down the same route as the Libei Armored Cavalry after she became the commander-in-chief of the Qidong Five Commanderies' military forces. She went all out to establish the Qidong generals' barrack, which took in men who had the potential and the making to lead troops. It was her confidence in her hold over absolute military power and authority that she dared to delegate authority to these men. She gave Lu Guangbai this much authority because Lu Guangbai had the capability. She understood what kind of generals were suitable to lead what kind of squads. In Xiao Chiye's eyes, Qi Zhuyin was the most qualified person among their generation to be the commander-in-chief.

People who could fight could be the general of an army, but they might not necessarily be able to be a commander-in-chief commanding armies from all quarters. If one were to rank the Four Great Generals of the world, no doubt Qi Zhuyin would be the chief. She had long come to discern the Libei Armored Cavalry's weakness, and she had reminded Xiao Jiming of it.

Xiao Chiye's ostracisation was inevitable.

With one hand on his knee, Xiao Chiye poured the melted candle wax into the small porcelain plate. The tips of his fingers came into contact with it, but he liked this kind of searing pain. He watched as the candlelight



flickered and said, “Chen Yang, when I left home at seventeen, I asked my eldest sister-in-law when I would be able to return home. This question brought tears to her eyes, and she cried the entire night alone in her room. When my eldest brother and I got on the horses, she stuffed many cakes from Libei into my bundle<sup>1</sup> and even hid a flask of ‘On Horseback’<sup>2</sup> within. She said she didn’t know when I would be able to return home either, but they would always be waiting for me in Libei. I entered the capital as a hostage because my eldest brother won a victory in battle. I hate Shen Wei to the core. At that time, I thought the defeat of the Zhongbo troops was to be blamed. I never thought of myself to be more outstanding than my eldest brother, but I was equally attached to Hongyan Mountains and the racecourses. I used to lie prone on the ground and listen to the sounds from the lands of Libei. When I left, I even wanted to take the soil of Libei along with me.”

“I attempted to survey the horizons for a glimpse of Libei from the top of the tallest building in Qudu, but even Meng could not see it when it flew up into the clouds. It was then I understood for the first time how much of a remote possibility it was to return home. I’ve learned plenty from *shifu*, but it was only when I was in Qudu that I began to understand the truths behind those words. I am a man burning with ambitions, and Qudu is the teacher that taught me to restrain all those desires. My encounter with Lanzhou did not happen by accident. He was the last line of defense when I was about to hit my limit and lose it. He is also the indulgence and freedom I lost and regained.”

Xiao Chiye lifted a finger, as if he had drawn a line.

“I am complete. The parts of me that were broken and lacking are now encased with steel. I would no longer stop when I walked out of Qudu again. Whether it was twenty years ago or ten years ago, my father and eldest brother both made the best choice, and now, it’s my turn. The mountain we surmount might not necessarily remain our foes forever. I acknowledge how outstanding my father and eldest brother are. I revere and cherish them, but that is the part that belongs to ‘family’, not the ‘Libei Armored Cavalry’. We are wolves that have strayed from the pack. Our return to the pack is not for us to submit and bow to the commands of others, but to carve out our own place and positions among them.”

Xiao Chiye bent over slightly, his gaze as sharp as a blade.

“Libei cannot suffer another defeat. This isn’t a matter of the Xiao clan. I understand that, as do my father and eldest brother. Who should inherit this iron wall? Anyone. As long as he can shoulder the responsibility. I’m going back to Libei, not just going home. Guo Weili is a veteran of Libei; he knows all of your functions best, and not injuring Gu Jin’s eyes and ears is the most merciful warning he is giving me. So cheer up, Chen Yang. Our opponents are all the battle-hardened seniors who have been fighting on the battlefield for a long time—there is no battle in this world that must be lost. All those impregnable defenses and impenetrable encirclements are but facades. I’m going back. I want a Libei Armored Cavalry that truly belongs to me.”

Chen Yang’s fingertips trembled slightly; Xiao Chiye’s words had him all fired up. He had been sitting on his knees until his legs had both gone numb, but that tingling sensation leaped up his spine as he faced such a Xiao Chiye, his fear all swept away by the fervor coursing through his blood.



By the time Shen Zechuan emerged from his bath, Chen Yang had already taken his leave and left the room. Xiao Chiye was lying on the *xumi* couch<sup>3</sup> staring into space. The windows were open, and there was a porcelain jar on the veranda with a few stalks of lotuses in it. Their delicate fragrance wafted through the gaps. Xiao Chiye rested his head on an arm and looked up at the starry night sky.

The breeze of summer nights was always so gentle, coming and going without a trace; one could barely feel it if not for the scent of lotuses permeating the air. Xiao Chiye was not only feeling hot; he was also weary. However, he had his own pride. He was unwilling to show his fatigue easily, so he could only stuff these feelings into these sleepy moments as he stared into nothing and pretended not to be tired at all. The sky was studded with stars this night. He was in a bit of a trance.

Shen Zechuan blew out the candle and threw his outer robe on the back of a chair. He scraped an icy cold finger gently across Xiao Chiye’s cheek, leaving in its path a temperature that belied excitement. Xiao Chiye returned to his senses and locked gazes with him.

Even though he had just showered, Shen Zechuan’s fingers were still icy cold. That icy cold finger brushed across Xiao Chiye’s cheek, as if comforting him.

Xiao Chiye tilted his head a little to the side to be a little closer to Shen Zechuan's palm.

Xiao Chiye really missed Shen Zechuan. This kind of longing was fervent and urgent, but it was not strange. Every inch of his body missed Shen Zechuan; this was a common occurrence. However, this longing was not just limited to his physical self; it was also the desire raging in his heart. It was a love far deeper and much more indescribable. He felt an unprecedented excitement lying in wait behind all of this fatigue.

Shen Zechuan sensed his rising temperature.

Xiao Chiye had been on horseback for days, but he was unable to fall asleep right now. Only both of them understood the intrusive look in his eyes, which hardened along with the movements of Shen Zechuan's finger.

Absence makes the heart grow fonder. In the near future, there would be countless of such absences. And now, Xiao Chiye wanted to possess every single moment they were alone together. He suspected that vines would sprout out of the longing in his chest and wound around the armored hooves on which he raced across the grasslands, holding him back. He wanted to invade Shen Zechuan, penetrating deep into him again and again, and in the process, leave his own scent on him. Not only that, he also wanted to be filled with Shen Zechuan's scent.

Both of them had to have the same scent.

This was a childish obsession of the wolf pup. It was as if doing so would prove that they could never be apart. Xiao Chiye pressed his cheek against Shen Zechuan's palm, sniffing his scent before the small furrow in his brows finally relaxed.

Xiao Chiye wanted to tell Shen Zechuan how much he truly loved him.

Perhaps there were many ways to express love. But now, he only wanted to use the most intense kind.

The *xumi* couch was not big enough for both of them. Xiao Chiye reached out to pull down the bamboo blinds and covered up that bit of gap in the window, shutting the moon outside. Lanzhou did not need the moonlight. That naked, lithe softness of his only needed one person's gaze on him—Xiao Chiye's.

Shen Zechuan rode on Xiao Chiye as they kissed in the darkness. Their hot breaths intertwining inseparably together, its heat edging all the way down to their necks, chests, and even abdomens. Shen Zechuan's neck was flushed all over. Xiao Chiye felt this to be some kind of silent acclamation;

it was also Lanzhou's indulgence. As with Shen Zechuan's tremblings, these were all urgings Xiao Chiye could not rein in.

Xiao Chiye's ferocity caused Shen Zechuan to lift his head and gasp for breath. Shen Zechuan pressed down on Xiao Chiye's chest and attempted to make him stop this aggressive invasion. But he was also looking down at Xiao Chiye with tears in his eyes, seducing Xiao Chiye with his gaze into continuing with the fierceness, into keeping up with the meanness.

Do all you want.

This was what the expression in Shen Zechuan's eyes was explicitly telling Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye was brimming with energy as he held Shen Zechuan securely on top of him. He was panting. Neither of them averted their eyes, as if they could not bear to look away from each other for even a moment.

Shen Zechuan's hair gradually scattered all over his shoulders amidst the intense thrusting. He clenched Xiao Chiye's clothes until it creased, as if he was a drowning man clutching at straw while shudders rocked through him.

"Grow a little more meat on you." Xiao Chiye said in a raspy voice, "Lanzhou."

Shen Zechuan's damp locks of hair stuck to his face. In the moments between kissing and panting, he could not find it in himself to answer. Sighs escaped through his lips as he reached out with his fingers as if to grab on to something. But Xiao Chiye held his hands and did not wait for him to come to his senses as he entered with unhurried tenderness—a slow, gentle ride after the gallop to his heart's content before.

That is, if he had not gone in that deep.

Shen Zechuan let Xiao Chiye hold him in position as he took him all in to the deepest depths. The never-ending onslaught of thrusts turned his mind into mush. His misty, lidded eyes became even more of an aphrodisiac, while the corner of his eyes glistened with pleasure as Xiao Chiye permeated every pore of his being.

"Ce'an," Shen Zechuan followed his heart and called out his name, "A-Ye."

His calls caused Xiao Chiye to break out into a sweat.

Shen Zechuan lowered his head and edged along Xiao Chiye's temple with the tip of his nose to disperse those beads of sweat. He called out wickedly, "Er-lang".

Xiao Chiye came to an abrupt stop. He grasped Shen Zechuan's jaw and corrected the position of his face, then kissed him hard in between gasps. These calls threw all those that once had order into disarray; it messed up the anxieties he had concealed away. Xiao Chiye forgot them all. He did not need any of them; he only wanted Shen Zechuan.

They could not indulge to their heart's content on the *xumi* couch, and so the bedding on the bed was pulled down onto the rug. Even the pillow on the rug was drenched after some time. Shen Zechuan's eyes were half-closed. He was wet to the bone, his energy fully expended. Xiao Chiye propped himself up on his arms. He was still inside him. He lowered his head to press his forehead against Shen Zechuan's, all the while lightly gasping for breath.

"Lanzhou." Xiao Chiye's sweat-drenched forehead inched down. He nuzzled against the crook of Shen Zechuan's neck and called out in a muted voice, "Lanzhou."

Shen Zechuan lifted his hand and placed it on Xiao Chiye's hair. They clung this inseparably close together, in perfect harmony in every sense of the word. Shen Zechuan raised his legs, indicating for Xiao Chiye to press down into him. Instead of doing so, Xiao Chiye tightened his arms around him. His embrace was so tight that Shen Zechuan found it hard to breathe. He stroked the back of Xiao Chiye's head with varying strength and tilted his head to breathe a light puff of air into Xiao Chiye's ear. Very slowly, he called out, "Lang-zai."<sup>4</sup>

Xiao Chiye bit him.

Shen Zechuan let out a husky laugh. He sensed something trickling out of him, so he said, "You came."

Xiao Chiye switched to kissing him. Both of them grind against each other intimately, squeezing out even more fluid as they moved. It still seemed as though Xiao Chiye's sexual desire was about to rear its head again, causing Shen Zechuan to sigh repeatedly. Xiao Chiye initially thought of putting the brake on as he had been going at it rather savagely, but when he looked at the expression in Shen Zechuan's eyes, he continued to penetrate deep into him.

Xiao Chiye stroked Shen Zechuan's cheeks and inserted two fingers into his mouth, leaving Shen Zechuan's tongue with nowhere to hide. Both of them clung close together, panting at the same pace as they took in each

other's expressions all into their eyes. The last time was not intense; rather, it was more like a never-ending session of tender lovemaking.

When Xiao Chiye finally slid out of him, Shen Zechuan was no longer able to make a single sound. All of his vague grunts and moans had been devoured clean by Xiao Chiye. As the waves of heat washed over him, he grasped Xiao Chiye's jaw. Tears he could not stop soaked the hair on his temples wet. Xiao Chiye finally lowered his body to snuggle with him, skin on skin.

In the end, both of them were exhausted, Shen Zechuan could barely keep his eyes open. He was still grasping Xiao Chiye's jaw. Xiao Chiye seemingly let out a laugh and leaned over to kiss him. They kissed for a moment before falling asleep together like this—Xiao Chiye on Shen Zechuan.

Xiao Chiye did not dream.



It was already considered late when the day broke the next day. Xiao Chiye had only just returned after leading his troops, so no one would have castigated him for it, but he woke up pretty early. Their lovemaking had dispelled emotions that might have been suppressed otherwise. When he got up, Shen Zechuan made to wake up too, so Xiao Chiye covered the latter with a quilt and kissed him back onto the bed.

"Military affairs." Shen Zechuan struggled tiredly and sleepily in the darkness, and said with his eyes closed, "I'll go later, in the afternoon..."

"We'll discuss Cizhou's garrison troops later." Xiao Chiye said. "I want to settle the issue with Lei Jingzhe with Zhou Gui first."

"Two hours." Shen Zechuan let out a long sigh. "I'll be there two hours later."

Xiao Chiye stroked him and said, "It's the same if you go tomorrow. There's no hurry to do it these few days. Go on, sleep. I'll be back for lunch at noon. Call *shifu* along too."

Shen Zechuan uttered an acknowledgement, although it was unknown if he had actually heard Xiao Chiye clearly. Xiao Chiye changed his robe after taking his bath. He did not get anyone to go in and clean up, but he had instructed Ding Tao and Gu Jin well in advance to stand guard in the courtyard. Then he left, taking Chen Yang and Qiao Tianya with him.



Zhou Gui was already in the study, having a few rounds of discussion with his advisors. It was getting increasingly bright out there, but there was still no sign of Shen Zechuan. When he finally saw Xiao Chiye, he hurried out to greet him. He dismissed the others, leaving only Kong Ling in the room to serve tea.

Xiao Chiye did not look to be in an amicable mood today, and all his so-called frivolity had been fully curbed. He cut such an intimidating presence that Zhou Gui and Kong Ling did not dare to take deep breaths. Xiao Chiye had something on his mind, and so he did not beat around the bush after taking his seat.

"I let Lei Jingzhe go in the east. He should arrive in Dunzhou in three days."

Kong Ling had done a headcount of the bandits last night, and he had gotten suspicious when he did not see Lei Jingzhe. Hearing these words now, however, had dispelled his misgivings. They were already on familiar terms with Xiao Chiye, so there was no need to be as punctilious as before. He gave a light cough and said, "Your Lordship presumably must have your own plans."

Zhou Gui still had doubts, so he asked, "Lei Jingzhe is a scheming man. Is Your Lordship planning to keep him for your own use by letting him go?"

"This man is too shrewd to submit himself into compliance." There was no warmth in Xiao Chiye's eyes as he said, "Although we've captured the majority of Lei Jingzhe's men this time, he still has men remaining in Mount Luo. And it's not just that. There are still plenty of Lei Jingzhe around even without this one Lei Jingzhe. Before Cizhou has its own garrison troops, it'll prove to be too difficult to get rid of them once and for all."

Kong Ling thought of what Shen Zechuan had said a few days before. He nodded at Xiao Chiye's words and said, "That's right. Just as the Vice Commander said, as long as food is scarce in Zhongbo, there will still be decent commoners reduced to being bandits. There is no way to eradicate this issue just by force alone."

"Lei Jingzhe lost his right-handed men this time, yet he was still able to escape alone from my hands. Even if he has a glib tongue, he won't be able to clear himself of suspicions among the bandits." Xiao Chiye said. "I'm also going to give him a hand and make him the Imperial Army's 'spy' that

the bandits of the two prefectures of Dunzhou and Duanzhou will revolt against. This person is capable. He will certainly not sit still and wait for death. With that, the bandits will be thrown into internal turmoil and will be too preoccupied to set their eyes on Cizhou.”

It was only because he had intentionally released Lei Jingzhe that Lei Jingzhe would have to suffer. Cizhou was presently powerless, and this was already the best option out of the better strategies available to them.

Kong Ling caught a hint of his intent when he heard this. He asked, “Your Lordship goes to such an extent to think for Cizhou. Is it because you are preparing to set off for Libei?”

Xiao Chiye turned the teacup around and said. “Time waits for no man, and Libei is currently often at war. It’s inadvisable for me to remain in Cizhou for longer. Moreover, Qidong has already delayed for two months. Once Qi Zhuyin arrives, it’d be hard for me to leave even if I want to. After I leave Cizhou, Lanzhou will still continue to assist Cizhou. As I said before when I deployed the troops, I will not concern myself in all the matters concerning the garrison troops of Cizhou. But if both of you gentlemen still need the Imperial Army, just get Lanzhou to send me a notice, and I’ll be sure to arrive within a day.”

The way he put it was worth pondering over. At least, in Kong Ling’s ears, it sounded like both a favor and an intimidation.

Xiao Chiye said to let Lanzhou inform him; this indicated that he would not listen to the words of the whole lot of them from Cizhou. Lanzhou would have to be the one to decide whether or not to let him lead his troops back. However, Lanzhou was not someone who could be easily fooled, so they could not take advantage of the distance to deceive the Imperial Army into deploying their troops. In addition to the above, there was another layer of meaning.

Kong Ling was a little on tenterhooks as he wiped his sweat.

If Cizhou dared lay a hand on Shen Zechuan, Xiao Chiye was sure to hasten there within a day.



T97’s Words:

2 Chapters in 1. Short of 700 words orz

Thank you for reading.

Lianyin’s Note:



This chapter is a combination of the non-censored + revised version for the best of both worlds (◡‿◡)

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#### Footnotes



- 1.
2. 包袱, a cloth bundle. In the old days, people traveled around with their clothes and possessions bundled up with a piece of cloth. The bundle was then worn across the shoulders and carried around. It also works for carrying food around.
3. A strong wine from Libei, as mentioned in Chapter 102
4. Xumi couch (须弥榻, ), also known as the Mile couch (弥勒榻) or short couch (短榻), is basically a shorter couch, a common piece of furniture during the Ming Dynasty.
5. 狼崽 literally wolf pup

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 118 : PAST AFFAIRS



Kong Ling did not dare to grouse to himself for fear that Xiao Chiye might sense something amiss. After wiping his sweat, he took a sip of his tea trying to cover it up, only to make it more conspicuous. He said as he nodded, “Your Lordship is returning to Libei to fight battles with the Biansha Tribes, so Cizhou can’t possibly trouble the Imperial Army any further. Moreover, with the Vice Commander’s presence here, Lei Jingzhe won’t be able to get anything out of it even if he stages a comeback.”

Zhou Gui still had not gotten the hint at this point. He merely said, “The march of an army over a long distance is beset with difficulties. Cizhou is to the south of Libei, so Libei has nothing to worry about back here. If we can be of any use to Your Lordship in the future, Cizhou will surely do its best to help. As for those bandits who have been taken into custody at the prison, how does Your Lordship wish to deal with them?”

“Several of those bandits were once one of the few bandit chiefs from Mount Luo. There’s not much use in killing them, so why not release them together with Lei Jingzhe?” Xiao Chiye already had a plan in mind. He said, “I’ve already bribed a few of the bandits to spread around the news that Lei Jingzhe has been released by the Imperial Army. Half a month later, they will break out of the prison and flee with Ding Niu and Liu’er. When the time comes, Cizhou can just send men to pursue them and drive them back to Dunzhou’s territory. They have men who died at the hands of the Imperial Army. Once they conclude that the siege in the east was a leak from Lei Jingzhe, they will never let him off.”

Zhou Gui and Kong Ling nodded in unison. Thinking as Xiao Chiye was about to return to Libei soon, Zhou Gui decided that he had to discuss the military provisions with him. They had conferred with Shen Zechuan a few days ago regarding the military provisions’ allowance for the Imperial Army next year, but Shen Zechuan had promptly turned it down.

“Cizhou had originally planned to give the Imperial Army an allowance of 16,000 *dan*<sup>1</sup> of grains after spring next year.” Zhou Gui faced Xiao Chiye and deliberated over his words. “We know it is a small amount, but it’s a little token of appreciation from Cizhou to Your Lordship. I have already told the Vice Commander of this. The Vice Commander understands

Cizhou's difficulties. He wants us to sell these grains at a suitable price to Chazhou and use the money as funds for the reconstruction. We have been thinking about it for these few days, and we still feel bad about it. Your Lordship, there is a piece of vacant land to the northwest of Cizhou. It's the former site of the Beiyuan Hunting Grounds.<sup>2</sup> At the very beginning, we wanted to till the land and cultivate fields there, but the soil isn't suitable, and we couldn't grow any grains except sow some rapeseeds. Rather than leaving it idle, we might as well gift it to Your Lordship to create a track for horse riding or to build a new camp as you wish."

The emergence of the Beiyuan Hunting Grounds preceded the Nanlin Hunting Grounds. Owing to the rise of Xiao Fangxu in the north later, the Li clan canceled the annual ceremony at the Beiyuan Hunting Grounds and had the venue changed to Nanlin Hunting Grounds, where they could feel more at ease. This piece of land was not small; it was even bigger than Xiao Chiye's military drill grounds at Mount Feng in Qudu. It was far enough to pose a threat to Dancheng and close enough to provide support to Cizhou. And it also stood on Libei's boundary line. It was an excellent position from which to advance and retreat, launch an assault and defend.

Xiao Chiye's interest was piqued. He dreaded the Qidong Garrison Troops in the south. Shen Zechuan was remaining behind in Zhongbo. If he did not have a place to station his troops, he would have to rush to and forth between both ends. Never mind if it was just him alone. But if he ran around like this with tens of thousands of men in tow, then he would not only expose their tracks but also draw unnecessary troubles to themselves.

But Xiao Chiye had no money. He had scrimped and saved to build up the military drill grounds at Mount Feng. It was not as imposing as the Eight Great Training Divisions' military grounds, but it consumed real silvers. His noble title was useless now, and there was no one to pay him a salary. His residences in Qudu had turned into lifeless objects he could see but not eat. Even taking out a handful of copper coins would prove to be a problem for him.

The little jade bead earring Shen Zechuan was presently wearing on his right ear was polished by Xiao Chiye himself. In the past, Xiao Chiye would not even blink an eye at losing a few ivory fans. Now that Lanzhou's little bamboo fan had gotten stained on one side and he had promised to have it replaced, he was thinking of making one himself later.

Seeing as Xiao Chiye had still yet to say a word, Zhou Gui thought that the piece of land was not to his liking, so he said, "The place is big. Although it is a venue for hunting, it has fallen into years of disrepair, and the errand-runners have all left. The perimeter wall seems to me to be still solid. After Your Lordship takes over, you'll just need to fortify its defenses a little, and you'll be able to use it."

Kong Ling also added, "Your Lordship helped Cizhou out of its predicament. Naturally, we will not try to fool Your Lordship on this matter. We had also mentioned this place to the Vice Commander yesterday, and the Vice Commander said he would personally make a trip down to take a look when he finds the time these two days. Seems like he likes it too."

It had been a passionate night last night, and Shen Zechuan did not get the time or chance to bring this matter up. What's more, Xiao Chiye had left in a hurry in the morning, and Shen Zechuan was still not wide awake then.

"The place is good. It's suitable as a resting place and temporary lodging for the Imperial Army. Lanzhou and I both like it." Without a change in expression, Xiao Chiye said, "There's no need for both of you to stand on such ceremony, but thank you."



Shen Zechuan got out of bed and put on a plain, white set of regular clothes. He originally wanted to go out, but the traces from their lovemaking were too obvious. The marks on his chest, waist, side of the legs, crook of the neck could be covered up with clothes. But he was too thin-skinned. As long as they had gone at it vigorously at night, the lingering redness at the sides of his eyes would not fully recede the next day.

Ding Tao was standing on the veranda feeding the red carps. He was also rattling on and on, telling Gu Jin a story. The fish bait in his hands kept leaking into the vat, where the two red carps gobbled it down. By the time Gu Jin realized what was happening, one of them had already gotten so bloated that it flipped belly up.

Gu Jin made to beat up Ding Tao. Sensing trouble, Ding Tao hurriedly stuffed the remaining fish bait into his pocket and fled to the principal room. He yelled, "Young Master! Bad news! Jin-ge fed the fish to death!"

Shen Zechuan picked up the sweet soup from the tray. He gave a bowl to Ding Tao and told him to sit under the eaves to drink it. He then asked Gu Jin, "How are your injuries today?"

Gu Jin saw Shen Zechuan wearing wooden clogs and knew that the latter would not be heading out today. He bowed in greeting and said, “Much better. The physician came as scheduled to change the bandages. Since Young Master is not going out today, shall we get the kitchen to prepare the meals now?”

Clusters of tree shades decorated the grounds in the courtyard, while shadows of flowers adorned the panels of the two wide-opened doors. The weather was fine today. It was not yet noon, but it was already starting to get hot. Shen Zechuan’s fingers that were basking in the sunlight looked as though they were clutching a handful of crystal clear amber. He could not stand the cold, and he also disliked the heat. He looked to be exhausted today, and his entire person exuded laziness.

“The weather is hot. Shifu dreads greasy food, and Ce’an gets cranky easily. Get the chef to choose and make some light dishes. You’re currently nursing an injury, so do as the physician and *shifu* say and get the kitchen to make an individual portion for you.” Shen Zechuan retreated half a step and returned to the coolness of the shade under the eaves. “Ding Tao, go to the courtyard and call *shifu* over.”



Ji Gang did not stay in the separate courtyard Shen Zechuan had initially given him. Instead, he lived in a courtyard together with Qiao Tianya and the rest. People tend to fear loneliness when they grow old, and it was inevitable for him to get all sentimental now that Qi Huilian was no longer around to squabble with him. The good thing was that there were those from Libei and those who originally came from the Imperial Bodyguards among this batch of guards. All of them held the Ji clan’s boxing style in esteem, and they hoped to gain pointers and guidance from Ji Gang. That was why they liked to hang around Ji Gang when they were not on duty. What’s more, they were all lads who had yet to get married. Ji Gang found them boisterous and lively, and it made him happy to be around them too.

Ji Gang went to bed early and woke up early nowadays. He got up at the first quarter of the hour of *mao*<sup>3</sup> today and watched Qiao Tianya and the others practice shadowboxing in the courtyard. After drinking his tea, he came out for a stroll and found that Shen Zechuan was still asleep. So he took another stroll with his hands at his back and returned to find that Shen

Zechuan was still not up. So on seeing him now, he could not refrain from asking, "Why did you get up so late today? Have you fallen ill?"

Taken aback, Shen Zechuan paused for a moment before he said, "... I overslept."

Ji Gang noted that he seemed to be under the weather today, so he said, "Although there are plenty of issues at present, you also have to take care of your health. I'll cook a couple of fish dishes for you tonight."

As they chatted, Xiao Chiye returned. He saw Ding Tao at the entrance of the courtyard and knew that Ji Gang had come. He took off his outer garment and asked Chen Yang as he washed his hands, "Did *shifu* come in the morning too?"

Chen Yang answered truthfully, "Young Master bought *shifu* a skylark a few days earlier, and *shifu* would always take a stroll with the bird every morning when he gets up. Young Master was still sleeping when he came to the entrance of our courtyard this morning, so he asked about it several times."

Xiao Chiye wiped his hands and walked along the walkway to the front. When he entered, he carried out a disciple bow to Ji Gang. He had been very respectful to Ji Gang and Zuo Qianqiu back then at the Plum Blossom Residence, but Ji Gang could not forget that kick he gave Shen Zechuan six years ago. Now that Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye were in the same boat rowing towards a common goal, Ji Gang thought that they had buried the hatchet in private and were merely friends on good terms with one another. So, for Shen Zechuan's sake, he would not give Xiao Chiye the stink eye.

Ji Gang and Zuo Qianqiu were brothers. According to seniority, Xiao Chiye's paying of obeisance to him was etiquette. Ji Gang nodded and said concisely, "Your Lordship may dispense with such formalities."

Xiao Chiye took his seat. Ji Gang was at the head, so Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan were sitting face to face with one another. During the meal, Ji Gang asked questions relating to the suppression of the bandits as well as stuff about Zuo Qianqiu. Xiao Chiye answered him all in full detail. He did not hope to give a perfect answer; all he strove for was to be genuine in his responses.

Ji Gang was a person who greatly valued relationships and ties. In his younger years, he screwed up his assignment because of drinking and caused his adoptive father, Ji Wufan, to lose the favor of Emperor Guangcheng. This had been weighing heavily on his heart. Later on,

Duanzhou fell into the enemies' hands, and he never touched wine again. He did not have Qi Huilian's illustrious reputation for his talents, but he had great prestige among the Imperial Bodyguards. He was the main reason why the group with Ge Qingqing at the head was willing to go all out to help Shen Zechuan when Shen Zechuan was flogged and thrown into the imperial prison, even extending their assistance to him in the period after. When Ji Gang was still serving as the Vice Commander in the Imperial Bodyguards, he rarely abused his authority to oppress the others. He also abhorred Pan Rugui and the likes. Again and again, he had helped the innocents to redress the injustices they had suffered, and because of this, he had offended quite a number of powerful officials.

When it came to elders like this, Xiao Chiye would not resort to dubious tricks for his own personal advantage. He had to take out all of his sincerity. Only then would he be able to make Ji Gang see him in a new, more favorable light.

Their meal lasted an hour. Ji Gang thought that they still had important matters to discuss, and so he did not stay for long and left early.



Xiao Chiye was changing his clothes. When his upper body was bare, he pulled over Shen Zechuan's hand and placed it on his back to touch it.

Shen Zechuan was still sitting on the mat with a brush in one hand as he calculated the expenses for this period of time. As he touched Xiao Chiye's sweat, he lifted his eyes and said, "Just how nervous were you?"

"That was scary." Xiao Chiye swiftly put on his clothes. "I was worried my answers were not sincere enough, and it would alienate *shifu* from me even more. I've been really busy this period of time. I will have to find a day later to talk it over with *shifu*."

"A father loves his child without asking for anything in return."<sup>4</sup> Shen Zechuan set the brush down. "There is no transactional exchange of benefits and profits when it comes to *shifu*, only genuine affection and sincere concern. Second Young Master has a long way ahead. That kick of yours really set you back a long way."

Xiao Chiye slumped into the rattan chair. He thought for a moment and said, "If it had been my old man sitting there today, we might not even get to finish the meal."

Still feeling the trepidation, Xiao Chiye touched his own chest and looked at Shen Zechuan, who was deep in thought over the accounts. He

held the brush, then set it down, and his sleeve slid down to reveal a portion of fair skin. The expression on his side profile was calm. There was no one else in the room, and his collar that had been slightly loosened because of the heat exposed a snow-white expanse with traces of lovebites on it.

How flimsy.

For a moment, Xiao Chiye was in a daze as he gazed blankly at Shen Zechuan. He thought of many things, and yet it also seemed as if he had figured out nothing.

“Lanzhou.” Xiao Chiye inexplicably called out to him.

Shen Zechuan’s mind was not here. He just happened to be thinking that he should get Ge Qingqing to find a few stewards from Juexi who could do the accounts and have them sent over when he suddenly heard Xiao Chiye’s voice. Although his eyes never left the accounts book, he turned his face slightly and answered, “Spit it out if you have something to say.”

Xiao Chiye abruptly stood up, turned around a few times, and suddenly squatted behind Shen Zechuan to embrace him. Shen Zechuan was still writing. It was all thanks to the power of his extraordinary focus that he did not mess up his strokes.

Xiao Chiye nuzzled against Shen Zechuan’s cheek from behind until Shen Zechuan’s face felt hot. Shen Zechuan had no idea what was up with Xiao Chiye. Xiao Chiye never said a word as he touched Shen Zechuan all over and scooped Shen Zechuan into his arms, clinging on to him like glue.

And just like this, Shen Zechuan sat in Xiao Chiye’s embrace and continued to do his accounts. When he ran into difficulty, he got Xiao Chiye to stretch his fingers out, but Xiao Chiye was unwilling to and did the sums orally as he continued to hug him. Surprisingly enough, he was pretty swift in his calculation.

“Second Young Master.” Shen Zechuan pushed the abacus aside. “You have a bit of a knack for this. Calculate these all for me, will you?”

Xiao Chiye pulled the abacus back and said, “Count long enough, and I’ll fumble. It’s so complicated that it’s better to hand it over to the professionals. Do you know who in Qudu is the best in arithmetic?”

Shen Zechuan replied, “That, I really don’t know.”

“Third Missy Hua, Hua Xiangyi.”

So Shen Zechuan asked, “Then do you know who in Zhongbo is the most skilled in employing diversionary tactics to lure the enemies?”



Xiao Chiye ventured a guess. "... Tantai Long?"

"It's Xiao Ce'an." Shen Zechuan finally looked at him and said in all seriousness. "Look at him nuzzling away at me until my heart goes all pitter-patter and I'm too preoccupied to get down to serious business."

"I'm unworthy of the reputation." Xiao Chiye moved in closer. "It's only because I saw how sweaty the little Young Master is and with clothes in such a state of disarray that I've specifically come over to drop you a reminder or two."

"Then you are a real gentleman." Shen Zechuan brushed the tip of this finger that was moistened with tea water across the back of Xiao Chiye's hand and said, "Unlike me and my mind working in overdrive."



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SPECIAL THANKS TO: [Yunyun](#)

#### Footnotes

1. 石 *dan*, dry measure for grain equal. 1 *dan* = approximately 90kg (see chapter 113 author's note)
2. 北原猎场 literally Northern Plains hunting grounds.
3. 卯时 hour of *mao*, i.e., 5-7am, based on the system of two-hour subdivisions used in former times. one *ke* (一刻) is at approximately the 15 minutes mark.
4. 慈父爱子，非为报也。The original quote speaks of a mother's love instead (慈母爱子，非为报也。) by Liu An (刘安).

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 119 : PAST ACQUAINTANCE



Xiao Chiye said, "Let's hear more about it."

Shen Zechuan was feeling so warm from Xiao Chiye's embrace that he began to sweat. He said, "You'll lose the fun if you voice it out when it comes to matters like undressing and what happens after."

Xiao Chiye grabbed hold of Shen Zechuan's fleeing finger. He laughed for a moment before saying, "You'll lose the fun if you voice it out? Then, take a moment to hear me out. I'll say it for you."

Shen Zechuan looked toward the account books.

Xiao Chiye squeezed Shen Zechuan the pulp of Shen Zechuan's finger and looked at the account book together with him. He said, "I haven't even started, so why are you getting all hot?"

Shen Zechuan looked askance at Xiao Chiye and mouthed soundlessly, *because of you.*

Xiao Chiye looked at Shen Zechuan for a moment, then suddenly lowered his head and buried it into the pit of Shen Zechuan's neck. All his earlier emotions had melted away at this look of Shen Zechuan. They became another kind of raging torrents that surged along Xiao Chiye's chest to his entire body. But no matter how tempestuous the waves were inside of him, he did not dare to use even more strength in his embrace of Shen Zechuan.

That kick that had never once turned a hair during all the years in Qudu had, along with the passage of time, cunningly turned into pangs of pain after Xiao Chiye fell into the clutches of love. The turbidness that was love and hatred went through a cleansing by the heavy downpour to become a crystal clear lake. Xiao Chiye drew in his claws, bowing his head in submission to the word "love".

Shen Zechuan released his hand and held hands again with Xiao Chiye with interlocking fingers. He tilted his head to bump gently against Xiao Chiye's unmoving head and said, "Have you fallen asleep?"

Xiao Chiye raised his head and said in a hoarse voice, "Oh, how I love you so."

Shen Zechuan was slightly stunned.

Xiao Chiye looked at him and enunciated each word as he repeated, "I love you so much."

Shen Zechuan remained stunned for a moment before he said, "I—"

Xiao Chiye could not wait any longer. He turned his head and kissed Shen Zechuan hard, as if he wanted to give all the love in his heart that could not be expressed with words alone to Shen Zechuan. The cool breeze in the courtyard stirred the bamboo blinds, while shadows of flowers shifted under the eaves along with the slanting trajectory of the sun at the same time golden light, having penetrated through the obstacles to make it way deeper in, cascaded over the ground.



Beiyuan Hunting Grounds was not that far away from Cizhou, and there was also a bridle path connecting both places. Lang Tao Xue Jin could reach it in half a day, so Xiao Chiye took Chen Yang and Ding Tao to take a look at the site the next day. Shen Zechuan finished sorting out the accounts for this period of time in Cizhou and, together with Zhou Gui and Kong Ling, made some changes to matters relating to the Cizhou garrison troops.

"Although I had the thought that quite a number of people would come forward to answer our recruitment call, I never expected it to be this many!" Zhou Gui was overjoyed. "With this, we can further expand the plowing range next year."

"There's a shortage of grains on the outside which Cizhou can supply. To many of those in desperate situations, this is timely help that's equivalent to sending charcoals in snowy weather. It not only solves their urgent needs but also prevents them from turning to banditry." Kong Ling looked delighted as he said to Shen Zechuan, "We shall have to trouble the Vice Commander regarding the military arms."

"With the way things are going, there will be no more bandits in Cizhou's territory when next year comes around." Zhou Gui did not sleep the entire night; he had been making a lot of plans. He said, "If we can also help Dunzhou and Duanzhou out of their predicaments, then the bandits from Mount Luo will fall apart without the need for us to attack them."

"While the recruitment is showing initial success, Your Excellency cannot simply rely on this alone. Cizhou has been able to sustain such a large amount of food consumption because everyone from top to bottom in Cizhou was able to work as one in the past five years. Duanzhou lies close to Biansha. Even if they have a change of heart and wish to reclaim the

wastelands for farming, they won't be able to do it." Shen Zechuan still has other considerations. He said, "What's more, we currently do not have an emperor on the throne, and ambitious men are easily born out of troubled times. There's a Lei Jingzhe in Mount Luo, so Chazhou might just have their own Lei Jingzhe too. Cizhou has only just begun to toddle; there's no rush."

"What he said." Kong Ling nodded and said, "The most pressing task at present is to resolve the issue of household registration. Many of them fled here from other places, and they don't have any documentary proof on them. If they want to reside in Cizhou permanently, they will need an identity."

Shen Zechuan paused for a moment and said, "During the reign of Yongyi, the Eastern Palace pushed forth a census registry<sup>1</sup> to register common folks as citizens. It was to be checked and verified by the layers of prefectural prefects, district magistrates, and townships of the various lands. Cizhou is less populated at present. Since Cizhou is no longer under Dazhou's command, you can abolish the original three registers and let Cizhou develop its own new registers, with vagrants still prohibited in the city. Once the registry is finalized, Cizhou will be able to collect taxes based on the registry, and subsequently, the accounts will become clearer too."

"Then we can get to work and have it straightened out these few days." Zhou Gui paused for a moment, then continued, "I'm only worried about the Qidong Garrison Troops now."

"It has been so long." Kong Ling piped up too. "Why haven't we heard any news from Qidong at all?"

Shen Zechuan had also gotten an inkling of sorts from this wait.

If Qudu wanted to stop Xiao Chiye from returning to Libei, they only had to mobilize Qi Zhuyin right away, and she would have been able to stop Xiao Chiye at the border of Zhongbo a month ago. But Qudu did not do so. They sent Han Jin, an armchair strategist who was all talk and no action. This legitimate son born of the Han clan was taken captive by the Imperial Army outside Dancheng and was still being held in prison. Going by the division and distribution of Qidong's Five Commanderies, Qi Zhuyun could assemble 100,000 men within half a month. Yet, there was still no sign of her to date.

It was already late when Shen Zechuan came out of the Zhou's residence. He estimated the time; Xiao Chiye should still be on the way back to the city, so he was not in a hurry to return home. As he descended the stairs, the path ahead brightened up. Fei Sheng carried a lantern, illuminating the road ahead for Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan had been busy with other matters these few days, and so he had yet to have a talk with Fei Sheng. Fei Sheng tried his best to get close to Chen Yang every day, and he was the most diligent in serving tea and water to Ji Gang. This man, a veteran who had tumbled his way out of Qudu, was presently holding up the lantern for Shen Zechuan, and he did not speak up to interrupt Shen Zechuan's thoughts along the way either. From all appearances, he looked as if he was already content enough to hold the lantern for Shen Zechuan.

There were some people on the streets. Fei Sheng was carefully guiding the way when he suddenly heard Shen Zechuan said, "I heard you recommended yourself for the job when His Lordship went out this morning."

Fei Sheng answered with a neutral expression, "I saw that Gu Jin had yet to recover from his injuries, and so I thought of going along with His Lordship on his behalf."

Shen Zechuan looked at the road and said nothing more.

Once back at the residence, Qiao Tianya took over the lantern. There was still Gu Jin in the courtyard, and it was not Fei Sheng's turn to be on shift duty. So he went back on his own initiative.

"If Master gives him the cold-shoulder," Qiao Tianya said, "he might come to harbor resentment."

As Shen Zechuan entered the long walkway, he looked back to see that Fei Sheng had already made a turn and passed through the moon gate<sup>2</sup> on the other side. He said, "I have the mind to use him, but he might not necessarily think highly of me. His rank in the Imperial Bodyguard is higher than yours. Han Cheng could be said to be one of the bigwigs he counted on for backing. He was also Han Cheng's right-handed man before the former emperor met with sudden death. There has to be a reason why Han Cheng wants to kill him. It has been several days since he came to Cizhou, and yet he has never shown any intent to speak of this reason to me."

Shen Zechuan stood still and smiled at Qiao Tianya.

“It wasn’t me but Ce’an he was originally gunning for when he willingly staked and gambled everything on that one move of his in Qudu. Ce’an is the second legitimate son of the Prince of Libei. The Hereditary Prince was severely injured at that time, and the others all thought the Ce’an was going back to replace Xiao Fangxu. Fei Sheng was already starting to harbor ill-feelings towards Han Cheng. Rather than compromise and make concessions to achieve his aim, he might as well leave Qudu for Libei to carve out another path for himself. The identity of a life-saving benefactor is enough for him to secure a stable life in Libei.”

Qiao Tianya had some understanding of Fei Sheng. He said, “It’s inconvenient for Gu Jin now that he’s wounded. Fei Sheng recommended himself for the job today because he wants to take Gu Jin’s place. A pity His Lordship is a hard-hearted man and would not give him this opportunity.”

But Fei Sheng was prepared. He had been so attentive towards Ji Gang just so he could leave himself a way out. The self-recommendation today was a kind of test to sound Xiao Chiye out. He had already understood Xiao Chiye’s intent, and so he shifted his gaze back to Shen Zechuan.

“This person has real capabilities.” Shen Zechuan said. “He’s on par with Gu Jin. It’d be truly a pity to cast him aside and not use him.”

They had already arrived at the courtyard while they were speaking. Gu Jin was about to arrange for the people to serve the food, but Shen Zechuan told him to wait.

“He should almost be back now.” Shen Zechuan turned back. “Go wait at the entrance and receive him.”

But this wait lasted for half a night, and Xiao Chiye still had not returned. Shen Zechuan stayed up until the burning candles were gone by half before he heard movements at the front.

Xiao Chiye strode into the courtyard but did not enter the room immediately. He was covered in dust all over. He took off his outer robe in the courtyard and turned back to look at the person behind him, although the words that came out of his mouth were, “Lanzhou.”

Shen Zechuan looked past Xiao Chiye’s shoulder and saw Chen Yang and Gu Jin supporting someone in. The courtyard was not bright enough for Shen Zechuan to make out who this person was.

This person’s robe had been ripped to pieces, and the legs of his trousers were torn. He was wearing a pair of straw shoes that had split apart,

and his legs were all caked in dirt and mud. He could not stand firm on his feet and had to rely on Chen Yang and Gu Jin to hold him up as he spouted nonsense. Disheveled and unkempt, he was truly a sorry sight to behold.

Shen Zechuan suddenly thought of something under the faint light. He probed, “Your Excellency Yu?”

That man shivered and struggled for a bit as he peered forward through the dimness in disbelief. His messy hair exposed a pair of eyes among them. He froze for a moment when he saw Shen Zechuan. Then he swallowed a few mouthfuls of saliva. His mouth opened and closed. All of a sudden, he burst out bawling.

“This is draining the life out of me!” Yu Xiaozai cried himself hoarse. He kept wiping his face as he shouted, “Vice Commander! The Grand Secretary is no more! I’m going to die too! I’ve been fleeing and hiding the entire journey here. Life is hard!”

Startled, Shen Zechuan strode a step out and asked in a heavy voice, “What do you mean, Secretariat Elder Hai is no more?”

Chokes of sobs clogged up Yu Xiaozai’s throat. He wanted to answer, but all that came out was the sound of his crying. He cried so hard that he was virtually on the verge of sliding to the ground. He kept shaking his head. At last, overwhelmed with grief and with his voice hoarse from exhaustion, he answered in bureaucratic-speak, “The Grand Secretary... The Grand Secretary risked his life in futile remonstrance...”

“Take him away to calm down for a moment and have a change of clothes.” Xiao Chiye said with a cool head. “Gu Jin, go inform the kitchen to make some soup and have it sent over.”

Those wretched cries lingered in the air. Shen Zechuan was still standing in the same spot. For all his hundreds and thousands of guesses, he had never foreseen that Hai Liangyi would die. Hai Liangyi was the stabilizing force of Qudu. He could even hold on tight to his position in the Grand Secretariat back then, when the Hua and Pan factions were at the height of their power and influence. Even if Han Cheng wanted to assist a male offspring from his own clan to the throne after Li Jianheng’s death, Hai Liangyi should still be the first and best choice of a minister inside and outside the imperial court to entrust the child to.

Xiao Chiye held on to Shen Zechuan’s arm to bring him out of his stupefaction. Xiao Chiye said, “I found him among the groups of bandits a few *li* west of the hunting grounds. It hadn’t been easy for him to get out of

Qudu, and he was robbed by the bandits after leaving Dancheng, so he could only walk barefoot towards Cizhou. He has a letter on him, which Cen Yu wrote to you. He has news of Qudu and Qidong as well.”



Yu Xiaozai still needed someone to help support him when he entered the room again. He was so famished that he had no strength and had to carry the bowl in his arms to wolf down the food before they had their conversation. Tears were still streaming down his cheeks as he ate. He seemed to be in a rush as he choked on his food and coughed. It was only when his hunger abated some that he covered up his face with a clean handkerchief and wiped away at it for a while.

“It’s truly a stroke of luck that I could live long enough to see the Vice Commander. His Excellency Cen’s letter is in my bosom. I kept it close to me throughout for fear that the bandits would search me and find it.” Yu Xiaozai sat on his heels and said with difficulty, “Before I begin, I have to inform both of you gentlemen that the new emperor who is about to ascend to the throne is a woman.”



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#### Footnotes

1. 黃冊 *Huangce* or census registers/yellow book served during the Ming Dynasty to provide basic data for taxation and recruitment based on the household’s classification according to their occupation. It was mainly divided into three categories: civilian, military, and craftsman.





- 2.
3. 洞门 An opening in a wall separating different courtyards within a residence or palace. It's also known as a moon gate (月亮门).

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 120 : AFFAIRS IN THE CAPITAL



There was no place for women in the imperial court.

Feudal ethics<sup>1</sup> drove them into the lady's chambers, becoming fragile objects in the small courtyard of their living quarters, cared for in every way by their husbands and servants, parents and children. They were porcelain vases to be appraised for their value as they waited to be married off; they did not need lofty aspirations.

The Empress Dowager, Hua Hewei, was from an illustrated clan. She was a legitimate daughter of direct descent born to the principal's wife of the Hua clan. Before she came of age, she had never seen the world beyond the walls of her quarters, and after she came of age,<sup>2</sup> she was still bound within the confines of her courtyard. She wrested away the most supreme power and authority of this world from her husband's hands, yet she never strode a step beyond that line; instead, she let down the beaded curtain and sat cautiously with her back straight behind it.<sup>3</sup>

Commander-in-chief, Qi Zhuyin, similarly came from a distinguished background. She was the legitimate daughter of direct descent born to the principal's wife of the Qi clan, a military family of generals. Before she went to war, she was betrothed to another, but after she went to war, no one dared to marry her. She never got the conferment she deserved, only the concession before Yulong Terrace.<sup>4</sup> The Ministry of Rites said that she was not worthy of enjoying the posthumous privilege of being enshrined and worshiped by the Imperial Ancestral Temple after death. The name, Qi Zhuyin, had been, to date, branded as the little girl of Qidong. If only Qi Shiyu's sons had lived up to expectations, the position of commander-in-chief of the military forces would never have come to fall upon her shoulders.

Xue Xiuzhuo initially did not have the thought to support and assist Ling Ting to the throne. That acute disappointment when he found out that the imperial heir was a girl made him change his strategy right at once, but then, he changed his mind when he saw Ling Ting.

Because Ling Ting resembled Emperor Guangcheng way too much.

Any long-time minister who was old enough to have seen Emperor Guangcheng before could tell Ling Ting's origins at a glance—this was an

aberration the result of incest within the Li clan.

When the Eastern Palace fell from power during the reign of Yongyi, the only reason for Emperor Guangcheng to leave the palace was to pay a visit to Prince Qin – who had taken ill – and his beautiful, defenseless wife. Emperor Guangcheng did not have any imperial concubine who was in his favor during the later years of the reign of Yongyi. After he fell ill, the empress, Hua Hewei, took control of the former imperial court and harem to prevent him from begetting another imperial heir. It was under these layers of walls around him that Emperor Guangcheng set his eyes on his daughter-in-law.

A pity Princess Consort Qin gave birth to a girl.

Like an old lion who had exhausted every bit of his energy, Emperor Guangcheng did not even lift an eyelid when he learned of this news and subsequently lost all the lofty aspirations he once harbored. No one knew if Prince Qin had caught some wind of it, but it was not long before he passed away from his illness. Before his death, he threw Ling Ting out of Qudu. However, it seemed to be fated that Xiangyun would come across her and bring her back.

When Xue Xiuzhuo had just found Ling Ting, she was uncouth in behavior and was already in her teens. Pulling her back onto the seat of the imperial heir would be an impossible task without the determination to transform her from inside out. At first, it was tough. She had wasted too much time in Xiangyun Villa. If she herself were not resolute enough to erase all those superfluous traces on her completely, then it would have been undoable even if Xue Xiuzhuo had superhuman powers.

But Ling Ting actually “corrected” herself, one step at a time. Little by little, she scraped all those vulgar and frivolous things off herself. At first, there were plenty of words she could not read, so she studied hard through the nights. Strokes she could not write well, she would practice them day and night. She seemed to be the last remaining bit of strength Heaven left for the Li clan’s empire. She allowed Xue Xiuzhuo to see a faint glimmer of light in that deteriorating situation.

A few months ago, when the misty rain enveloped the silk-tree blossoms – when Qi Huilian rejected Xue Xiuzhuo in the loft – Ling Ting was sitting upright at the table practicing her writing.

She used so much strength in her writing that she almost broke the paper.

After she was done writing, she turned her head aside to look at the drizzling rain. She watched it for a long time without expression. Xue Xiuzhuo later came over to have a meal with her. She sat in the seat of lower priority and ate her meal with precise table manners. Xue Xiuzhuo was particular about not speaking when eating, so they never talked when they had their meals. After the meal, he would test Ling Ting on her homework. This was the most important event of the day. Ling Ting had to be precise and clear in her answers. Xue Xiuzhuo never scolded her, but he was more exacting on her than anyone else.

“Teacher.” Ling Ting paused for a moment as she lowered her head. “Am I going to have a change of teacher?”

Xue Xiuzhuo put the books in order and said with indifference, “This isn’t a matter for you to think about.”

Ling Ting was silent as she propped herself up. She listened as Xue Xiuzhuo rose to his feet and walked towards the door. She suddenly turned her head aside to look at Xue Xiuzhuo and asked, “Because I’m a woman?”

Xue Xiuzhuo stood still and turned back to look at Ling Ting too. Ling Ting never averted her eyes. She was just as calm as Xue Xiuzhuo.

“I’m a woman.” Ling Ting said. “If the new teacher isn’t willing to teach me for this reason, then I’d like to ask to see him.”

Xue Xiuzhuo turned around again and changed his shoes. The sound of rain outside intensified. He said, “No. You just don’t have the affinity to be teacher and pupil with him. I’ll still continue to teach you.”

“Affinity is the most difficult thing to make do with. Wise teachers are hard to seek. I’m not willing to let a teacher slip by because of this.” Ling Ting had already stood up. “Teacher.”

But Xue Xiuzhuo paid her no heed, nor did she answer her. He lifted the curtain, and the young servant boy waiting on the outside hurriedly held up the umbrella. Without letting the servant touch the books, he went down the stairs and left.

Ling Ting stood where she was and watched through the gap in the same curtain as Xue Xiuzhuo walked a few steps before he disappeared in the rain. She knew this was a soundless rejection from Xue Xiuzhuo. No matter what other people thought of Xue Xiuzhuo, he was, in Ling Ting’s eyes, exceedingly calm under that gentle and refined mask of his. He was

even a little conceited; he would never open himself up to manipulation by others, and it was rare for him to heed the words of others.

Ling Ting could only let the matter drop. She sat back down, flipped open the essay on contemporary politics that Xue Xiuzhuo had left behind, and copied Xue Xiuzhuo's characters. But she could never write like him. Because she did not know how to rein herself in diplomatically. Her strokes were just like steel blades that would never go around in circles.



Several months later, the scorching sun blazed down upon Yulong Terrace where a densely packed mass of court officials was kneeling. These were officials from humble backgrounds headed by Hai Liangyi. After the sixth month, Han Cheng brought back a boy from his own clan and claimed this child to be a descendant of the Li clan.

Under Yao Wenyu's meticulous care, Hai Liangyi's condition took a turn for the better. The first thing he did when he attended court was to reject Han Cheng's memorial in his capacity as the Grand Secretary of the Grand Secretariat. He also demanded an official verification of his child's identity. But the emperors of the Li clan were all dead, and it was impossible to determine if this child was a descendant of the Li clan based on the empress dowager alone. Both parties reached a deadlock, with no one willing to make any more concessions.

"I was the Eight Great Training Divisions Vice Commander during the reign of Yongyi, and I was also the top military officer under Emperor Guangcheng's command. I have a private letter from Emperor Guangcheng entrusting the care of the child to me. Grand Secretary, is this not enough either?" Han Cheng had gained power recently and so dared to refute Hai Liangyi on the imperial court.

Hai Liangyi did not have the same vigor as before after his illness. His heart would palpitate and his hands would tremble just by standing for a few moments. He stepped out and said, "Mere words without a factual basis. If the commander is willing to make the private letter public and hand it over to the Grand Secretariat for examination, then you and I would have no further need to engage in such a war of words on the imperial court."

Han Cheng sneered inwardly to himself. There was no imperial heir at present, and it was the throne being left vacant that Hai Liangyi should be getting anxious about. For him to be so unwilling to make a concession, he must already have found a candidate. So he said, "The throne has been left

empty for more than a month. What is the Grand Secretary still waiting for? The Grand Secretariat has been deliberating over it. Has it still not come up with a solution?"

Hai Liangyi was sweating all over. He felt a stifling oppression in his chest, so he took a short breather before continuing, "We sorted out the clan register and found out that the second son of the former Prince Yan's grandson born of a concubine is still in Huaizhou. He is a descendant of the Li clan with a traceable lineage. According to the rules, no one else but him is fit to be the current crown prince candidate."

"Prince Yan was the Prince of Huaizhou during the reign of Wanxuan. His descendants of direct lineage died in battle at Luoxia Pass, and those born of concubines further down are all from the collateral branch of the clan. How can they be called the bloodline of the Li clan if we were really to go into it? The second son of Prince Yan's grandson born of a concubine is already approaching seventy years of age, so how can he still head the government?" Han Cheng smiled. "Furthermore, it's a long and bumpy journey. How is he going to stand this kind of physical and mental torment? Grand Secretary, there is simply no way we can discuss this further in detail!"

Both parties stood their ground, with no one backing down. There were still students from the imperial college kneeling outside. The empress dowager listened behind the bead curtains for a moment before saying, "Although this matter is urgent, there is still room for discussion. Secretariat Elder, the Grand Secretariat assists in governmental affairs, and there has never been a time when I do a perfunctory job of matters. If you have objections, you can come over to Mingli Hall to discuss it face-to-face with me. Please get the students to disperse."

She spoke in a soft voice, but Hai Liangyi could hear the displeasure.

Although Han Cheng went all out to push forth this child, he had always been submitting his memorials in the capacity as the former Vice-Commander of the Eight Great Training Divisions; he never got the officials from the noble clans to second his proposal. This was to, firstly, allow the Han clan to become the only support the new emperor could rely on, and secondly, avoid suspicion.

Avoiding suspicion was exceptionally important.

Hua Siqian and Pan Rugui both failed because they did not know how to avoid suspicion. Forming cliques for one's selfish ends was a great taboo

in the imperial court. It had not been long since the empress dowager took control over the imperial court again. At present, she was just like the emperor. What she could not stand to see was her ministers flocking together to become a force powerful enough to coerce her into making policy decisions. As such, she did not promote officials from humble backgrounds as a gesture of goodwill, nor did she promote officials from the noble clans in order to secure her power. She seemed to understand that Dazhou had already come to a certain point. Instead of pinning her hopes on a puppet like she had done a few years before, she might as well count on herself.

Hai Liangyi was sick for two months, during which officials from humble backgrounds were extremely jittery and on edge. With Kong Qiu and Cen Yu taking the lead, they carried out plenty of discussions in private, and they also repeatedly submitted memorials to ask the empress dowager to let Hai Liangyi return to the imperial court to administer state affairs. Not only that, the students from the Imperial College still had the nerve to engage in idle talks of state affairs. The sixth month had only just arrived, and there were already rumors that the empress dowager had seized power and established herself as the ruler.

The empress dowager did not have any overt discussions with Hai Liangyi, but she increased the frequency of visits paid by the eunuchs. This was a kind of covert prompt. So Hai Liangyi attended court as soon as the sixth month came around, when his illness had just taken a turn for the better. Although he had, in the past decades, asserted that he never was a part of a faction or clique, he had already become the direction in which all the scholars of humble origins in the world looked to. This was a fact he could not deny even if he wanted to. He had already turned into a powerful “force” of sorts.

Hai Liangyi fell ill, and everyone in the world panicked. Hai Liangyi rejected Han Cheng’s memorial, and before the empress dowager gave her reply, the officials and students had already kneeled for a day. Without realizing it, he had become the thorn in the empress dowager’s flesh, far more than the overbearing Han Cheng.

Hai Liangyi braced himself to hang on and said, “The imperial college students have the duty to discuss official affairs to begin with, and the imperial court is a place where the world has their eyes on. It’s only when there are discussions that there can be strategies. Your Majesty heads the

administration diligently and attends to affairs personally. Still, officials are appointed to share the burdens of their superiors at the top and oversee the work of their subordinates at the bottom. It's Dazhou's blessing that they are concerned about state affairs. What's more, the matter of the crown prince is not just a family affair. This subject thinks that it's only by letting them remain here that we can have an open discussion on the issue of the new emperor."

It was not stuffy and warm in the hall. There were bamboo blinds hanging everywhere to hold in broken blocks of ice. To Hai Liangyi, it was even a little cool. He stood with his head lowered after he was done saying his piece. Behind the beaded curtain, the empress dowager remained silent for a long time. It was only when Hai Liangyi's legs were aching that she finally answered in an unhurried tone.

"What the Secretariat Elder has said makes sense. In that case, I shall listen to you. As for the matter of the second son of Prince Yan's grandson, I still have yet to see the clan registry, so it's inappropriate for me to come to a conclusion. But Han Cheng's people are already here. Do you want to let the Court of Judicial Review assist in the checks, or would you prefer the Ministry of Justice to do it? I shall do as you say."



T97's Words:

If a character's reason for appearing is not convincing and their actions are not logical, then it won't matter if this person is a male or female; it won't save the story from collapsing. When I first did the mind map of the characters, it occurred to me that the female characters might get discussed. But I didn't expect discussion about whether the entire book is enough of a serious drama with their presence. When Qi Zhuyin appeared, someone mentioned that she was a self-insert Mary Sue. But actually, in the year before last, I've put up a few Qiang Jin Jiu paragraphs on Weibo, and Qi Zhuyin and Ling Ting were among the characters who made an appearance back then. If their appearance makes no sense, would it definitely make sense if I change them to a "he"?

Thank you for reading.

Lianyin's Reminder:

As usual, you are free to dislike the novel or the plot or settings (just stop reading, easy as that) but please refrain from bringing the author



personally into tirades. Thank you.

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**SPECIAL THANKS TO :** [Alex](#), [Yuka](#) for burning brain cells with author's words!

#### Footnotes

1. 天理 “Law/Principles of Heaven” i.e., feudal ethics as propounded by the Confucianists in the Song Dynasty
2. 及笄 for a girl to reach the age of fifteen in old days
3. i.e., to hold court behind a screen or curtain. A practice in ancient China, where the Empress or Empress dowager was allowed to preside over the imperial court without actually being seen by her subjects since women were prohibited from politics. This would usually be done by a child emperor's mother, who would serve as regent and rule in place of the emperor. It's different from actually declaring herself sovereign and ruling as the 'emperor' herself.
4. For a refresher, see [chapter 51](#)

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 121 : LIANGYI



Hai Liangyi did not want to be supported by anyone after the court session was dismissed. Kong Qiu and the rest knew that the Secretariat Elder was a strong-minded one who did not like to look weak, and so they only dared to follow behind him and watch as he hobbled along alone and made his way slowly down.

That official robe of his soaked in the last of the evening rays like a scar blending into its brilliance. At this time last year, he had led hundreds of officials in attending court. What an imposing, spirited sight he had cut back then. But now, there was no trace of this will and spirit to be found on him.

Hai Liangyi reached the end and stopped. He slowly turned back to look at the officials on the stairs, then at the last remaining sunset glow above the upturned eaves of Mingli Hall.

“It’s getting dark.” Hai Liangyi said gently. “Be careful on your way back.”

For some reason, Kong Qiu felt a tinge of fear at this moment. He strode a step out with the intent to support Hai Liangyi by the arms. Choking a little with emotion, he called out, “Teacher!”

Hai Liangyi waved a hand at him and turned around to walk towards the palace gates.

The descendant of Prince Yan’s grandson born to a concubine was Hai Liangyi’s last line of battle. He watched as that setting sun was covered up by the buildings. A sense of powerlessness washed over him. He knew what it signified for a child of the Han clan to ascend to the throne. He had fought this battle for thirty years, and his steady pursuit to sue for peace had never once scored a victory.

He could only try his best to set himself aflame and throw these old bones of his into the intense fire, hoping that the spatter of sparks would be able to light up the night sky that had been deadly still for so long. An endless night had descended upon Dazhou, and he seemed to be the only remaining torch left. But to date, he still could not bring himself to admit that Qi Huilian and the rest who had once shared the same goal in spite of their differing paths had all failed.

He watched as those geniuses fall like shooting stars, one after another, leaving himself as insignificant as ever.

Thirty years ago, Hai Liangyi was not concerned with success or failure. Thirty years later, Hai Liangyi was all burned out and spent. Steadily but surely, he walked on his own path and attempted to hold back Qi Huilian, who was taking extreme, radical measures as he charged ahead. But he failed to do so. No one knew that the night when the entire Eastern Palace was wiped out was the most pained moment in Hai Liangyi's life.

It was already dark. By the time Hai Liangyi made his way to the palace gates, he was already panting. He lifted his sleeves to wipe his sweat and saw Yao Wenyu standing beside the sedan waiting for him. Yao Wenyu came over to help him up. Hai Liangyi took his seat, and just as Yao Wenyu was about to lower the curtain, Hai Liangyi said to him, "Yuanzhuo, there is a load on my mind that has yet to be resolved. Make a trip to Wucheng tomorrow on my behalf. Pack your bags tonight."



During the court session a few days later, the empress dowager exempted Hai Liangyi from standing. But the more she treated him with such courtesy and respect, the more it meant that her dissatisfaction with Hai Liangyi was intensifying. This was because the imperial censors from the Chief Surveillance Bureau had been working as one these few days to launch a series of scathing rebukes at Han Cheng. Cries of demand for an official verification of the child from the Han clan rose to an all-time high, and this tidal wave surging around Hai Liangyi was forcing the empress dowager to make a concession.

The empress dowager had a hard time sleeping in the day and at night, and her hesitation put Han Cheng in a desperate situation. Gradually, it dawned on Han Cheng that the empress dowager was trying to take advantage of the conflict to destroy him. As long as he could not bear the weight of the burden and perish under the voices of castigation, the empress dowager would be able to support the Han clan's child into ascending to the throne immediately and eliminate the possibility of Han Cheng making a power grab. When that time comes, she would be able to focus on confronting those of humble backgrounds. Whether she would be giving Hai Liangyi the cold shoulder or have the Grand Secretary of the Grand Secretariat replaced, she would be able to do it with more ease than she could at present.

Han Cheng was unwilling to let the matter drop and surrender the power in his hands on a silver platter to others. Even if he had to put up with it, he had to make Hai Liangyi suffer!

“The situation is unstable at present. Libei in the northeast is eyeing us like a tiger watching its prey, while Zhongbo to the east is beginning to show signs of stirring. Is the world going to take the lead of the Grand Secretary if we don’t have a new emperor because the Grand Secretariat keeps delaying the matter of the crown prince?” Han Cheng’s mouth was already blistered from the verbal battle that had gone on for several days running. He suddenly flung his sleeves and said, “If you ask me, the Grand Secretary is rallying his own clique to obstruct the imperial court from designating a crown prince. His intention is condemnable!”

“That’s a slanderous accusation!” Cen Yu rebuked sternly in his capacity as the head of the imperial censors. “We have been discussing the matter of the crown prince appointment for several days in a row, and yet the commander has been unwilling to verify the real identity of the imperial heir officially. So who is the one here trying to hamstring efforts to designate a crown prince? The imperial court had the support of the public previously. If it weren’t for the commander’s insistence on surrounding the Marquis of Dingdu, Xiao Chiye, to capture him, how would Qudu find itself caught in such a predicament?! If we were to hold someone accountable for this, you’d be the one to bear the bulk of the responsibility!”

“Well, then!” Han Cheng sneered and pointed at Cen Yu. “Xiao Chiye assassinated the late emperor. As the commander-in-chief of the Imperial Bodyguard and Viceroy of the Eight Great Training Divisions, I’m perfectly justified in taking this person down! You said I did wrong, and that means you’re saying that he did right in assassinating the last emperor! You are on good terms with Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan. Cen Xunyi, the Ministry of Justice didn’t trace their investigation to you, did they? Kong Boran, both of you are truly close friends from the same school. I, Han Cheng, am truly envious!”

Fury washed over Kong Qiu’s face. He said, “What nonsense are you spouting? We are still investigating whether Xiao Chiye really did assassinate the late emperor. If we just take your words as it is without evidence, then we might just as well do away with the Ministry of Justice.

Besides, you were also present during our private gathering, were you not? You drank quite the amount of wine too!”

Han Cheng said, “I’m an Imperial Bodyguard. Keeping my ears to the ground at all times and taking records is my duty. If I don’t show up when you senior officials have a private gathering, then how can I know precisely what has been said? I have already told someone to transcribe everything that has been discussed in detail that night for Her Majesty. I’m in the clear! Do you people dare to though?”

Pan Xiangjie, having received help from Xiao Chiye before, was fearful of being implicated, and so he had been keeping a low profile on the imperial court lately. Han Cheng was presently in power, and Pan Xiangjie went along with whatever he said. Seeing them argue again, his lips opened and closed, and he took several small steps back, not daring to cut into the conversation. He made up his mind to be a coward like a turtle hiding in its shell.

Gradually, several parties got carried away with their verbal assaults on each other. Cen Yu was the most eloquent of all. He cursed Han Cheng so savagely that even if Han Cheng wanted to put up with his words, he was boiling with so much rage that the hand he was pointing at Cen Yu with was trembling hard. But still, he kept a clear head as he slid down to his knees on the ground and burst out wailing as though he was going to go broke.

“Your Majesty!” Han Cheng lay prostrate on the ground and wept bitterly. “Your Majesty! This subject’s heart is as pure and bright as the moon! It’s my fault for surrounding Xiao Chiye to capture him. It’s also my fault that the late emperor was assassinated. And now it’s even my fault that we have no one to be the crown prince! As an official, I’m willing to die for my sovereign and be punished by my sovereign! If there is a crime, then it’s all on me! Whether I’m to be killed alone or along with my family, I will accept whatever sentence my master dishes out!”

Kong Qiu found this man truly shameless. He promptly raised his hands to remove his *wusha* hat<sup>1</sup> and said, “I am ashamed to be of the same rank as a vile person of this kind! If the real identity of the imperial heir cannot be officially verified, then I, Kong Boran, might as well forfeit this official post!”

The empress dowager abruptly rose to her feet and lifted the beaded curtain to sweep a cold glance over them one at a time before her eyes came to a stop on Han Cheng. She said, “We are discussing official matters on the

imperial court, so what are you crying for? Get up!” Then she looked at Kong Qiu. “You are a member of the Grand Secretariat and could be said to be the Deputy Grand Secretary. You are someone who presides over the affairs of the state. You keep using your resignation at every turn as a pressure tactic. Are you trying to threaten me into giving in, or are you thinking of fishing for praises—You know it best yourself! Ever since I stood in to act on behalf of the Son of Heaven, I have to ask the Grand Secretariat about all the matters in detail, regardless of its significance, so what is there that can’t be explained clearly that you have to keep pushing every step of the way?!”

All the ministers kneeled.

“Our forefathers laid down the rule that the harem cannot interfere in politics. I’ve been overstepping my boundary time and again that I’m already too ashamed to face my ancestors. Jianheng passed away so suddenly this time. If not for your repeated pleas, how would I have been willing to step out into this court once again to take charge of governmental affairs? We lack an emperor now, and I’m merely a widow who is without a child...” Hot tears brimmed in her eyes when she spoke to this point. “When has Emperor Guangcheng ever let me suffer such grievance when he was still around?!”

Han Cheng seemed to be so moved by the emperor and empress’s deep love that he covered his face as he lay prostrate on the ground and wailed, “This subject never had to put up with such a treatment either when Emperor Guangcheng was around. I’m deeply aware that I’m an ignorant and shallow person. I’m merely a soldier. I dare not compare myself with the various major officials from the Grand Secretariat, what’s more vie with the Grand Secretary? It’s all because of my staunch loyalty and deep love for the Li clan that I dared to return the imperial heir to the imperial court. Grand Secretary, why go to such an extent?!”

Han Cheng has repeatedly been fanning the flames towards Hai Liangyi. Kong Qiu was burning with pent-up anger deep down. It was with difficulty that he said, “Your Majesty... Heaven can attest to the Grand Secretary’s heart and intentions. Designating a crown prince is by no means a small issue. We are beset with difficulties all around at present. Dazhou is already at the most critical moment of survival. If we cannot proceed with prudence and caution, then I fear there will be no end of trouble for the future...”

“I understand this as well. That’s why I have called the various excellencies here for days on end to discuss it in detail.” The empress dowager regained her composure and said, “The imperial heirs after Emperor Guangcheng have all passed away, and now, we can’t even find ourselves a crown prince. The harder the crisis is, the more we should work together as one. Han Cheng, hand over Emperor Guangcheng’s private letter for the various excellencies present to verify it officially!”

Where on earth would Han Cheng have a private letter entrusting the child to him? The reason he had been holding out and refusing to hand it over was that he was competing with Hai Liangyi and the empress dowager to see who was more capable of stalling. The moment Hai Liangyi relented and the wave of officials from humble backgrounds dispersed, the empress dowager’s desire to head the country would be unstoppable. When the time came, she would have no choice but to let the child from the Han clan ascend to the throne. By then, he would truly become the minister the child had been entrusted to. The golden age of the Han clan was just right before his eyes. He understood that the empress dowager currently wanted to push him into the corner to his death, so he cried even louder.

Han Cheng beat his chest and said, “The various excellencies doubt my loyalty, so you may as well let me die! My dear younger brother, my dear younger brother of direct descent! He ended up being held hostage in Cizhou to this date, all just to hunt down that Xiao Chiye. I had an eye injured for the late emperor, and I took three slashes of the blade for Emperor Guangcheng. So how can I be a shallow, narrow-minded person who deceives the entire world for my own selfish desire?!”

All they had been going back and forth about was “selfish desire”. Cries and curses flooded the imperial court. No one else mentioned Prince Yan’s descendant again. Kong Qiu remained kneeling, but his heart had already gone cold.

Hai Liangyi had not spoken a word today. Supporting himself on the handles of the chair, he suddenly stood up. Countless gazes converged together on him. Officials from humble backgrounds looked on expectantly for the Grand Secretary to turn the table and regain control of the situation again, while officials from the noble clans remained silent and waited for a good opportunity. They all focused their attention on Hai Liangyi, just like they did in the past.

Hai Liangyi started coughing. His emaciated, wizened hand trembled as he covered the blood with a handkerchief. He swallowed some saliva and slowly looked around the great hall, then at all these faces. Finally, he looked at the empress dowager.

“Back then, the Li clan reigned supreme, and it took several years of conquest before the empire was finally united as one. Over the past hundred years, generations after generations of Dazhou’s officials have, without exception, devoted all their themselves to the court and spared no effort in their duties. Although the city walls of Qudu during the reign of Yongyi are old, its integrity still remains, and its spirit still exists. At the start of the reign of Yongyi, Qi Huilian of Yuzhou successively came in first in all three imperial examinations,<sup>2</sup> and from then, the imperial college flourished. Although the three preceptors of the Yao clan were born of a noble clan, they advocated freedom of speech and recruited all kinds of outstanding talents. Most of the scholars of humble origins still serving in this imperial court today joined the imperial court during that period of time.”

Kong Qiu lowered his head. As he recalled the past, he could not help but choke with sobs softly.

“But then, the period of resurgence during the reign of Yongyi was merely a flash in the pan. It had only been ten years, and Emperor Guangcheng fell ill. Then the noble clans thrived once again, and prejudices over family status divided the imperial college. From the reign of Yongyi to Xiande, no other scholars of humble origins entered the imperial court; this is the imperial court of the noble clans.”

Pan Xiangjie looked embarrassed and kept his head bowed in a kowtow without saying a word.

Han Cheng wanted to say something, but Hai Liangyi suddenly raised his voice. “During the reign of Xiande, the state treasury was empty. This subject made a request to Hua Siqian to hand over the accounts. He worked in hand with the various noble clan officials who were then serving as the ministers of the various ministries to avoid the issue and dismissed me in a perfunctory manner time and again! In that same year, Juexi was hit by a disaster, and it was a scene of desolation and despair everywhere. Once again, this subject forced Hua Siqian to hand over the accounts, only to have him skirted around the issue. Not long later, the troops of Zhongbo suffered a defeat, and the granaries of the six prefectures turned up emptied overnight after the battle! To this date, Hua Siqian had never given a clear



explanation of this account! Is this his fault, or is it the fault of everyone here for exacerbating the issue?!”

Alarmed, Pan Xiangjie hurriedly said, “About this matter, the Court of Judicial Review has already—”

“Ever since this subject, Hai Renshi, has returned to the imperial court, I have been repeatedly remonstrating and requesting to officially verify the real identity of the imperial heir from the Han clan. Han Cheng keeps hesitating, and to date, he is still unwilling to hand over the private letter entrusting the child to him. Left without a choice, I took charge and directed the Grand Secretariat to search through the imperial registry before I eventually presented a memorial to ask Her Majesty to choose and designate the descendant of Prince Yan of Huaizhou as the crown prince. It was a futile attempt.”

The empress dowager was stunned into taking half a step back by this impassioned tone. The beaded curtain fell noisily over her body as she looked at Hai Liangyi in shock and uncertainty.

Hai Liangyi was on fire. The fury in his heart had been suppressed for a full thirty years, and it was now burning so intensely that his spirit blazed once more into existence and left the entire hall shocked. He said, “The decline of the state is all my fault as the Grand Secretary! I have been remonstrating with the ruler all my life; I already have no more to fear! Since my remonstrations are futile while I’m alive, then I shall remonstrate with Dazhou today with my death! A crown prince can be appointed, but the child from the Han clan must never be appointed as the crown prince! A crown prince can be appointed—”

Before anyone could bat an eyelash, Hai Liangyi’s sleeves rose with the wind, like falling leaves set on fire right before everyone’s eyes. An earthshaking thud followed. Blood splattered.

Dead silence descended upon the entire hall. The empress dowager’s limbs went icy cold, and she almost slid to the ground. Her eyes traced along that splattered blood with difficulty and landed upon Hai Liangyi. A moment later, the entire court of officials rose to their feet with exclamations of shock. Kong Qiu practically crawled over on his knees and propped Hai Liangyi up.

“Renshi...” The empress dowager’s voice trembled, “Why... why go to such an extent...”

This one head smash completely severed Han Cheng's retreat route. Hai Liangyi used death to attain the wrath of all the scholars in the world. The lad of the Han clan would never be able to become emperor. Whoever dared to risk universal condemnation to seek infamy would be the thorn in the flesh of the world's literati in the future. But even Han Cheng himself was stunned on the ground. Never in his wildest dream could he have imagined that Hai Liangyi would go to such extremes.

With his face drenched in blood, Hai Liangyi looked up at the high, unreachable roof.

He had been seeking stability his entire life. Yet, at this last moment, he took such drastic measures for once. He became the blazing sun that had burst out of Dazhou, flaming with countless rays of light in that pitch-black night. The crane on his chest,<sup>3</sup> which had already been stained red, rose and fell with the last remaining heaves of his chest. He gripped Kong Qiu's hand tightly.

"Boran..." Hai Liangyi said softly. "... I... have done all I can."



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SPECIAL THANKS TO : [Eggy](#)<3

### Footnotes

1. 乌纱帽 *wusha* hat, or black gauze hat, is the headwear of Ming dynasty officials, comprising a black hat with two wing-like flaps of thin, oval-shaped boards on each side.
2. 三元 "Triple Yuan". In the Ming Dynasty, the imperial examination system was split into three phases: the provincial exam (乡试); metropolitan exam (会试); and the palace exam (殿试). The titles for the top scholars in each exam were known as the *Jieyuan* (解元), *Huiyuan* (会元) and *Zhuangyuan* (状元). These three are known as the "Triple Yuan". i.e., a Triple Yuan Top Scholar is one who came first in all these examinations.



朝服 | 黄强文史

- 3.
4. Refers to his rank badge, or mandarin square, a large embroidered badge sewn onto the surcoat of an official to indicate the rank of the official wearing it. Squares depicting birds were used for civil officials, while animals were used for military officials. So for a first-grade civil official like Hai Liangyi, this bird would be a crane.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 122 : THE EMPEROR’S DAUGHTER



When Yu Xiaozai spoke to this point, he bent over and choked with sobs, unable to continue. The scholars of their generation who went on to take up official posts either wanted to be the patriotic and loyal Qi Huilian who would lay down his life for his cause, or the Hai Liangyi who was the stabilizing force that could hold them together in times of crisis. But then, this building teetering under the elements suddenly let loose the thunderous sound of collapse.<sup>1</sup> In one night, it shattered the lofty aspirations of several tens of thousands of people, turning Dazhou into a land where wails abound everywhere.

Shen Zechuan turned his head aside silently and listened to the sound of the night watchman on his rounds beyond the courtyard wall.<sup>2</sup>

Some time later, Yu Xiaozai stopped sobbing. He covered his face with a warm handkerchief for a moment before he said, “The Grand Secretary’s use of his death to remonstrate forced Han Cheng into a dead end, but he refused to give up. The crowd from imperial college was so worked up that they blocked Han Cheng’s sedan on Shenwu Street after the dismissal of the court session and smashed it to pieces. The Eight Great Training Divisions sealed off the imperial college and captured a few students who had been taking the lead and hauled them over to the imperial prison. They even cut off the students’ supply of food, and so the students went on a hunger strike.”

Yu Xiaozai could not help but shed tears again.

“I initially thought all the scholars in the world would die out at this point. But that night, I saw the flickers of flames<sup>3</sup> among Mount Jingyi, which the imperial college was on, and that was when I knew of the far-reaching significance of the Grand Secretary. The blaze that spread far and wide had already become a force to behold. To quell the fury of all the scholars in the world, the empress dowager once again demanded Han Cheng hand over the private letter entrusting the child to him. She also drove the child from the Han clan who was feigning to be the imperial heir out of the palace. Han Cheng had no choice but to make a concession. He promised to have the private letter officially verified three days later.”

“The forged private letter did not have Emperor Guangcheng’s private seal. So the Grand Secretariat rejected Han Cheng’s crown prince proposal. On seeing this, the empress dowager consented to meet with Prince Yan of Huaizhou’s descendant to establish the candidate for the crown prince. However, Huaizhou is far away from Qudu. Just as Han Cheng had said earlier, that second son of Prince Yan’s grandson of non-direct descent was already advanced in age. He was fatigued from the long journey, and coupled with the fact that he had been through a roller coaster of emotions, he gave up the ghost before arriving at Qudu.”

“The issue of selecting and designating a crown prince completely came to an impasse. Han Cheng, with ulterior motives in mind, used the Eight Great Training Divisions to coerce the Grand Secretariat. He submitted another memorial to make a request for the eight cities to assist in governmental affairs. He wanted the empress dowager to establish a ‘Chamber for the Deliberation of State Affairs’, and the candidates listed were all officials from the noble clans. The empress dowager shelved the memorial without giving him an answer. Carrying on with the legacy of the Grand Secretary, His Excellency Boran submitted a memorial to consent to the original plan for the Chamber, but he asked for the removal of Han Cheng’s military power on the grounds that civil officials do not get involved with the military. He wanted to use this opportunity to take down Han Cheng’s Eight Great Training Divisions. But Han Cheng refused, so the Grand Secretariat did not give their approval, and both parties’ negotiation fell through once again.”

The lack of an heir was the breaking point of the no-win situation in Qudu. Officials of the Grand Secretariat with Kong Qiu in the lead made a concession in the face of the proposal for the eight cities to assist in governmental affairs, and this was in line with Hai Liangyi’s policy to keep the peace. They had no troops. Qidong was under the control of the empress dowager, and Libei no longer obeyed Qudu’s deployment orders after what happened with Xiao Chiye. Kong Qiu could only choose the lesser of two evils and give way. The bottom line was to strip Han Cheng of his military power. Even if they could not get their own hands on military power, they could not hand over all the patrols in Qudu to the noble clans to take charge of just like before.

“It was at precisely this moment that Xue Xiuzhuo submitted his memorials.” Yu Xiaozai let out a vague, bitter smile under the dimness.

“With one stone, he stirred up a thousand ripples... This move of his was really too ingenious.”

Xiao Chiye heard Xue Xiuzhuo's name and shifted his gaze a little to look at Shen Zechuan. After a moment of silence, Shen Zechuan lifted his head slightly to look out of the window with furrowed brows. After a moment, he said, “You were right before. This talent is really something else. Rumors of the imperial heir made their way so easily to where we are, stirring us into action. I originally suspected that Han Cheng was the one who killed all those boys after I arrived in Zhongbo. But it now seems that Han Cheng was merely the same as Xi Hongxuan—they were all sacrificial chess pieces manipulated by Xue Xiuzhuo. A wrong move of a chess piece and the whole game is lost. It was careless of me to underestimate the enemy.”

The impasse in the imperial court continued for less than half a month when the upsurge of verbal assaults of the imperial college on Han Cheng shifted to the eight cities' assistance of governmental affairs. Countless students with emotions running high became more and more dissatisfied with Kong Qiu's conservative strategy. At the same time they wrote articles and elegies to mourn Hai Liangyi, they were also mourning Qi Huilian. The way Kong Qiu was at present was not the Grand Secretary of their expectations.

The empress dowager made a concession when it came to the child from the Han clan, and this allowed all the students under the world to see the might of gathering various powers into one faction. They were like water droplets from all over who converged together to form the boundless sea. They believed that their combined forces could push over that high wall. The opportunity to get rid of the malady that was the noble clans was right before their eyes.

Because Kong Qiu affirmed Han Cheng's proposal for the eight cities to assist with governmental affairs, the direction of the imperial college suddenly changed course like the weather in the fourth month. First, an article with impassioned words was stuck to the door of the Kong's residence. Then all the criticisms that had been used to verbally assault Han Cheng were used on Kong Qiu. The students became more and more certain that the scholar-officials of humble origins led by Kong Qiu were too weak, and that was why Hai Liangyi was left high and dry by himself in the Grand Secretariat, which led to his eventual decision to choose such a resolute

method to remonstrate. They openly listed out all the court officials during the reign of Yongyi and checked, one at a time, whether these officials used to have any relations with officials from the noble clans. News that Cen Yu had invited Han Cheng to a private feast spread like wildfire and worked the students up into an emotional frenzy. They labeled Cen Yu, Kong Qiu, and even the Minister of War, Chen Zhen, as “hypocrites”.

The sedan Cen Yu used to attend court sessions was smashed. He stood at the entrance of the palace gate with his head all covered in blood and pointed to the sky to proclaim that he had no inappropriate relations with the noble clans. Consequently, he got splashed with filthy dung all over. Cen Yu could not believe that these were the students of before. He had been with the Chief Surveillance Bureau for twenty years, and he had impeached countless major and minor officials of the imperial court. He even dared to impeach Emperor Guangcheng. But he never thought that he would, one day, be cursed as a scum who sought personal gain without shame.

The Yao clan had always been an exemplar of scholars who were concerned with politics but remained political outsiders who kept their distance from those in power. It was an honorable glory for a clan to produce three preceptors. Even though they had no one in the imperial court after the reign of Xiande, their influence far surpassed those from the other clans. They were widely respected among the noble clans and those of humble origins. Hai Liangyi, Qi Huilian, Kong Qiu, and other old and new officials of the imperial court were all once recipients of the Yao clan’s advice and guidance. The thriving of the imperial college during the period of resurgence in the reign of Yongyi had everything to do with Old Master Yao’s extensive recruitment of talents. But now, the doors and windows of the Yao clan’s ancestral hall they had set up at the eastern end of Qudu had been smashed broken. If Kong Qiu had not sent someone to guard it, it would have been set aflame that night.

This fire even blazed its way to Yao Wenyu. He was Hai Liangyi’s student, yet he refused to join the imperial court as an official. He did not appear either the last time when the imperial college went up in arms to curse Pan Rugui. And now, new grievances piled up upon old scores. They tore up the essays they had once sung praises of, and likened Yao Wenyu to a thief—a thief of the noble clan who stole Hai Liangyi’s government administration knowledge.

Qudu plunged into complete chaos. The moment the Eight Great Training tried to dispatch troops to suppress them, the students would go on a hunger strike in protest. Already, four or five people had starved to death, and Han Cheng no longer dared to act rashly. At this time, even Qi Zhuyin, who was busy with Bianjun Commandery affairs far away in Qidong, was not spared either. The marriage alliance of Hua and Qi was to take place next month, and those impassioned articles stating their opinions spread like snowflakes to Qidong. The commander-in-chief initially had insomnia, and now, whenever she wanted to sprawl out on her desk to rest, she would get Qi Wei to read out those articles to her. The more unpleasant the scoldings, the more soundly she slept.

The fire in Dazhou did indeed start to burn, but not in the way Hai Liangyi anticipated. The night was whizzing with flaming stray arrows all over. They drew a clear boundary between “us” and the enemies. The demands made were exacting, with black and white clearly distinguished. There was no middle ground for anyone to stand on, only a bitter fight to the end when one side was left standing.

Kong Qiu insisted on not taking sick leave, but attending court gradually became a dangerous affair. One day, he went out all exhausted, but he was still in the compound when he saw a stranger walking out from the courtyard. The stranger held up his sword and hollered all around, wanting Kong Qiu to atone for his crimes with his death. He was a bona fide official of the Grand Secretariat, and he often used to receive some students from the other lands, so he had never set up defenses at home. But who knew someone would hold a sword against him now? It was simply the greatest joke in the world. How ludicrous!

It was at this time that three of Xue Xiuzhuo’s memorials were presented. The content of his memorials was like a monstrous wave that instantly extinguished the crackling fire. Following right after, it turned into raging billows that won over the scholars in the world in one fell swoop.

In his memorial, he spoke of the innumerable hardships he underwent before he finally found Emperor Guangcheng’s daughter, who had been leading a wandering life in poverty outside the palace. He not only had Prince Qin’s personal seal as evidence but also relevant witnesses’ testimonies that could prove the parentage of this girl beyond doubt. What’s more, he asked for an official verification right there on the court.



Having a woman as a master could be compared to a disruption in the balance of yin and yang, and a reversal of the sun and the moon.<sup>4</sup> This was something that had never happened before in hundreds of years. Xue Xiuzhuo's memorial sent the entire imperial court into an uproar. Even Kong Qiu refuted it vehemently and refused to accept it.

Following right after, Xue Xiuzhuo presented a second memorial.

He revealed in his memorial that this girl had ended up in a peasant household in Qudu. Because she was an exceptionally bright child, she was very well-loved by the family. Although the family was poor, they were willing to let her older brother teach her to read and write. As a descendant of Emperor Guangcheng, she was naturally different from the common person. Her family often saw auspicious signs such as rainbows materializing from dew and purple clouds over the house, and so they treated her with even more attentiveness and did not dare to slight or neglect her. This girl was not only intelligent, but kind too. Her neighbors were in distress, and there were elderly starving, so she saved her own food and personally attended to them. Everyone from the villages near and far was unanimous in their praises of her. There were witness testimonies of this incident too. As for her bearing, he would let the various gentlemen ascertain it themselves when this girl came to court.

This memorial had already spread beyond the palace walls. Someone posted it in the Imperial College, and it even made its way to every street and lane in Qudu. The emperor's daughter was noble and precious, and the only one who could claim such status in Dazhou at present was the one who was by the empress dowager's side, Third Missy Hua. The comparison and contrast between the two made the common folks even more sympathetic towards this emperor's daughter. Teahouses and wine taverns all had storytellers who specifically told the legendary tale of this emperor's daughter living among the people, making that extraordinary talent of hers out to be like she was an immortal who had descended to earth. She came from the common masses. Her family had been farming for generations, which, in many instances, was similar to current students from the imperial college. What's more, she was a righteous and benevolent one who was kind and friendly to her neighbors. She was the most aware of the hardships of the people. For a time, even the students revered her.

And it was at this time Xue Xiuzhuo submitted his third and most crucial memorial.

He said her elder brother was also a student of humble origins. He had previously entered Qudu during the reign of Xiande, but because of prejudices over his family status, he had never made it to the list of those who passed. After returning home, he died depressed. The affection between the emperor's daughter and her elder brother was so deep that this became a source of pain and distress in her heart. On the way to Qudu, she had asked him many times about the condition of Secretariat Elder Hai's illness. When he mentioned how hard it had been for Secretariat Elder Hai to take care of state affairs, the emperor's daughter actually shed tears on hearing that and said, *"If I were a man, there would be no way I could have let the Secretariat Elder suffer such hardships."* He was a son of non-direct descent from a noble clan, and he had been subjected to harsh treatment on both ends owing to the difference in status between those born of the direct line of descent and those who weren't. Yet, he did not have the same magnanimity as the emperor's daughter, and for this, he felt very ashamed.

At last, Xue Xiuzhuo said, since there was no law in the world that decreed that priority should be accorded to those of direct descent and those from distinguished clans during the selection of court officials, then there were also no forefathers in the world who said that priority should be accorded to males when it came to the selection for the crown prince—all the more so in view of the fact that Dazhou already had no other choice left at this stage.

The students were roused. They had finally found a suitable candidate. The prejudices between parentage and family status made it tough for them to fulfill their ambitions. They saw themselves as fellow sufferers commiserating with the emperor's daughter over her hard lot in life. Li Jianheng was an emperor who had grown up in a life of luxury. He did not understand the hardships of the people at all, and he had been repeatedly impeached by the Chief Surveillance Bureau for his pursuit of petty pleasures at the expense of lofty aspirations. But look at how different this emperor's daughter bestowed by Heaven was. She seemed to be the most wonderful woman in this world. She had a heart compassionate towards all the scholars of humble origins in the world. She was the Goddess of Mercy who had descended to the mortal realm to deliver the masses from suffering.

And thus, it was under the buzz of an entire night of discussion that Xue Xiuzhuo – who had been lying low without showing his mettle all this

while – emerged the victor.



### **Lianyin's Note:**

Dear all, I've been reflecting on my translations lately and I'm aware that they are very much lacking (and I keep going back and forth on terms). Tbh, I *was* intending to do an overhaul once I get my hands on the traditional chinese physical copies. But since it will take some time for qjj, I'll be going back to the earlier qjj chapters for some minor editing, that is, until the qjj physical copy (for a final edit) and possibly the LA (for english terms/titles used). **This is the tentative plan, barring any unforeseen circumstances.** Once again, if you have any feedback, suggestion, correction, etc, feel free to let me know. Thank you for putting up with me.

P/S: Also, please support the author, that's all I'm asking. If you enjoy the novels, purchase them on jjwxc. Links and "how to buy" guide are in each of the chapters themselves. Thank you.

### **Support the Author!**

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**SPECIAL THANKS TO :** [Eggy](#), [Yunyun](#), [Alex](#), [Yuka](#) for consultation advice :p

### **Footnotes**

1. From the idiom 大厦将倾, or "the mansion on the verge of collapse". The original idiom refers to a hopeless situation, like a mansion on the brink of collapse. Here, it suggests that the situation is a total goner.
2. A night watchman typically patrolled the streets at night with a wooden clapper or a gong and a mallet and regularly sounded the instruments at certain intervals to remind the others of the time and to look out for potential fire hazards.
3. 薪火 flame/torch which also refers to the flame/torch of learning/knowledge
4. Yin refers to feminine energies, and Yang refers to masculine energies in the concept of Yin and Yang, while sun and moon are also used to refer to the emperor and empress.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 123 : YANQING



By the time Yu Xiaozai spoke to this point, the tea on the small table had already gone cold. He continued, “I don’t understand. The students were initially so harsh on the officials of humble origins, then why would they flock to Xue Xiuzhuo overnight? Don’t tell me Xue Xiuzhou, who is merely the common son of the Xue clan, would be able to do his best for those from humble families more than Minister Kong from Cangjun Commandery, who has been diligent in administering state affairs? The Grand Secretary went to the trouble to pave the way for us. But who would have expected that it’s still the noble clans who gained the upper hand in the end?”

“Xue Xiuzhuo might not necessarily let the noble clans gain the upper hand.” Xiao Chiye poured cold tea and said, “He struck this round when his opponents were unprepared, and so caught both sides off guard. The empress dowager had been going around in circles with Han Cheng because she had no one in her hands to use. Xue Xiuzhuo obviously had not leaked any words of it to the conservative noble clans headed by the empress dowager. Furthermore, at the time when the former emperor passed away, he had Han Cheng trapped as a pawn. In other words, he had already offended the noble clans, and this is something he knows better than anyone else.”

With a worried frown, Yu Xiaozai said, “I’ve been thinking about it on the way here, but I still can’t figure it out. I don’t understand what his intention is. The foundation of the new emperor is unstable, and she’s a woman to boot. If he did so for merely a moment of power, then even if the Xue clan rises in power, he wouldn’t be able to last long under pressure from the empress dowager and the others.”

Thoughts flashed through Shen Zechuan’s mind. He contemplated it for a moment, then said, “We can’t let go of any clues if we want to probe into a person’s motive. During the reign of Xiande at the Nanlin Hunting Grounds, Hua Siqian was forced into rebelling, and it was Secretariat Elder Hai and Xue Xiuzhuo who masterminded it. At that time, Xue Xiuzhuo held office as the Chief Supervising Secretary in The Office of Scrutiny for Revenue and audited their accounts. You said that Secretariat Elder Hai

mentioned this matter before he died in remonstrance. Then my guess is that Xue Xiuzhou was aware of the inside story of the Zhongbo troops' defeat. This was probably the reason he could later go on to join forces and work as one with the Juexi's Provincial Administration Commissioner, Jiang Qingshan, to investigate and take out Hua Siqian. Looking at it this way, this person is not of the same kind as Wei Huaigu, because he has been striking out the noble clans right from the start."

"I once heard Xi Hongxuan talking about him. He said Xue Xiuzhuo was busy all day with governmental affairs. After I took office as the Northern Judge of the Imperial Bodyguards, I sorted out the case records the Imperial Bodyguards and the Court of Judicial Review joined forces to investigate. I discovered that he did indeed handle many cases after he was transferred away from the Office of Scrutiny for Revenue to the Court of Judicial Review. Secretariat Elder Hai was an upright person who would never stoop to flattery, and his repeated promotion of Xue Xiuzhuo is not without merit. Even His Excellency Cen has spoken to me many times about Xue Xiuzhuo. His political achievement to date could be said to be outstanding among the up-and-coming talents."

Enlightened, Yu Xiaozai said, "To tell you the truth, Vice Commander, this is where I can't figure it out. All along, Xue Xiuzhuo has a good reputation. Even the imperial censors from the Chief Surveillance Bureau hardly have any objections of him. The Chief Surveillance Bureau's appraisals of him are excellent. This is clear as day to everyone, so I really can't understand the rationale behind his current actions. Because as we have seen before, he's not a man like Pan Rugui who would seize the opportunity to get rich."

Xiao Chiye leaned back slightly and put up his arms. He said to Shen Zechuan, "That's right. We talked about Xue Xiuzhuo too when we were in Qudu. Yao Wenyu said before that although he was not accepted by Secretariat Elder Hai as his pupil, he was very much in Secretariat Elder Hai's good books, and this was the reason Secretariat Elder Hai let him hold the crown during Yao Wenyu's coming of age ceremony. In the first few years when he joined the imperial court, the essays<sup>1</sup> he wrote were all on doing away with the prejudiced views of the noble clans in the hope that the imperial college, headed by Hua Siqian, could be restored to its former glory in its heyday during the Grand Preceptor's time. As you know, other than Hai Liangyi, the Grand Secretariat – as well as the Six Ministries under

it – was then composed of officials from noble clans. For a time, priority during the selection of officials in Qudu was given to those from distinguished clans. Even the illiterate thirteenth son of the Hua clan could take up an important post in the Ministry of War and intervened with the Imperial Army's affairs. Kong Qiu was still stewing in the Ministry of Justice at that time, while Liang Cuishan from the Ministry of Revenue was repeatedly demoted during the same period, with no hope of a transfer and promotion."

Shen Zechuan nodded his head slowly and said, "The fact that he was able to hold the post of the Chief Supervising Secretary in the Ministry of Revenue at that time is an indication of Hua Siqian's intention to send him away. The Chief Supervising Secretary is an important post that would give him direct access to the emperor. But at that time, Emperor Xiande was unable to take charge of the government. Hua Siqian, who was in charge of the Grand Secretariat, had the final say over whether he would be able to build up an outstanding track record in this position. It was at this period that Xue Xiuzhuo's approach to tackling matters began to shift. He went from taking radical measures to keeping a low profile for a time, eventually settling into the way we later come to be well-acquainted with."

The more Yu Xiaozai listened, the more alarmed he was. He said, "But since he is in the same camp as those from humble origins, why didn't he get in touch with us? That Han Cheng..."

"He gave the best he could in the incident leading up to Li Jianheng's ascension to the throne, but very quickly, he came to the realization that Li Jianheng was not bold, decisive, and visionary enough. Back then, Li Jianheng was constantly wavering in the tug of war between several parties, and the officials of humble origins led by Secretariat Elder Hai failed to get rid of the empress dowager." Shen Zechuan turned his head aside, causing the little jade on his right ear to be obscured by shadows. He continued, "The imperial college students repeatedly mentioned weakness in their attacks of the officials from humble origins. This is probably the reason Xue Xiuzhuo no longer trusts scholars of humble births. Secretariat Elder Hai's conservative policy allowed Dazhou to survive, but he also gave the noble clans a chance to catch their breath. The noble clans give to one another, like how Wei Huaigu fell this time only for Han Cheng to rise. This is not the result Xue Xiuzhuo wanted—"

Shen Zechuan suddenly stopped and narrowed his eyes.

“No wonder he took Teacher away.”

Qi Huilian was the most important figure of the radicals—those who were in favor of thorough and complete political change. He had been actually working hands-on in the Eastern Palace. The Crown Prince did not live for long, yet he could still accomplish feats such as the registration of the common folks into the census register,<sup>2</sup> tapping on the Eastern Palace’s subordinates’ diligence in discharging their official duties and tenacity to forge ahead regardless of public opinions. If Xue Xiuzhuo wanted to change the conciliatory approach during the time Hai Liangyi headed the administration, then he was bound to seek Qi Huilian’s help.

But Qi Huilian declined. So Xue Xiuzhuo handed Qi Huilian over to Han Cheng.

Shen Zechuan pursed his lips tightly. His side profile was cold and detached under the candlelight. He said, “He’d stop at nothing to achieve his aims. This person doesn’t believe anyone else. He still wants to rely on the new emperor to sustain Dazhou, and for this, he does not hesitate to offend the old-school noble clans. He wants to bring in new blood to Qudu and overhaul the system. We defeated Wei Huaigu and the others in Qudu, and their falls have now turned into vacancies in which he can install these new blood. Your Excellency Yu, you’re wrong. It was not how wonderful the emperor’s daughter was that the memorial he presented could move the hearts of all the scholars in the world, but his last sentence.”

There is no law in the world that decreed that priority should be accorded to those of lawful birth and those from distinguished clans during the selection of court officials!

The noble clans’ domination of the upper echelons of the government once again turned Dazhou into an imperial court dominated by the eight clans. The Li clan emperor’s assertiveness, or the lack of it, dictated whether those from humble backgrounds would be able to kill their way out of the heavy siege laid by the eight clans. They underwent a low period during the later years of the reign of Yongyi. This was too long a time. What they desperately needed was a sovereign who was well-disposed towards the scholars of humble origins. Gender did not matter. As long as this person was able to rouse the hearts of the humble scholars, and shoulder the weight of the humble families’ expectations after the successive passing of Qi Huilian and Hai Liangyi, then this person would be embraced.

After the empress dowager took charge of the government, those of humble origins not only had to put up with the intensified ostracism but also the weakness and incompetence of the Li clan's emperors that had taken firm roots in the minds of the masses. The reason why the students were so harsh on Kong Qiu and Cen Yu was that they could no longer endure the repeated concessions made by the present imperial court. Hai Liangyi, who had endured it for a lifetime, had already died in remonstrance, so why must Kong Qiu still keep on enduring? The reform of the world was at hand, *right now*! Doing nothing was tantamount to a neglect of duty!

But was it really a good time now?

Shen Zechuan thought otherwise.

Why did Hai Liangyi endure it? Because the noble clans had already become a chronic disease of Dazhou. They ought to have scraped the bones and healed the wounds long during the reign of Yongyi. But as it turned out, the troops of Zhongbo suffered a defeat before Hai Liangyi could make his move. Dazhou was just like an old man in his twilight years who was kicked in the waist by another until he coughed out blood. It was hard for the external wounds to recover, and even harder for the internal wounds to heal. Right before his death, he questioned the imperial court, asking if this was everyone's fault for exacerbating the issue. But did this "everyone" include himself too?

If he had not pushed Hua Siqian every step of the way.

If he had been able to deal with it with a more conciliatory attitude back then.

Would Zhongbo be able to avoid the subsequent tragedy of having its cities massacred?

Hai Liangyi did not know, but this incident directly affected the way he headed the administration in the later period of Emperor Xiande's reign. He partook in the imperial court with an even more placatory attitude. He did not dare to act rashly again. He had the reckoning and awareness of one mired in the current political situation, but these were things that the fledgling students did not understand.

Perhaps Xue Xiuzhuo did not have the power to guide the direction in which the students of the world moved. But he was no doubt a fisherman standing among the stormy waves trying to figure out the most optimal time to cast his net. This person did not return empty-handed after rolling and crawling in the official circles for many years. He even understood the



dispute between the humble scholars and the court officials more than Shen Zechuan did. Since the flames of war of the old clique had already been ignited, then the sparks erupting at present had similarly kindled a fire in those of them who upheld the same ideals.

Xue Xiuzhuo had repeatedly asked to be under Hai's Liangyi tutelage in a formal teacher-pupil relationship. But he did not get his wish. He eventually turned to Hai Liangyi to ask for help. And still, he failed to get his wish. He seemed to be a rock in the tussle between both parties, destined to use his own method to charge his way out amidst the bloodshed. This was a merciless character who would not even spare himself.

Ruthlessness brimmed in Shen Zechuan's eyes. He felt as if he had been thwarted. He was driven out of Qudu, like a stray dog with its tail between its legs, beaten to the point he was almost defenseless.

Xue Xiuzhuo was able to forsake Xi Hongxuan instantly at the right time, and he emptied the Xi clan's silver warehouses before Shen Zechuan made his move. This showed that he had long been preparing for this day. And what had Shen Zechuan been doing at that time? He was still naively thinking that he could rely on his eloquence to drive a wedge between the noble clans, even though it was clear that Xue Xiuzhuo had long revealed his mettle during the Imperial Army's silk case.

Shen Zechuan had already been defeated once. Since he was still alive, then he had to fight this battle to the end. As someone who had inherited Qi Huilian's life work, he could not accept himself being dogged by defeat again and again. They had already gone from a battle-free Qudu to the crumbling land of the frontier that was torn apart by disunity. He had to stand up again immediately. Otherwise, there would be no place for him in these turbulent times. There were no weaklings among the up-and-coming talents who were looking on covetously like a tiger eyeing its prey. He had to acquire the rights to challenge the other party before he could sit down and delve further into the topic of beliefs in a calm manner.

Xiao Chiye looked at Shen Zechuan's silent side profile and suddenly asked Yu Xiaozai, "Have you seen the empress?"

Yu Xiaozai happened to be fishing out the letter Cen Yu wrote to Shen Zechuan from his robe. On hearing this, he gave a start and said, "Not yet. Before I left Qudu, the Ministry of Rites was already starting to prepare for the enthronement ceremony. The empress dowager wanted to summon the emperor's daughter for a meeting, but Xue Xiuzhuo declined."

Xiao Chiye's hanging fingers swayed gently. He said, "Looks like he isn't that confident of success either. Then let's wait and see if the empress he has nurtured in four short years is a paper tiger who would topple over at just a touch. I'd like to see just how long she would be able to bluff Qudu."

Shen Zechuan returned to his senses. After composing himself for a moment, he said, "I just hope she isn't a second Li Jianheng."

Xia Chiye was tired from leaning. He straightened up his upper body and asked Yu Xiaozai. "We still don't know what her name is. If they are going to register her in the imperial registry, then is it possible that she's called Li Jianting?"

A strange expression came over Yu Xiaozai's face. He extended his finger to write on the mat, one stroke at a time. "It's this name all right. But it's not the same character as the former emperor. Rather, it's Jianting, with different words. Li Jianting."<sup>3</sup>

Taken by surprise, Shen Zechuan exchanged glances with Xiao Chiye.



Will edit later \_(: 丿 ∠)\_ Also feel free to feedback.

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**SPECIAL THANKS TO :** [Alex](#), [Suika](#) <3

### Footnotes

1. Specifically essays on current affairs presented to the emperor as advice on government policy
2. 黃冊 *Huangce*, or registers/book served during the Ming Dynasty to provide basic data for taxation and recruitment based on the household's classification according to their occupation. It was mainly divided into three categories: civilian, military, and craftsman.
3. Shen Zechuan initially thought it was written as 李建婷. The Jian is the same as the Jian in Li Jianheng (李建恒) and Li Jianyun (李建云 a.k.a. Emperor Xiande). This is a "generation" name, where each member of the same generation (i.e., siblings and paternal cousins of the same generation) share a common syllable. (For example, in the Xue Clan, this character is "Xiu" for Xiuyi and Xiuzhuo's generation.) Ting (婷) is a common female name, which

is also the same Ting in her original name, Ling Ting (灵婷).  
However, Yu Xiaozai said it was written as 李剑霆 instead (which  
sounds more masculine too).

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 124 : THE DIE IS CAST



The first glimmer of dawn appeared in the sky. Yu Xiaozai was a scholar after all, and it was hard for him to hold up mentally after a time, so Shen Zechuan got Chen Yang to lead Yu Xiaozai away for a rest. They could always discuss the remaining matters another day. Yu Xiaozai did not force the issue and withdrew out of the room after leaving behind the letter Cen Yu wrote to Shen Zechuan.

Xiao Chiye went to take a bath, while Shen Zechuan read Cen Yu's letter under the candlelight. The morning light from the courtyard seeped into the room. Shen Zechuan read the part about Bianjun Commandery. He waited for a moment, but Xiao Chiye was still not back. He set aside the letter, lifted the bamboo curtain, and walked along the narrow corridor to the inner area. Then he stepped around the screen for a look. Xiao Chiye was soaking in the pool, fast asleep.

Xiao Chiye had been feeling a little tired as he thought about some matters, but who would have known that he would fall asleep while thinking? A sudden chill on his cheek woke him up.

Shen Zechuan scooped up the water and stroked Xiao Chiye again. He said, "The water has gone cold. Go back and sleep in the room."

Xiao Chiye rose, sending water droplets splashing all over. He lowered and buried his head into Shen Zechuan's bosom, rubbing against him until half of Shen Zechuan's body was wet. He said in a muffled voice, "Hug me."

Shen Zechuan lifted his hand to squeeze Xiao Chiye's nape. He said, "Aren't you making things difficult for me?"

Xiao Chiye said, "Then I'll hug you instead."

Shen Zechuan kicked off his shoes and stretched his arms around Xiao Chiye's neck that still had water droplets on it. He said a little lazily, "Come on then."

Xiao Chiye raised his head to press his forehead against Shen Zechuan's forehead. He embraced him and said, "I've seen the Beiyuan Hunting Grounds. It's still passable. It can be made into a military camp after a little tidying up, but the towers have to be constructed anew. All these will cost money."

The lamps were not lit on this side, and the lightning added a touch of sensuality to the atmosphere.

Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye pressed against each other up close. Shen Zechuan said, "The city of Dancheng lies to the west of the Beiyuan Hunting Grounds. If we are going to come face to face with the Eight Great Training Divisions in the future, we can't skimp on this place."

"No rush." Xiao Chiye exerted a little force to pick Shen Zechuan up and carry him into the room.

Shen Zechuan knew that Xiao Chiye did not intend to use those silvers of his. The Imperial Army's expenditure could not always be pegged to Cizhou. What's more, Xiao Chiye was about to return to Libei soon. To lack money was to lack confidence. He was probably considering this matter himself.

"Cen Yu went to the trouble to get Yu Xiaozai to bring a letter to you. He must have a favor to ask of you." Xiao Chiye got onto the bed. Without even taking off his robe, he leaned back against the pillow, half-embraced Shen Zechuan, and rested his chin on top of Shen Zechuan's head. He asked, "What is it?"

Shen Zechuan had already finished reading the letter. Resting his head against Xiao Chiye, he folded the letter and answered, "Cen Yu hopes that you can give everyone another chance and act as the bridge between Qudu and Libei."

With his eyes half-closed, Xiao Chiye said, "They are in need of help now, that's why they are willing to lower themselves. If the Grand Secretariat and the empress dowager get along in the future, then Libei will have to send another person in as a hostage. If not me, then Xun-er."

The grandson-heir was already six years of age now, and Xiao Chiye still had yet to meet him. But this did not prevent him from doting on his nephew. This matter was non-negotiable.

Xiao Chiye softened his voice. "Cen Yu is aware this is a difficult matter to achieve, so he hopes I can head south to Qidong and convince Qi Zhuyin to halt the marriage alliance between Hua and Qi."

"Cen Yu is in Qudu year in year out. He doesn't know the details when it comes to Qidong. The commander-in-chief doesn't have a say in matters relating to the marriage alliance." Xiao Chiye said. "It's Qi Shiyu who is going to marry Hua Xiangyi, not Qi Zhuyin. Qi Shiyu is a wily old fox. Seeing as the present situation isn't boding well, he does not want Qidong

to follow in Libei's footsteps, and so he wants to strengthen ties with Qudu through marriage. What can Cen Yu and the rest give Qi Shiyu? With Hai Liangyi's death and the empress's enthronement, all past promises have become worthless. They have no bargaining chips that they can use to convince Qi Shiyu..."

Xiao Chiye's voice gradually became a murmur as he spoke.

Shen Zechuan counted in silence for a few beats, then turned over to look at him. Sure enough, he had fallen asleep. Shen Zechuan opened up the letter once again. His eyes lingered on the word "Bianjun" for a moment before he closed it.

Xiao Chiye had a good night's sleep.



Xue Xiuzhuo, however, did not fall asleep.

He had been resting in his study for several days in a row. The whole affair about the emperor's daughter could convince the students, but it could not convince the shrewd and astute imperial court officials. Kong Qiu felt that the blow Xue Xiuzhuo dealt to the Grand Secretariat by taking advantage of present circumstances was not what a gentleman should do. He had already submitted several memorials in succession to protest against the empress dowager's tacit consent. But it was a futile endeavor, and he received no response.

A conniving, ambitious man of great designs.

Thinking how wrong he had been about Xue Xiuzhuo, Kong Qiu threw these words at him and refused to discuss any further with him.

Whether or not the emperor's daughter ascended to the throne, the imperial court officials led by Kong Qiu had failed to reap any benefit this time round. They fought with Han Cheng and lost their pillar, and they saw Han Cheng make a concession only for Xue Xiuzhuo to come barging out of nowhere midway. What he delivered was not the emperor's son, but the emperor's daughter. Everything they had done had been in vain.

Cen Yu did not concede defeat. The criticism of the imperial censors was far more intense than Xue Xiuzhuo had imagined it to be. Xue Xiuzhuo thought Dazhou was already at the point where they would let the emperor's daughter ascend to the throne. Was he not implying by this that the state and its rule were coming to an end, and that was why an incident such as the reversal of gender norms and the confounding of right and wrong could have happened?

Back then, Qi Zhuyin had merely been conferred a title as commander-in-chief, and she had already been repeatedly censured. And now, the Ministry of Rites poured over book after book for details regarding the enthronement ceremony of the emperor's daughter, and there were too many areas in which they had simply had nothing to reference at all. The sounds of castigation in the imperial court never stopped, and memorials impeaching Xue Xiuzhuo numbered in the dozens.

"Are all of you I see here pansies?"<sup>1</sup> Pan Lin had now made a name for himself in the Ministry of Revenue after all the ordeals he had been through. As a descendant of Pan Xiangjie from the old-school noble clan, his reaction on the imperial court was the most intense. "Dazhou never had a female crown prince in all its hundred years! Feudal ethics<sup>2</sup> is the Way of Heaven. Although the common descendant of Prince Yan has passed, he still has descendants. Even if the royal bloodline is hard to find, Her Majesty can temporarily exercise the rights of the Son of Heaven. We will search again!"

Xue Xiuzhuo stood alone in the middle of these two groups of officials who were polar opposites and said in a steady voice, "All the later descendants of Prince Yan take his surname. Do you mean to tell me that the Li clan's empire should also change its surname to his? It's indeed entirely justified for the empress dowager to act on behalf of the Son of Heaven. Since the harem can lead the administration, then why not a female crown prince?"

"You're distorting the facts!" Cen Yu turned aside to look at Xue Xiuzhou. "The empress dowager acts on behalf of the Son of Heaven; she does not take his place. As long as the crown prince ascends to the throne, the harem will naturally have the authority returned to its rightful master! But if the emperor's daughter has an imperial heir in the future after ascending to the throne, will she be able to return the power?!"

Han Cheng's expression was livid. He understood deep down that he had been duped by Xue Xiuzhuo too. The empress dowager and all these old-school noble clans were dissatisfied because the attitude Xue Xiuzhuo was manifesting was not that of compliant submission. He held the emperor's daughter firmly in his hand, which meant that after the emperor's daughter ascended to the throne, he would have the influence to control court administration and state affairs. To those traditionalists, this was a kind of betrayal.

Seeing as the empress dowager, who was sitting behind the beaded curtain, had still yet to speak up, Han Cheng said, "Moreover, the emperor's daughter has never been out there in the world, limited as she is to her chamber. How can she assume the responsibility of managing state affairs? In my opinion, the empress dowager should still lead the administration after the enthronement ceremony."

On hearing this, Kong Qiu wanted to throw up his hands and quit. This situation was like one big sticky mess. At present, none of the parties were satisfied. They were displeased if the emperor's daughter were to ascend the throne, and they were unhappy if the empress dowager were to head the administration, but what else could they do? Let the eight cities deliberate state affairs, and that would upset the students!

Kong Qiu wanted so much to beg Heavens to hurry and drop a prince from the sky! They were blinded and muddleheaded over ten years ago not to let Emperor Guangcheng beget more sons. If there was still an imperial heir around, would they be in such a predicament?

Xue Xiuzhuo lifted his arm to point at the old stone inscription outside the hall. He said, "The forefathers had explicitly said that 'the harem shall not interfere with politics', not 'the emperor's daughter shall not lead the administration'! Since the various gentlemen here are so critical of me today, then may I be so bold as to ask what, in the various gentlemen's opinions, should be done? Do we oust the emperor's daughter and install an emperor of another surname, or do we leave the throne empty and have the empress dowager lead the court?!"

A loud buzz rose in the imperial court, but no one stepped forth to give a definitive statement. It was like this too when they appointed Li Jianheng as the crown prince back then. It was as if they were being pushed to the precipice of the cliff with each step they took with no other choice open to them.

If Xue Xiuzhuo had come forward a few days earlier to say that he still had the emperor's daughter in his hand, the empress dowager and the Grand Secretariat would all have a strategy to deal with it, and they would also have been willing to treat him cordially. But he just had to pin everyone down by their vulnerable point in an attempt to hold the initiative to call the shots in his own hands. He now had the emperor's daughter in hand, and public opinion to back him up. Who would dare to lay a hand on him at this juncture?



Kong Qiu took a step back and gave in. He knew such a stalemate was non-beneficial to Dazhou and to them. He said, "There is something the commander said which I find true. The emperor's daughter has been limited to her living quarters for long. Even if she ascends, she still needs to study the classics. In the interim, the empress dowager will be in charge of the administration with the assistance of the Grand Secretariat."

They had to stand firm in this last stand they took. They had to turn themselves into the threshold that determined if the emperor's daughter had the capability to participate in government independently. Kong Qiu's intent was clear. It was only when the Grand Secretariat found the emperor's daughter capable that she was capable. Otherwise, she would always remain a student sitting on the throne. To the empress dowager, this was also a kind of threat. If the empress dowager dared to support the Han clan as she did for the Hua, Pan clans during the reign of Yongyi, then they would immediately put the emperor's daughter in charge of the administration and force the empress dowager back into the rear palace.

The empress dowager sat in silence behind the beaded curtain for a long time before she said, "I feel uneasy all day to act on behalf of the emperor. Since there is now a crown prince candidate, it is indeed inappropriate for me to continue doing so. After the enthronement ceremony, I shall retreat to the Buddha hall and will no longer show myself in public."

Since she was going to beat a retreat for the sake of moving the situation along, all those present could only kneel in unison and shout, "Your Majesty is the matriarch of the world. You mustn't put your esteemed self down."

Xue Xiuzhuo knelt among them, his back drenched in sweat as he bowed in a kowtow. Surprisingly enough, he did not refute Kong Qiu.



Xiao Chiye was brimming with energy after a sleep. He had just finished his breakfast and was sitting cross-legged under the eaves feeding Meng. When he heard the news Bianjun had revolted, he and Meng looked back at Shen Zechuan together.

Yu Xiaozai sat on his heels at the side. On seeing this, he hurriedly said, "I was shocked when I heard it too. General Lu comes from a clan of military talents; how could he have revolted? Minister Kong requested right away for the Ministry of War to check the state of military affairs in

Bianjun. The Imperial Bodyguards put the supervising eunuch on trial, and it took nearly a month for them to find out that the initial military provisions allocated to Bianjun were moldy.”

Xiao Chiye was still stunned. He rose swiftly to his feet, blocking off the light inside the room, and said, “Moldy? We agreed back then to reduce Qidong’s military provisions by half. No one said anything about letting them pass off inferior grains as quality grains.”

The warring situation in Libei was critical at that time, but Bianjun also had to fight battles with Biansha. No matter how anxious Xiao Chiye had been, he would never let anyone stuff Lu Guangbai with moldy grains. He dispatched Chen Yang and Gu Jin to supervise the process precisely because he was worried someone would mess with the military grains, but he had never expected someone to make a move on Bianjun.

“No wonder the commander-in-chief has yet to come and fight me.” Xiao Chiye raised his arm to let Meng perch. His expression was grave. “She lost Lu Guangbai. Qudu would not dare to be hasty and let her head up north to confront us. They have to let her close up the gap in Bianjun. But Lu Guangbai...”

This was Lu Guangbai they were talking about!

Xiao Chiye’s heart sank. He said, “The 20,000 soldiers in Bianjun are all infantrymen. With nowhere to go, Lu Guangbai can only lead his troops deep into the desert. The desert is the Biansha Cavalry’s territory. He will lose the advantage of laying ambushes that he has back in Bianjun. No doubt he will have to change his usual style of fighting battles. Why didn’t he head for Suotian Pass?!”

It would have been fine if he went to Suotian Pass or Tianfei Watchtower. There were still troops of the Feng clan stationed in Suotian Pass. Both of these places could be said to be Zuo Qianqiu’s former units. Zuo Qianqiu was now a general in Libei, and Lu Guangbai’s sister, Lu Yizhi, was Xiao Jiming’s wife. No one would ill-treat him if he went to either of these places.

But why did he decide to head east?

There were only the Twelve Tribes of Biansha in the desert.



To be edited ;;;

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SPECIAL THANKS TO : [Suika](#) <3

#### Footnotes

1. Original quote “举朝之士皆妇人也” by Hai Rui, (海瑞), a Chinese scholar-official and politician during the Ming dynasty.
2. 天理 “Law/Principles of Heaven” i.e., feudal ethics as propounded by the Confucianists in the Song Dynasty



# QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 125 : MENG & YU

Editor: [Ami](#)<3



There was not much of the sixth month left. Cizhou's garrison troops were already beginning to take shape, and it was time for Xiao Chiye to continue his journey north. Not once had he sent a personal letter to Libei in the two months he was in Zhongbo; likewise, Libei did not send him one either.

Both parties seemed to have come to some kind of tacit understanding.

Meng began to spend more and more time out hunting. Xiao Chiye knew it was flying north. He stood in the courtyard today, watching the sun sink in the far distance. It was only when Shen Zechuan rapped lightly on the door frame behind him that he returned to his senses.

Xiao Chiye looked back at Shen Zechuan from under the last of the evening rays.

Shen Zechuan felt as if Xiao Chiye had grown a little taller again. Those broad shoulders of his bore the weight of the setting sun; he was far more sturdy than he had been six years ago. Shen Zechuan watched for a moment until Xiao Chiye turned aside slightly and said, "Let's go horse-riding."

Unlike the last time they went horse-riding in Qudu, Xiao Chiye was serious this time. He led Shen Zechuan up Lang Tao Xue Jin and explained it all to Shen Zechuan regardless of significance, from how to step on the saddle to how to pull on the reins. It was as if he wanted to leave it all to Shen Zechuan—His horse, his eagle, his heart.

The two men rode on the horse together and trotted along the forested path outside the city of Cizhou. This section of the path was not long. They ran until the last of the sun on the horizon vanished. Stars adorned the vast stretch of the sky behind them, sprinkling the ground with a smattering of light. The lands in the mountain ranges to the north were rich in vegetation and water. Lang Tao Xue Jin ran up the slope. Xiao Chiye reined in the horse and sat in the wind as he said to Shen Zechuan, "The Hongyan Mountains lie at the end."

Shen Zechuan looked out into the distance. On this cloudy night, the boundless sky stretched on in the far distance. He could vaguely catch a glimpse of the tall, rising peaks of the Hongyan Mountains. It looked like a dragon lying at the end of the earth, asleep in eternal rest. It drew a meandering demarcation line at the very edge of Dazhou. One could see its contours from Zhongbo, but not reach it from where they were. It nourished the vast expanse of land north of Dazhou; it was a natural-formed wall that rose from the earth of Libei.

Shen Zechuan heard the howl of the wind—a wind that was entirely unlike that of Qudu. It blew against him, sending the sleeves of his robe fluttering like a white bird spreading its wings.

“This is the call of the Hongyan Mountains. It’ll miss me too. When we get closer to it, we will be able to hear the song of the wind even more clearly.” Xiao Chiye spurred Lang Tao Xue Jin into a run. They jolted in the wind, shooting across the billows of wild grasses like a bird swooping towards Hongyan Mountains.

Meng flapped its wings and chased after them from behind. It circled in the air and dove, leaving behind a line of bent grass in its trail as it swept past.

Xiao Chiye suddenly said in Shen Zechuan’s ear, “I want to take you there to see it.”

The puff of warm breath from Xiao Chiye warmed up the little jade earring on Shen Zechuan’s ear. Looking ahead, he said, “Xiao Ce’an...”

Xiao Chiye turned his head. Shen Zechuan said something, but the wind was too strong, and Xiao Chiye did not hear him clearly. Refusing to let it drop, he moved in closer and motioned for Shen Zechuan to repeat it.

Shen Zechuan said, “Keep going, and we’re going to cross the border!”

“Then so be it.” Xiao Chiye did not stop. “I’m taking you home to meet my old man and eldest brother—What did you just say?”

Shen Zechuan shouted in the wind, “WHERE . IS . MY . FAN?!”

Xiao Chiye scooped up Shen Zechuan in his arms and suddenly reined in the horse, causing Lang Tao Xue Jin to raise his hooves and neigh. The world turned upside down in Shen Zechuan’s vision, and a muffled thud rang out right after. Both men tumbled and rolled in the grass along the slope.

Xiao Chiye wrapped his arms around Shen Zechuan to shield him. He did not get up when they came to a stop; instead, he spread his arms and

remained lying under Shen Zechuan. He said, "You lied to me."

Shen Zechuan pinched his cheek and asked, "Who lied to you?"

Xiao Chiye stared at Shen Zechuan as he said huffily, "You lied to me. Liar. Scoundrel. Heartless man..."

Shen Zechuan tugged over a handful of grass and plastered them all over Xiao Chiye's face.

Xiao Chiye did not dodge. He stretched out his arms to embrace Shen Zechuan and forcefully held him to his chest. He said wickedly, "In this life, even if I die, I have to die with you."

He hugged Shen Zechuan so tightly that Shen Zechuan's head was buried in the pit of Xiao Chiye's neck. Shen Zechuan made a few attempts at struggling, but he could not break free, so he said in a muffled voice, "Xiao'Er, if you suffocate me to death, then you'd be murdering your own husband."

Xiao Chiye said, "Then repeat what you said earlier."

Shen Zechuan gasped hard for breath and finally managed to peek out from under Xiao Chiye's palm. With deep feelings, he said, "Xiao'Er, you're suffocating—"

Xiao Chiye rubbed away at Shen Zechuan's head until even the latter's cheeks flushed red and his hair was all tousled, looking not in the least like Vice Commander Shen at all. Xiao Chiye said resentfully, "Shen Zechuan!"

There were bits of grass in Shen Zechuan's mouth. "Huh?"

Xiao Chiye cupped Shen Zechuan's cheeks and lifted the latter's head to kiss him. But just as their lips were about to touch, he stopped and said callously, "Kiss me."

Shen Zechuan could only remain in this position with his head slightly raised. He endured it for a moment, then said, "Release your hands then."

Xiao Chiye said, "Nope. Think of a way yourself."

Shen Zechuan could not reach him. Pursing his lips, he grabbed hold of the front of Xiao Chiye's robe to yank him over and gave him a peck on the lips.

Xiao Chiye's expression remained unchanged.

Shen Zechuan was still trying to reach him, so Xiao Chiye lowered his head and kissed him so hard that Shen Zechuan bent backward. Even his bites were merciless. Xiao Chiye's arms were still locked around his waist in a hug, and as Shen Zechuan leaned back, he felt a stab of pain in his neck and sucked in a breath with eyes narrowed.

In no time, their positions reversed. Shen Zechuan sank into the grass. He could see the entire boundless starry sky as Xiao Chiye entered him. Sounds he could barely suppress escaped his lips as he grabbed a lock of Xiao Chiye's hair, which wound around his fingers as they tensed and curled. The stars dazzled before his eyes, and his consciousness gradually disintegrated in the wind. He gazed at Xiao Chiye a little dizzily, clearly sensing that the wolf pup was much fiercer than usual.

"Xiao'Er..." Shen Zechuan dragged out the syllables.

Xiao Chiye bent down, enveloping him and blocking out all the wind and stars at the same time.

"I love you."

Xiao Chiye seemed to have fallen in love with such whisperings lately. The closer he was to home, the more he would act like a child. He took possession of Shen Zechuan, and he was also taken by Shen Zechuan.

He was not stingy with declarations of love such as these. Each time he said it, he would make Shen Zechuan clench hard and tremble in spite of himself.

Shen Zechuan seemed to be sighing and moaning as he immersed in the murmurs of words and clung close to Xiao Chiye, while Xiao Chiye indulged to his heart's content with wild abandon at the boundary of Libei. Only the two of them knew of the debauchery taking place beneath those seemingly intact clothes. With his back to the Hongyan Mountains, and under that enchanting sighing of the wind, Xiao Chiye revealed just how feral and domineering he could be.

Shen Zechuan gradually forgot all about the milky way above as he kissed Xiao Chiye. He soared high up in the clouds and fell back into the embrace of the wind, eventually melting into the crooks of Xiao Chiye's arms.



When Shen Zechuan woke up, the day was just beginning to break. Thin rays of the morning sun shone through the bamboo blinds. He stretched a hand out and felt the fading residual heat beside him. Xiao Chiye had gone out of the city earlier, leaving his old robe still hanging on the clothes rack. A small incense had been lit in this room to repel mosquitoes. The mingling of heat still lingered on Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan spread his arms apart and took up both of their spaces. He had yet to close his eyes for the second time when he suddenly propped



himself up into a sitting position. He hurriedly put on his clothes and wooden clogs and pushed the door open.

“Quick.” The redness at the corners of Shen Zechuan’s eyes was visible. In a hoarse voice, he said to Ding Tao, who was under the eaves, “Send that new pair of arm guards to Ce’an posthaste.”

Ding Tao was feeling a little dispirited because he had been left behind. He was presently sitting cross-legged at the edge of the small pond, drawing as a vent for his feelings. When he heard Shen Zechuan, he did not even put away his brush; instead, he rose to his feet and attempted to run. A sharp-eyed Qiao Tianya deftly caught hold of Ding Tao’s back collar and said to Shen Zechuan, “His Lordship brought it with him.”

The rush of coolness in the morning sobered Shen Zechuan up. He tapped his wooden clog, nodded his head, and made to return to the room when Qiao Tianya added, “But he only took one along. Said to keep the other one for Master.”

Shen Zechuan stood still for a moment without saying a word. He saw it was going to be complete daylight soon, and so he did not intend to return to bed. “How many men from the Imperial Army have been left behind?”

Qiao Tianya answered, “Two thousand. They are all at the Beiyuan Hunting Grounds.”

“Prepare the register of names. The Imperial Army must not be lumped together with the soldiers from Cizhou.” Shen Zechuan pulled the front of his clothes and said, “Mister Chengfeng wants to discuss the purchase and sale of grains between Cizhou and Chazhou in detail. Go tell him that we will discuss it today.”

Qiao Tianya was not in a hurry to leave. He fished out a letter from the front of his robe and said, “Master, you have a letter from Ge Qingqing in Juexi.”

“Good timing.” Shen Zechuan said. “Is the fleet of ships in Yongyi Harbor all good? The Xi clan’s shops have nothing to do with us, so the surface-level policing will not involve them. But Xue Xiuzhuo merely emptied their silver warehouse and left these money-making shops to us. My guess is that he might not have necessarily done it willingly.”

“There are no signs of activities from Qudu. Even if Xue Xiuzhou has a foolproof plan, he can’t be in two places at once. There’s no one to work out a plan for those shops in Juexi for him.” Qiao Tianya released Ding Tao and

said, “However, what Ge Qingqing means is that Qudu did not go and created trouble for him, but the Yan clan of Hezhou did.”

The Yan clan of Hezhou owned the waterways of Chazhou. They were prominent merchants south of Qudu. Lei Changming was able to establish his brigade of bandits because the Yan clan was backing Lei Jingzhe. Shen Zechuan had been thinking about them, so he was not really surprised to hear this.

“I know very little about the Yan clan.” Shen Zechuan said. “There’s not much news about them in Qudu either.”

Ding Tao jumped in excitement at his words and said, “Young Master, I know of this! The one supporting Lei Jingzhe is the current head of the Yan clan, a man by the name of Yan Heru. Rumor has it that he’s such an extravagant and ostentatious person that he refuses to go out without a sedan chair worth its weight in gold. He’s not only dressed in gold; even the abacus he carries along with him is made of precious gold and jade! He’s VERY, VERY, VERY rich!”

In his haste, Ding Tao’s pronunciation of “very” came out sounding vague, so he lifted his little book and showed it to Shen Zechuan. There was a scrawl drawn in brush of a figure holding up an abacus. He was dressed in copper coins all over, giving off a strong “rich man” vibe.

“Where did you hear of this?” Qiao Tianya asked.

Ding Tao pointed in the direction of the prison and replied, “Master brought home a silly lad the last time they caught the bandits. He’s almost as tall as Jin-ge, and he’s incomparably strong. I used a few sweets to trick this information out of him. This lad is so simple-minded that he will spill it all if you give him food.”

Shen Zechuan vaguely remembered that Xiao Chiye seemed to have mentioned it. He said, “Weren’t the remaining bandits sent back?”

“Yeah.” Ding Tao nodded. “But Master said he’s too silly. He can’t survive if he returns, so we might as well keep him here with us.”

Shen Zechuan still wanted to know the details of the Yan clan, so he said, “Bring him here.”



Zhao Hui fed the eagles at dawn. Wearing an arm guard, he held up his arm to them one at a time to let them perch on him while he fed them meat. At other places, there would be a servant specifically assigned to the eagles to handle matters like these. But when it came to Xiao Chiye’s generation in

Libei, they all liked to do it themselves and raised their own eagles they had tamed themselves.

When Zhao Hui fed “Yu”, who had been following Xiao Jiming all this while, he discovered that its back had been badly scratched, and there was a bald spot on it.

“What happened?” Zhao Hui held Yu and pushed aside its feathers for a look. He asked the soldier on the side, “Did it fight with someone?”

The soldier held the leather bag containing the strips of meat and took a few steps with Zhao Hui. He said, “I have no idea, General. It went out hunting a few days back, and when it circled back from the south, it was already injured. I had the physician look at it, and he said this wound was caused by the talons of a bird of prey.”

Yu was a gyrfalcon too, and it was considered large in size among all the flocks of birds in Libei. Xiao Fangxu was the one who was taming it originally, but he later gave it to Xiao Jiming. It had followed Xiao Jiming into battle for the last few years, and it had never been on the losing end against the saker falcons from the Hanshe Tribe.

Zhao Hui scrutinized the wound and wondered, “How strange. Whose eagle is as ferocious as this...”

One of these words sent a sudden jolt through Zhao Hui’s mind. He abruptly turned his head and looked to the south. The breeze was still the same. There were no traces of a gyrfalcon in the skies.

The sky in Libei was still blue.



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SPECIAL THANKS TO : [Suika](#)<3



# QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 126 : LI XIONG

Editor: [Ami](#)<3



Li Xiong was just as his name suggested—a baby bear. He stayed in the prison for a little less than half a month. Every day, he sat cross-legged with his face to the bars, looking helplessly at the door as he waited for Lei Jingzhe to come and take him away. Seeing as he was young, the wardens all loved to tease him. He was a strong but simple-minded boy who did not get angry even when he was made fun of. The only thing was that he had a terrifying appetite; he could eat a meal for three people in one setting.

The warden opened the door for a shackled Li Xiong, who asked with pressing urgency, “Has my big bro come to pick me up?”

The warden clapped Li Xiong on the back and said nothing to him. Qiao Tianya had arranged for a horse carriage to come and take Li Xiong away. Fearing that Li Xiong might make a racket and stir up trouble on the way, the warden made a special point of securing the fetters around Li Xiong’s ankles. Li Xiong was not used to riding in the carriage, and all that swaying made him dizzy. Finally, he arrived at the place, but when he got off the carriage and saw the mansion entrance, he refused to move his feet.

“I’m not going in.” Li Xiong stood where he was, like a stake nailed to the ground. No matter how they pushed and shoved him, he remained absolutely still. “This place is too big. Once I enter, my big bro won’t be able to find me.”

The weather was oppressively hot, and everyone was sweating profusely just by standing there. The warden, afraid of offending them, was overwrought with anxiety, and so he attempted to hoodwink Li Xiong, “Go in first. We’ll bring you out after you go in.”

Li Xiong found this man to be very much like a weasel with how his eyes shifted around when he spoke; he looked like a liar, so Li Xiong shook his head sullenly and refused to budge. The warden tried his best to persuade him, but to no avail, so he steeled himself and squeezed in together with the others behind Li Xiong in an attempt to push him inside.

Li Xiong’s heels scraped across the ground. Annoyed from the pushing, he jerked his arms and bellowed, “I’m not going in! Nope!”

The men behind him stepped back in unison from the force. The warden saw him struggling and was worried those shackles could not hold up, so he hurriedly ordered, "Hold him down! Don't let him make a commotion!"

When Li Xiong saw them pouncing towards him, he spontaneously spread his legs in a horse stance<sup>1</sup> to hold his body firm and steady. His suntanned face raged with fury. The warden strained himself to the limit and exerted all his strength, but Li Xiong did not budge the slightest. It looked like they were going to be delayed at the entrance.

Ji Gang happened to return from his stroll outdoors with Fei Sheng following at his side. Even from afar, he saw the crowd at the entrance along with the horse carriage parked in the middle of the road. With a hand at his back, he was just about to inquire when he saw the wardens exclaim out loud just as Li Xiong threw all of them off him.

"Such strength!" Fei Sheng cheered and watched Ji Gang's expression.

Ji Gang was a practitioner of the Ji Clan's boxing style, and he valued strength most. Sure enough, his eyes lit up and said, "Where's this lad from?"

Fei Sheng hurried over. He did not need to ask; he could more or less guess from the way the wardens were dressed. He clutched, then immediately released the Xiuchun blade at the side of his waist, before lifting the chain on the ground with one foot as he said, "Out of the way. I'll truss him up!"



Shen Zechuan was in the room waiting for Kong Ling and the rest when he heard the commotion before the courtyard. He lifted the bamboo blinds. When he saw Ji Gang entering, he could not help but be taken aback. "*Shifu*, what's wrong?"

Ji Gang handed his birdcage to Qiao Tianya and had him hang it up on the veranda. He bent over to scoop up a few handfuls of water from the copper crock to wash his hands. "Picked up a lad before entering. Take a look, see if he is the one you want?"

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, they saw Fei Sheng drag in a sturdy lad with iron chains as though he were hauling in a bull. The lad was still throwing a tantrum, and he yanked Fei Sheng towards himself. Fei Sheng was, at the very least, the vice commander of the Imperial

Bodyguards, and yet his clothes were already drenched in sweat just from the short distance of pulling and dragging.

“Oh!” Ding Tao poked his head out from the room and yelled, “That’s him, Li Xiong!”

Shen Zechuan asked, “What’s happening?”

Fei Sheng wanted to answer, but the chain suddenly went taut, and his entire body was thrown backward and quickly dragged over.

Li Xiong pulled at the chain, struggling until cracks appeared on his wooden shackles.<sup>2</sup> He dragged Fei Sheng round and round the courtyard. Fei Sheng’s back scraped across the beds of flowers, and mud splattered all over his neck. He had the intention to put on a display of his prowess, but discovered that he could not still his body at all.

Qiao Tianya was about to react in that instant, but Ji Gang put out an arm to block him from moving and bellowed, “Tao-zi!”

Ding Tao uttered an acknowledgment, stuffed his book into his robe, and nimbly leaped over the railing on the veranda. Fei Sheng was still being dragged around. Ding Tao chased after them for a few steps, but knew he could not stop Li Xiong by pulling him, so he stepped down on the chain and called out, “Li Xiong—”

But he slipped, and his foot got caught in front of the chain. The moment Li Xiong tugged at the chain, Ding Tao fell over backward. Quick-witted as he was, he used both arms to protect his head and shield his cheeks with his elbows as he fell into the soft, loose soil with a “thud” and tumbled. Flower stems stabbed into his outer arm, blocked by the dogskin arm guard he had just secured on himself.

Fei Sheng hooked a foot around the edge of the stone to bring himself to a stop and felt the sharp pain from the chain winding tightly around his arm. Gritting his teeth, he flipped over to his feet and pulled hard until he was almost leaning backward in a crouching position. His veins bulged, and he could not help but cuss, “This darn bearlike strength!”

Ding Tao leaped to his feet<sup>3</sup> and ran for a few steps before he sprang. Using the momentum from a kick on the railing to propel himself forward, he landed on Li Xiong’s back. He pulled at Li Xiong’s back collar with one hand, clamped his legs around Li Xiong’s nape, and raised a fist, but he did not punch him. Instead, he yelled, “Let go!”

Li Xiong’s shoulders sank from the weight. He was thrown off balance by the force of impact when Ding Tao pounced on him. He bent slightly at

the knees to stabilize himself, then released the chain and reached back with one hand to pull Ding Tao off him. He had only just stretched out his hand halfway when he was encumbered by the shackles. Flying into a rage, he whipped his upper body around in an attempt to throw Ding Tao off. Ding Tao held on like a monkey, but while he did not slip off, the book in his robe fell out.

Ding Tao's was the most skilled in *qinggong*, which was imparted to him by none other than his old man himself. Their family worked as guards in Libei, and they always brought a notebook along with them while on the job to record every single incident regardless of its significance. This book was far more important than their own lives. In order to prevent the book from falling on the battlefield, Ding Tao's old man mastered the *qinggong* skill specifically used for the purpose of fleeing for his life. A pity that his old man eventually died chasing after his book, slit in the throat by another.

Ding Tao was anxious upon seeing the book slip, and reached out an arm to catch it, but Li Xiong grabbed his arm instead and flung Ding Tao over one shoulder and slammed him to the ground like a fish he had caught from the stream.

A loud thud rang out. Ding Tao's entire back slammed onto the ground, and he yelped soundlessly from the pain. Even so, his feet swiftly caught hold of the book even as Li Xiong clutched Ding Tao's collar and hauled him off the ground. Too preoccupied to bother about the blows, Ding Tao tossed the book up with his legs and caught hold of it with one hand. In the next moment, he was slammed down to the ground again.

This time, Ding Tao could not hold back. He choked and coughed, feeling the bile in his stomach rise. He lifted his legs and wound them around Li Xiong's arm, then turned over and used the momentum to fling Li Xiong to the ground. Li Xiong's shackle broke from the impact. He rolled to his feet and bulged his eyes in a glare as he charged towards Ding Tao with a raised fist. Halfway there, his whole arm suddenly felt immensely heavy, as if he had, in a blink of an eye, struck a steel plate. Even with that astonishing strength of his, his arm would not budge.

Ji Gang held Li Xiong's fist in one hand, and rebuked, "Back off!"

Li Xiong was reluctant, but his legs did not seem to obey him, as he was beaten back a few steps by this white-haired old man. Unable to maintain his balance, especially after just getting up, he fell on his butt.

Ji Gang flicked his sleeves and pulled Ding Tao up from the ground.



Ding Tao stuffed the book back under his robes and said, "Grandpa! He hurt me so much!"

Ji Gang patted the soil off Ding Tao's back and said, "I told you a long time back that you will sooner or later end up on the short end of the stick by resorting to trickery and evasive tactics! When you jumped on him earlier, you should have used the 'Bullfight' move on him. Why did you hesitate?"

Ding Tao wiped the sweat on his face, feeling very aggrieved. "He ate the sweets I gave him, and just yesterday he was still chummy with me."

Only then did Qiao Tianya fold his arms as he leaned against the pillar. He whistled at Fei Sheng and quipped, "Old Fei, not up to it, huh."

Fei Sheng simply took off his filthy outer robe and laughed as he cursed, "Son of a bitch, why don't *you* try? This lad's strength is out of this world."

Shen Zechuan was a little surprised. Xiao Chiye was the strongest person he had ever seen. He could draw the hundred-*jin* Conqueror's Bow relying on just his arm strength alone, with no need for external aids. It was easy for Xiao Chiye to hoist him over one shoulder while getting up a horse or heading into a river. But even Xiao Chiye was not this frightening when he was Li Xiong's age.

"Which one of your parents is from Biansha?" Ji Gang pulled Ding Tao behind him, took a few steps forward, and asked Li Xiong.

Li Xiong's buttocks were hurting from the fall. His shackles were gone, but the fetters on his feet were still there. He was reluctant to come in in the first place. Fei Sheng's treatment had sparked his rage, and this was followed by Ji Gang beating him back. Now seeing Ding Tao being coaxed by others after making his way back under the eaves, he pouted, threw his head back, and burst out wailing. He kicked his legs and cried, "Why are you people bullying me?!"

Shen Zechuan let his hands droop and said to Ji Gang, "This one's still a child."

Ji Gang observed the back of Li Xiong's shoulders and said, "He was fighting in such a haphazard way earlier, relying fully on brute force... Feels a little like wrestling. Lad, tell me honestly, is one of your parents from Biansha?"

Li Xiong ignored Ji Gang. Nothing anyone said could register in his ears at this moment, as he cried particularly hard. He had been following

Lei Jingzhe since young, and now, without him, Li Xiong was like a little tot abandoned on the streets—at a loss for what to do, and with nobody to turn to.

His cries gave Shen Zechuan a headache. Shen Zechuan did not sleep well last night, and long periods of standing made him feel tired all over. He said to Ding Tao, “Give him some more of your sweets.”

Ding Tao was feeling even more aggrieved now. He felt around his sleeve pocket slowly before finally digging out an oil paper. “.....It’s melted.”

Qiao Tianya picked up a branch of blossoms from the ground and held it between his teeth. Looking at Li Xiong with a smile, he stepped over the railing and squatted down before him. He waved his hands and said, “This big brother shall remove your fetters for you and get someone to bring you some food. Do you want rice or noodles?”

Li Xiong hiccuped, his face glistening with snot as he sniffled, “I want meat.”



The bamboo blinds were partially lifted, and it was cool inside the house.

Li Xiong sat cross-legged by himself before the small table, grabbing the meat with his hands and feasting on them with great relish. Ding Tao secretly counted the plates, feeling as if he was going to be full just from the counting.

“His mother is most likely a woman abducted by the Biansha Cavalry. It’s chaos along the Chashi River banks, and things like this were common occurrences during the earlier years. The Duanzhou garrison troops didn’t want to cross the border to give chase either.” Ji Gang half turned his body and studied Li Xiong. “But with a sturdy physique like this, his father is unlikely to be an ordinary person. I wonder how he fell into the hands of the bandits.”

“If he really has Biansha blood, then it’s not strange that he was abandoned.” Shen Zechuan recalled Li Xiong’s earlier display of strength. “Qudu case files have annual records of names of those reported to be abducted at the frontiers, with the highest numbers reported in Duanzhou. If those abducted women were to get pregnant, the Biansha tribes, unwilling as they were to raise the kids, would throw those women back along the

banks of Chashi River. Though their original families wouldn't want to take them back again either."

Fei Sheng had just changed into clean robes. Seeing Qiao Tianya's silence, he said, "It's fine if he just happened to fall into the bandits' hands. What I fear is that the bandits raised him for a specific purpose."

"That won't be the case." Ji Gang shook his head slightly. "You've never seen the people from Biansha. They are just like us; not everyone can be born to be that big and tall. Look at Libei Armored Cavalry. Other than requiring you to have the requisite household registration to join the army, they also require you to have the physique, but not all of them are as sturdy as the Prince of Libei. I do think that this lad's father isn't likely to be an ordinary person; he would have been able to get some official posts in the Biansha Cavalry just with this strength alone. However, there is no one like that among the Biansha generals I know near Zhongbo."

"Lad." Qiao Tianya said as he drank the chilled soup, "You've had your meat. It's time for you to talk."

There was still meat in Li Xiong's mouth, so he was too occupied to reply. He swept a glance over the group of people, finally resting his gaze on Shen Zechuan, and mumbled something.

Ding Tao leaned over and listened carefully for a moment before he turned his head to tell Shen Zechuan, "Young Master, he's asking you why you are wearing an earring... Young Master's wearing it because he wants to, what are you asking this for... Oh, you saw the same one before... not the same? So is it the same or not... uh-huh... Of course Young Master's jade earring wasn't bought with money... You've seen it before?"

Li Xiong swallowed the meat. Without bothering to wipe his mouth, he looked at Shen Zechuan and said, "I've seen you before, at 'Gedale'<sup>4</sup> of Chashi River!"



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Footnotes



- 1.
2. 马步 horse stance, a common posture in Chinese martial arts and takes its name from the position assumed when horse-riding.



- 3.
4. An example for reference
- 5.
6. Specifically 鲤鱼打挺 carp kip-up, a martial arts move where one leaps from a supine position into a standing position.
7. Again, for foreign names in this novel, we decided to go with pinyin for the time being due to unfamiliarity with the language involved and to avoid mistranslations with the actual names in its original language. If we do get official subtitles someday, we will replace them in the translation (the same goes for titles). Until then, please bear with us.

# QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 127 : VULTURE

Editor: [Ami](#)<3



Ji Gang rose to his feet abruptly. “Nonsense!”

Although Li Xiong had been beaten back by Ji Gang, he was not afraid of him. He retorted resolutely, “I’m not talking nonsense. I have seen him before. There’s a portrait of him in Gedale. My big bro used to live there. I remember it clearly!”

Fei Sheng thought this did not augur well, considering that he was not Shen Zechuan’s trusted subordinate yet, so there were some matters he was not at liberty to remain here and listen. Thus he got up and said, “Seems to me like he’s more or less done with eating. Master, I’ll inform the kitchen to stop serving up the meat.”

Once Fei Sheng withdrew, Shen Zechuan asked Ji Gang to sit and said to Li Xiong, “Look carefully. Are you sure it’s my portrait?”

Li Xiong grasped the handkerchief he used to wipe his mouth with two fingers and scrutinized Shen Zechuan for a moment. He answered hesitantly, “It kind of looks like... yet also kind of doesn’t...”

Shen Zechuan felt a slight stir in his heart. He stirred the spoon in the soup and lowered his eyes. “The person in the portrait you’ve seen is a woman, yes?”

It finally dawned on Li Xiong. “Oh, right. That’s a woman; you’re a man.”

In just a short moment, Shen Zechuan made plenty of conjectures. He watched the sour plums stirring in the soup and thought back to what Zhou Gui had once said. He also remembered his mother, Bai Cha, as well as Lei Jingzhe who had just returned to the Prefecture of Dunzhou’s territory.

“What place is this ‘Gedale’?” Shen Zechuan asked without batting an eyelid.



“Gedale lies to the east of Chashi River and is a part of the area within the Biansha’s borders. In the early days, it was a temporary residence for the Zhongbo bandits to hide from the pursuit of the Zhongbo garrison troops, but later, they engaged in the illicit trade of selling women from

decent families and was wiped out by the garrison troops of two prefectures led by my elder brother, Tantai Long. The remaining people defected to the Biansha Cavalry, and the one roaming around this place back then was the Biansha's Liaoying Tribe." Tantai Hu raised his head to watch Meng pass through the layers of clouds. "Lei Jingzhe came from that place. After leaving the Zhu clan, he had nowhere to go. He thought of following the Zhongbo bandits to make his fortune, so he went to Gedale. But for some reason, he failed to build up a brigade of bandits there and eventually returned to the Prefecture of Duanzhou, where he met up with Lei Changming and started to make his mark."

"After Tantai Long wiped out the Gedale's bandits, the Liaoying Tribe headed north. Those bandits who had initially defected to them followed them north too." Chen Yang squatted on the ground and rubbed at a handful of dry soil. "The Liaoying Tribe is now the reserve cavalry of the Hanshe Tribe. All the saker falcons of the Biansha people are tamed by the Liaoying Tribe. At first, their status among the Twelve Tribes of Biansha was pretty low, equivalent to that of an 'eagle slave', but twenty years ago, an '*esuheri*'<sup>1</sup> appeared in the Liaoying Tribe."

Tantai Hu was not from Libei, so he did not know the implication of this form of address.

Gu Jin explained from the side, "That is, 'hero'."

"You know Biansha is made up of numerous tribes, right?" Chen Yang looked back and smiled at Tantai Hu. "Only tribes where 'heroes' have appeared can be called as one of the Twelve Tribes. Coincidentally, our lord and this 'hero' were both born in the same year. Ever since His Lordship established the Libei Armored Cavalry at Luoxia Pass, this 'hero' conquered the three tribes of Liaoying, Gouma, and Changjiu in the desert and defeated the old chief of the Hanshe Tribe in the north with saker falcons. From then on, he became the one and only 'Great Hero' to command the four tribes since the reign of Yongyi. He also became Libei's arch-enemy."

Tantai Hu gave a start. "Don't tell me it's..."

Xiao Chiye had been standing behind them at some point onwards. He tilted his head to drink up the water in the water bag, then picked up from where they left off as he secured the opening of the water bag, "It's Amu'er."

They made way for him, and Xiao Chiye stepped onto the clod of earth to look at the Hongyan Mountains in the far distance.

“Amu’er is currently the person most likely to be the monarch in Biansha. He has the ambition to subdue the Twelve Tribes.” Xiao Chiye had a prominent nose that cast some shadows when he turned his head to the side. He continued, “He formed the strongest cavalry in Biansha and became the person since the dawn of history to attack and breach the furthest into the lands of Dazhou. Laohu, the Biansha Cavalry you see now is actually the Biansha Cavalry that Amu’er has reformed. He combined the horses from the Gouma Tribe and the saker falcons from the Liaoying Tribe together, lowered the height of the Hanshe’s Tribe but increased their speed, and completed the deployment that would allow him to battle with Libei in the air.”

“Lowered the height?” Tantai Hu looked at Lang Tao Xue Jin and said, “Master, are the battle steeds from Libei and Hanshe Tribe different?”

“Of course they are different.” Xiao Chiye let loose a laugh, but his smile was faint. “At first, in order to keep up with the Hanshe Tribe’s speed, my father opened up a new stable at Luoxia Pass and stopped using the battle steeds from Suotian Pass. The current battle steeds of the Libei Armored Cavalry are all reared from that time on. Strong and muscular, they are all wild horses from the foot of the Hongyan Mountains, and also the same breed of horses the Hanshe Tribe once used. But Amu’er later came to realize the drawbacks prematurely. He thought that for the same breed of horses, the Libei Armored Cavalry’s weight-bearing capacity was stronger. Once the Libei Armored Cavalry removed their armors, the Hanshe Tribe’s speed would no longer be an advantage. So he took down the Hanshe Tribe’s horse ranch on the Hongyan Mountains and swapped them for the Gouma Tribe’s ponies.”

Lang Tao Xue Jin shook its mane and circled around Xiao Chiye to eat grass.

“We have come to grief because of those ponies.” Chen Yang gestured to indicate the height for Tantai Hu. “The Gouma Tribe’s horses caught the Libei Armored Cavalry off guard.”

Tantai Hu did not understand. He had been in the Prefecture of Dengzhou and the Imperial Army successively, but neither of these was the main forces of the cavalry, so he did not know what was so formidable about the ponies.

“They are astonishingly fast.” The expression in Xiao Chiye’s eyes grew a little frosty as he recalled the fleeting glimpse he had caught many years before. “Those horses are valiant and strong. Although they are small and short, they have great endurance. The Gouma Tribe has been fighting battles with the Bianjun Commandery all this while. Outsiders do not understand; they think Lu Guangbai doesn’t live up to his name and isn’t worthy of being ranked as one of the four generals in the world, but put them in his position, and they will know after a trial run that it isn’t an ordinary cavalry his infantrymen has been launching night raids on to wear them down, but the world’s fastest cavalry. Qidong has been stationed in the south with increased military strength for many years, yet they have never managed to weaken the Gouma Tribe, and this is all because they could not catch up with the latter. This is also the reason why Qudu isn’t willing to let Lu Guangbai dispatch his troops. When they appeared in the grasslands of Libei, they nearly crushed the Libei Armored Cavalry, which was just beginning to take shape. The weight increase by my father turned the Libei Armored Cavalry into prey at the mercy of the Hanshe Tribe’s machetes after the Hanshe Tribe’s change of horses. To solve this problem, my father chose to continue piling on the weight and turned Libei Armored Cavalry into an iron wall that could move.”

With the strong wind stirring on the grassland, Xiao Chiye lost himself in his thoughts.

“Laohu, the reason the Biansha Cavalry was able to fight their way through Zhongbo six years ago had everything to do with Amu’er’s change of battle steeds. If they had continued to use the wild horses at the foot of the Hongyan Mountains without any army supplies, they would not have the stamina to last that long. These horses are not only fast but also tough, and they won’t slow down at all when passing through the desert. Paired with the saker falcons acting as reconnaissance outposts, they will prove to be a great catastrophe to the Zhongbo garrison troops.”

In fact, this was an issue that had Xiao Chiye tossing and turning all night after the defeat of the Zhongbo troops. He had followed Xiao Jiming into battle when he was in Libei, and his memory of the Hanshe Tribe’s present structure had been deeply impressed in his mind. He even pondered to himself more than once what else he could do – other than increasing the weight – if he had been his father faced with such strong troops back then. He looked forward to his eldest brother’s answer, and Xiao Jiming’s choice



to this was to thin down the Libei Armored Cavalry's armor and enhance their mobility. However, Xiao Chiye was not satisfied.

He was a greedy wolf. He could not simply give up the Libei Armored Cavalry's advantage.

However, this was not a problem that could be solved with imagination. For this reason, Xiao Chiye opted to head south with the army before entering Qudu to witness the slaughterhouse that was Zhongbo with his own eyes. He also saw Lu Guangbai's infantry.

"I can't catch up with them. They are too fast." Six years ago, Lu Guangbai squatted on the ground and drew a map for Xiao Chiye. "But Bianjun Commandery is pretty good. The beacon towers stretching ten thousand of *li* can transmit news quickly. At night, we are the 'bag'.<sup>2</sup> As long as we block off the narrow opening, they won't be able to enter and exit freely. When the truncated squad falls behind, then no matter how fast their speed is, they can only be headless chickens."

Zuo Qianqiu once said, "A-Ye, 'an attack is an opportunity to defend, and defense is a strategy to attack'.<sup>3</sup> The reason the Tianfei Watchtower is able to stand firm without falling is not because of how strong I was as a leading general, but because Heaven has bestowed upon Tianfei Watchtower a strong geographical advantage. However, Tianfei Watchtower was forced to take a defensive stance because once our troops head out, we will not be able to stand up to the Biansha Cavalry's assaults. I was the general who cower behind the city gates. In this world, the only army who can pit themselves against the Twelve Tribes of Biansha when it comes to going on the offensive is the Libei Armored Cavalry. I told your father numerous times never to let the Libei Armored Cavalry become a real shield; that would cause Dazhou to lose its spear completely. If you become a general one day, remember the set-up of opportunities and strategies. The battlefield is a place that undergoes myriad changes in the twinkling of an eye. The moment you fall into the rhythm and pace of the other side, you will lose all your advantages. You have to seize your opportunities firmly; you must learn forbearance. Sometimes, a perfunctory, painless blow is the prelude to exhaustion. The fist has to strike the vital point."

But it was too hard.

Xiao Chiye had yet to think of a solution better than what his father and eldest brother had come up with. He could not even engage in guerrilla warfare like Lu Guangbai did. But he could not forget Zuo Qianqiu's

admonition, and he agreed wholeheartedly that the Libei Armored Cavalry could not be just shields. They had come this far after having gone through countless refinements not to bask in past glory. In Xiao Chiye's eyes, it was all too easy to beat back the Biansha Cavalry, but way too difficult to repel Amu'er,

Because the Biansha Cavalry was continuously becoming stronger and stronger under Amu'er's command. This man had the final say in four tribes; he had nothing to worry about from the rear. He was like a vulture born in the desert, eyeing the meat that was Dazhou, all the while attempting to invade it. When Xiao Fangxu changed the Libei Armored Cavalry, Amu'er changed the Hanshe Tribe. When Xiao Jiming changed the Libei Armored Cavalry, Amu'er changed the Hanshe Tribe right off. He had an uncanny understanding of the pack of wolves from Libei. Looking at it from a certain angle, they were confidants. He understood the Libei Armored Cavalry even better than most of those from Libei themselves.

Xiao Chiye's gaze was blocked by the Hongyan Mountains, just like how he had always been blocked by his father and eldest brother. He had not gone head-to-head with Amu'er before, yet he was already seeing the other party as an opponent he had to defeat.

That was a worldly-wise vulture, well-versed in the ways of the world. Xiao Chiye was still a wolf who had just embarked on his journey home.

Meng suddenly swooped down, bringing along a gust of wind in its trail that brushed across the guards' faces. It landed on Xiao Chiye's shoulders, the bloodstains on its sharp talons leaving rough streaks of blood behind. It had already exceeded the size everyone used to imagine it would be; the only ones who were able to hold it up were Xiao Chiye—and Shen Zechuan, who was particularly gentle with it.

Xiao Chiye collected his runaway thoughts and indicated to Chen Yang that there was no need for him to take the leather bag. He turned his head to look at Meng and said, "It has already hunted its fill."

But Meng was acting a little unusual today. It stared at the sky with a sharp, penetrating gaze, never once shifting its gaze even when Xiao Chiye bent his fingers to stroke it.

Xiao Chiye followed its gaze and looked over.

It was quiet up there in the skies and down here on earth. The strong wind springing out of the grass was like a long serpent. At the same time it bared open its bloody mouth, Meng took to the air once more and pierced

through the wind to clutch hold of the saker falcon that was attempting to extricate itself from the grass. As the other bird spread its wings and flailed, Meng abruptly rose. By the time it brought the saker falcon before Xiao Chiye, this lone saker falcon had already become a bloody pulp of ripped flesh.

Xiao Chiye abruptly mounted his horse. As he pulled on the reins, he surveyed his surroundings. His gaze finally landed on the east. He frowned.

He had just entered Libei's territory and had not even reached the Libei relay station yet, so how could the saker falcon of the Biansha Tribes appear here?

"The sound of drums." Gu Jin raised his head and turned around with the wind. "Master, it's coming from the east!"

"That's the Bianbo Camp, which is also the patrol camp. They have a backup support track that leads right to the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path." Chen Yang swiftly got on his horse too. Before he lifted his whip, he suddenly remembered something and turned his head back in astonishment to say to Xiao Chiye, "The Shasan Camp lies to the east of the Bianbo Camp.<sup>4</sup> That's where His Lordship's frontline military forces are, along with a year-round reserve of battle steeds to be supplied to the battlefields up north for emergency use—"

Has the Biansha Cavalry fought their way here?

Then what about Shasan Camp?

What about the Prince of Libei?

Xiao Chiye clenched the reins and spurred his horse into a gallop.



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**SPECIAL THANKS TO :** [Suika](#), [Eggy](#), [Alex](#)

### **Footnotes**

1. Again, for foreign names in this novel, we decided to go with pinyin for the time being due to unfamiliarity with the language involved and to avoid mistranslations with the actual names in its original language. If we do get official subtitles someday, we will replace them in the translation (the same goes for titles). Until then, please bear with us.



2.

3. Example

4. ‘攻是守之机，守是攻之策’ from “Questions and Replies between Tang Taizong and Li Weigong” 《唐太宗李卫公问对》，a dialogue between Emperor Taizong (599-649 AD) of the Tang Dynasty and Li Jing (571-649 AD), a prominent Tang general. It discusses matters of military strategy and is considered to be one of the Seven Military Classics of China.

5. For those referring to the [map](#) for reference, it says Shasan Camp is to the east of the Bianbo Camp in the text but it's Shayi Camp that's to the east of Bianbo on the map. :V It's likely the AD mixed it up and Shayi and Shansan were swapped around. I've revised the maps to reflect the correct position in the novel (that is, until the next time it changes again lmfaao).

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 128 : ENEMY ATTACK



The Bianbo Camp was an important supply site at Libei's borders. To keep the physical strength of the frontline military forces up, Xiao Jiming successively set up the Shayi, Sha'er, and Shasan Camps<sup>1</sup> at the southeastern side of Libei to act as protective barriers to the Bianbo Camp. The Bianbo Camp was always stocked with reserve military provisions and equipment meant to be supplied to the frontlines. There were stables here too, with battle steeds on standby to replace those on the frontlines.

Dawn had yet to break when Wu Ziyu woke up. He squatted at the tent entrance and had the soldier who was his personal guard pour water over his head. "The fighting at the frontline is too intense. We start running right on opening our eyes and lie down right on closing our eyes. It has already been half a month since I last bathed."

The guard handed him a handkerchief, which he used to wipe his face.

"Eat well these two days. We still have to head north three days later to replace Guo Weili's soldiers. The Tudalong Banner has also been cleared out by the Biansha baldies. This battle has already made its way right to our doorstep."

Wu Ziyu was the youngest general in the current ranks of generals in Libei. He was originally a guard in the Prince's residence, and because he had gone drinking and stirred up trouble, Xiao Jiming dismissed him from his original post and had him sent to the military camp. He did not really know how to fight battles, but he was resourceful when it came to transporting military supplies and allocating provisions. Libei had a shortage of military grains in the early spring, and he went to swindle a batch of grains out of the bandits in Zhongbo, thereby resolving the pressing emergency of the battlefields ahead.

When Chen Yang escorted the grains to Libei, the one he had met was Wu Ziyu. The latter had been following Xiao Fangxu these two months, running all over until his legs were about to break. Finally, it was Bianbo Camp's turn to take a break; the soldiers under his command were already all exhausted.

"I originally thought that it'd be a breeze to drive off the Hanshe Tribe now that His Lordship is here." The guard took Wu Ziyu's dirty

handkerchief and washed it in the water basin. “Who would have known that it would become harder the more we fought? The boundary line has already been shrinking until it now lies on the fringes of the Shayi Camp. If this keeps up, Bianbo Camp would have to shift back.”

A bare-chested Wu Ziyu wiped his nape with a damp handkerchief. He looked to the east and said, “Once the Bianbo camp moves back, the Hereditary Prince’s deployment in the southeast will cease to be effective. This place is the bedrock that will enable the Shasan Camp to keep on fighting as usual. We can’t afford to lose it.”

The guard picked up the basin and splashed away the water. He said, “We can’t afford to play the long game either. Leaving the soldiers aside, there are still military craftsmen in these camps who need to eat. If the Second Young Master had not rebelled and remained in Qudu as the Marquis of Dingdu, then we might just be able to fight the battle this way. But he has now killed the emperor, and Juexi is no longer supplying us with military provisions. The Northeast Provisions Bridle Path’s reserves won’t last for long either.”

Wu Ziyu covered himself with a towel and looked at the sky with squinting eyes as the water dripped. He did not respond to the guard’s gripes.

The guard set aside the basin and said, “General, how about steamed buns and milk tea for breakfast? The milk is good stuff that has just been transported over from the back. It can’t be stored for too long, so we have to drink it as soon as possible. I asked the mess cook to brew tea made out of plain leaves with clotted cream.<sup>2</sup> You—”

Wu Ziyu raised his index finger as a signal for the guard to shut up. He listened to the hubbub of splashing water and footsteps all around and looked at the sky, but he did not hear the whistle of today’s eagle patrol. He listened for a moment before asking, “Has last night’s patrol squad returned?”

The guard happened to be rinsing his feet with water. On hearing him, he looked up at the sky too and answered, “It’s not time yet. The earliest they’ll return after turning back from Shasan Camp is, at the very least, the third quarter during the hour of *chen*.”<sup>3</sup>

“Why am I not hearing the whistles from the eagle patrol?”

“Didn’t let them out.” The guard hesitated for a moment. “We were too tired when we arrived at the camp last night, so we didn’t report it to you

immediately. The eagles we brought back this time are all wounded, having been brutally clawed by the Biansha Cavalry's saker falcons at the battlefield. Even 'Hou' died. Those who raise eagles all treasure their eagles like they would a child. After we came back here, we dispensed with the eagle patrol today and had the physician tend to their injuries."

Eagles were not easy to rear. Patience was required when domesticating them,<sup>4</sup> and those that could act as scouting eagles were the cream of the crop. Even though they were not gyrfalcons, they were similarly valuable. Xiao Fangxu was fighting a battle in the frontline this time, and the battle was not going smoothly for both the soldiers and the eagles. In Libei, horses and eagles were good buddies with friendships that ran deep with the armored cavalry. No matter which was to get injured, the soldiers would not be happy.

Wu Ziyu pulled off the towel and bent a finger to whistle. An eagle swooped down from the top of the tent. As Wu Ziyu was not wearing an upper garment, this eagle did not land on him but instead hopped onto the drying pole where the clothes were hung up. Wu Ziyu said, "Release my 'Chi'. We are fighting a battle now. Doing away with the eagle patrol is just like losing an eye. Even if we are in Bianbo camp, we mustn't be negligent and careless."

The guard said, "... Chi has already been patrolling the battlefield for half a month. General..."

"We have no choice." Wu Ziyu has a gruff voice, yet he was very gentle when he looked up at Chi and commanded, "Go."

Chi spread its wings and soared into the sky. It hovered over Bianbo Camp for a moment, then charged into the morning sunlight in the east.

A bare-chested Wu Ziyu entered the tent and warned, "The batch of battle steeds that have followed us down should be replaced too. The reserve horses have to be taken to the north in three days. Guo Weili's defense at the Tudalong Banner has been breached by the Hanshe Tribe. A group of brothers was killed, and quite a number of horses have sunk in the swamp. He has already sent three military reports to urge us. He's in urgent need of new horses."

The barefooted guard slipped on his shoes and followed behind him. "I've already gotten the men to prepare the horses early in the morning, but this batch of horses is the last batch. Autumn isn't here yet, and our new battle steeds from Dajing aren't here."

“I’ll talk to him about it.” Wu Ziyu put on his clothes.

Guo Weili was single-handedly promoted by Xiao Jiming. This person could fight, but he was most suited to be used by Xiao Jiming, because Xiao Jiming was like an iron chain that could pull Guo Weili back every time Guo Weili let it go to his head, thereby preventing the main force from suffering heavy losses. Xiao Jiming was also the one Guo Weili was the most willing to submit to. Now that the commander-in-chief had changed to Xiao Fangxu, the way of combat was different. There was no one to pull him back, and so there were plenty of areas where he ended up on the short end of the stick.

Wu Ziyu retreated and brought along a batch of equipment that those at the frontline needed to repair. The Libei Armored Cavalry used a tremendous amount of equipment and relied heavily on army supplies and gears, so they had over ten thousand military craftsmen. These military craftsmen were split up among the various camps. Once the battle started, they had to repair equipment for the armored cavalry day and night.

Wu Ziyu’s own armor was also badly worn out. He went to the military craftsmen’s tent to check on it, and on the way, he asked the guard several times, but there was no news of Chi’s return. Sparks spattered out of the stoves when it was nearly noon; it was so hot inside that it was hard for anyone to breathe.

The weather was too hot, so hot that it made them sleepy. Even the wind outside the tents was hot. Wu Ziyu was sweating profusely as he looked at the ground. This steaming hot temperature had already caused many military craftsmen to suffer from heatstroke. Wu Ziyu got his men to splash cold water, but this was simply a futile attempt, much like trying to put out a burning cart of firewood with a cup of water.

“Get the kitchen to boil green beans. Boil as many as you can.” Wu Ziyu covered his face with the cool handkerchief and instructed the guard, “The equipment repair cannot be delayed. His Lordship and the rest are still donning worn-out armors on their end.”

The guard nodded in acknowledgment. He was feeling so hot that he was not wearing his armor, and his collar was open. He was about to turn around when he felt a few drops of water dripping onto his face. Puzzled, he wondered aloud, “Why is it raining...”

Wu Ziyu’s nape was wet with water too, but this water was sticky. He raised his head and saw Chi’s figure charging out from the hot sun before it



suddenly plunged. But halfway down, two saker falcons swooped out midair and simultaneously grasped hold of Chi before soaring once more. Chi let out a shrill cry as it was torn into shreds, its feathers scattering in the air.

Wu Ziyu promptly rose to his feet. Someone atop the watchtower in the distance was already shouting, “ENEMY ATTACK—!”

The drums sounded, each beat pounding Wu Ziyu hard in the chest. He immediately gave his commands. “Put on your armors. This is a sneak attack by the Liaoying Tribe. They are not Hanshe Tribe’s cavalry—don’t panic!”

Flaps of tents lifted in unison. From wearing their clothes to putting on their armors, the Libei Armored Cavalry carried out every step without a hitch. With swift and orderly movements, they gradually turned from individual men into men of iron and steel enveloped within the oppressive, heavy armors.

“Squad Six, go guard the stables. Squad Three, go guard the granary. If the vanguards led by me die in battle, Bianbo Camp is bound to fall. When you see that the situation is critical, don’t wait any longer. Release the stables immediately and lead the military craftsmen along the horse track towards the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path where Zhao Hui’s Three Great Training Divisions of Liuyang are.” As Wu Ziyu spoke, he saw that Chi had already fallen to the ground. That shocking mass of red made him pause a moment, then he quickly turned his head away and hauled up the guard. “The horses and the military craftsmen can leave when Bianbo Camp falls, but the grains can’t be sent away, so when the need arises, set them on fire and burn them clean. Do not leave even a single grain of rice to the Liaoying Tribe! Head back home. There is still the Hereditary Prince back in Dajing to assume command.”

Conventions dictated that the general should retreat with the troops and leave the vanguards behind to stall for time when the situation was bad. But Wu Ziyu knew that the sneak attack this time was a force to behold. There were only two possibilities in which the Biansha men could bypass the Shasan Camp before Bianbo Camp.<sup>5</sup> The first was that they took a shortcut and made their way over in silence. The second was that Xiao Fangxu, Zuo Qianqiu, and the rest had all perished in battle; the frontline had already collapsed, and Shasan Camp was completely wiped out even before they had the time to send back the military reports.

Regardless of which it was, the men who had come along for the sneak attack this time could not be underestimated. Wu Ziyu did not dare to hand the responsibility of stalling for time to others; he had to guard this place himself.

Wu Ziyu passed through the squad as he put on his helmet. “Which—”

Wu Ziyu had yet to finish his words when a large boulder came falling from the sky and smashed into the middle of the newly erected watchtower with a thunderous crash. Even before the sound of the watchtower’s collapse could be heard, it knocked down a tent.

“Stone catapults!” The guard shouted at the top of his voice from behind. “General, they are coming around from the south!”

“Fucking bandits!” Wu Ziyu spat. “Get on your horses! It’s inconvenient for them to move around since they’re bringing along heavy equipment, and they won’t dare to make a show of it when taking the detour. Without the ponies from the Gouma Tribe, this group of people can’t get away!”

But following right after, the sounds of neighing rang out from the horse stables, and the battle steeds scurried all over amidst the machetes and flames. The other party had the same idea as Wu Ziyu—slaughter all the horses they could not grab and burn away all the grains they could not take away with them. That way, the materials heading north in Libei will be in short supply immediately. They could think of ways to transfer the grains again, but without this batch of battle steeds, Guo Weili’s Cangzhu Camp would lose their combat capability.

“Motherfucker...” Wu Ziyu slowly gripped his blade. “Tell Squad Six to leave first with the horses!”

The guard flipped onto his horse. The tents near the stables were all on fire. He led his men and charged over. His saddle suddenly sank, and the guard felt an ill sense of foreboding. Following right after, the horse beneath him raised its hooves from an attack. A Biansha soldier clung to its abdomen like a spider. The Biansha soldier pulled out a dagger from the side of his leg and stabbed the horse in its belly.

The dagger made a white mark on the armor but did not pierce through it right away.

The battle steed landed back on the ground, and the guard tumbled off his horse and drew his blade to trade blows with the Biansha soldier. The Libei Armored Cavalry’s armor was too heavy, and the impact was so

strong that the Biansha soldier was forced back, his feet scraping against the ground. However, the soldiers' armors were not as hard as the horses' armors. The guard hacked off the other party's head, but he also ended up taking a blow from the other party's blade.

This bunch of Biansha soldiers was like locusts that opted to surround the enemy and fight to their death when faced with a trapped beast like the Libei Armored Cavalry. The helmet Wu Ziyu had just worn had been struck off him. He was surrounded by several people. The fire from the stables had already burned its way to the horses that had yet to run out, their blood-soaked neighing jarring on Wu Ziyu's ears.

He was not a general who could fight. The soldiers under his command were also from the Libei Armored Cavalry's backup transportation squad. They had only just retreated from the battlefield a few days ago, and their already exhausted bodies could not withstand such a strong assault. What's more, he still had to divert manpower to protect the Libei military craftsmen who were just as important as the battle steeds.

The guard flipped atop the horse once again and spurred his horse on to knock over the blazing railings of the horse stables. In a split second, the battle steeds within galloped out.

Wu Ziyu said, "Let the military craftsmen get on the horses. Remove the armors and hurry on to the horse track..."

Wu Ziyu was still speaking when he felt a sudden weight on his back as he was forced down by two men before being flung to the ground. The back of his helmet-less head struck the ground hard. The next moment, a rope was put around his neck, and both men dragged him in unison.

Wu Ziyu tugged at the rope tightening around his neck. It strangled him so hard that the timber of his voice changed as he hissed at the back of the guard, "When... *coughs*, when you reach the camp... tell Zhao Hui to head north..."

Beads of sweat dripped into his eyes, stinging them until Wu Ziyu could barely open them. He tumbled amid the smoke and dust, unable to breathe as he watched the sky turn yellow. That group of saker falcons that had torn Chi to pieces was hovering up there.

"Fuck..." Grief overwhelmed Wu Ziyu. His vision blurred as eyes that stung from the sweat brimmed with tears. He cursed without letting up. "... Fuck!"

He had already been dragged to the edge of the sea of fire amidst the chaotic sounds of horses' hooves. Wu Ziyu knocked against the rock and caught hold of the railing. The pain from being burned by fire was excruciating.

The saker falcons in the sky suddenly dispersed, and a falcon cry reverberated through the sky in the wind. Meng gripped the back of a saker falcon in midair, and both parties engaged in a fierce battle. At the same time, the sound of galloping horses closed in on them from afar. Choked by the smoke, Wu Ziyu could not get a clear look; he could only get a vague glimpse of a tall figure riding steadily on horseback.

Surprised, he shouted, "Your Lordship!"

Wu Ziyu felt a grip on his ankle and heard Chen Yang bellow, "Drag him out!"

The rope tightened around Wu Ziyu's throat. He hurriedly cried out in a hoarse voice, "Drag, my ass! I, I'm still being hanged by the neck!"

Chen Yang promptly let go and brandished his blade at the side of Wu Ziyu's neck, scaring Wu Ziyu so much that his hairs stood on end. And just like that, he was dragged out with the rope still around his neck. He rolled as they swatted at him to extinguish the fire. Gasping for breath, he lifted eyes against the sunlight and saw the man on horseback dismount. The man raised a finger between his lips and let loose a long whistle.

Meng flung the saker falcon from side to side as it swooped down. Its feathers were in a mess from all that tearing at one another. The saker falcon let out a cry of pain. Meng's sharp talons were like blades as they ripped into the saker falcon. Breaking through the wind, Meng rushed over to Xiao Chiye and kicked out its talons to toss the saker falcon to the ground.

"I'm not my old man," Xiao Chiye raised his arm to let Meng perch and turned his head back to look at Wu Ziyu, "I'm your Second Young Master."



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SPECIAL THANKS TO : [Ami](#)

### **Footnotes**

1. Literally Sand I, Sand II, Sand III Camps

2. 奶皮子 öröm/urum in Mongolian cuisine, a rich, highly caloric cream from animals such as yaks, goats, and cows.
3. 辰时 7-9 am, based on the system of two-hour subdivisions used in former times.
4. 熬鷹 literally torturing falcons, it's one of the ways to train them by not allowing it to sleep and torture it to exhaustion to wear down its wild nature.
5. For those referring to the [map](#) for reference, it says Shasan Camp is to the east of the Bianbo Camp in the text but it's Shayi Camp that's to the east of Bianbo on the map. :V It's likely the AD mixed it up and Shayi and Shansan were swapped around. I've revised the maps to reflect the correct position in the novel (that is, until the next time it changes again lmfao).

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 129 : GRAVEYARD OF DREAMS



Initially, the guard had already left the camp when he saw the men from the Imperial Army charging in like wolves and tigers. This squad was more excited than afraid; to date, they had never fought a battle to their hearts' content, having been held in check back in Qudu and Zhongbo. It had not been easy for them to encounter the Eight Great Training Divisions lead by Han Jin, but the other party was like dough that shrunk back at just a squeeze, and now, they finally got to come face to face with the Biansha soldiers. With a frenzied spurt of energy and vigor, the Imperial Army drew their blades and charged.

Not many men from the Biansha Liaoying Tribe had come, since they were relying on the stone catapults to take the Bianbo Camp by surprise. It seemed as if victory was within their reach, but they were caught off-guard by these troops that came killing out of nowhere.

The Imperial Army resided in Qudu all year round, and the battles they fought were all street fights. Their blades were not as long as the Libei Armored Cavalry, yet they were artful in wielding them. They were an incomplete squad before Xiao Chiye took up the post of the Imperial Army Viceroy, and their main force had another name in Qudu, called "the military oilmen"; they were the best at mucking around and loafing on the job. In other words, this was a 'slippery' squad. They were not an organized wall like the Libei Armored Cavalry was. As long as they could stab their blades through the enemy forces, they would even resort to using low-down means.

And now, the Biansha soldiers had become the target of a surprise attack. The guard who had turned back cut off their retreat route. The men at the periphery quickly withdrew with the stone catapults, while the Biansha soldiers who were still inside the Bianbo Camp could only fight to the death with the Imperial Army.

By the time Wu Ziyu was able to get up, the fire had abated some. With his blade in his hand, Chen Yang checked the corpses and reported to Xiao Chiye, "Master, they are indeed from the Liaoying Tribe."

"The stone catapults, being heavy equipment, are inconvenient to move around. If they want to take it with them when they flee, they won't be able

to run fast.” Xiao Chiye said to Tantai Hu, “Laohu, lead the cavalry and give chase.”

On seeing this, Wu Ziyu immediately said, “My horse can still run. Buddy, take mine.”

Tantai Hu said his thanks and flipped onto the horse. Gu Jin turned his horse around. “Laohu, follow me. We’ll go after them together.”

They led the men away. Half of Bianbo Camp had already been razed by the fire. Xiao Chiye was looking at the horse stables and granary. Wu Ziyu followed close behind him and called out, “Second Young Master...”

“Although Bianbo Camp is a patrol camp, it’s also a camp where reserves are stored. This place is still a distance away from the boundary line. There’s Shasan Camp to the east acting as a shield, and there are also sentry posts and checks along the way.” Xiao Chiye squinted his eyes from the glare of the sun. He looked at Wu Ziyu again. “Yet they made their way this far back. Where is your patrol squad?”

Wu Ziyu recognized Xiao Chiye. In his early years, he was picked along with Zhao Hui and Chen Yang to serve as Xiao Jiming’s guard in the Prince’s residence, and that was when he saw Xiao Chiye. But the Xiao Chiye back then and the Xiao Chiye at present were just like two different people. His excessively tall stature meant he was always looking down from above, and being gazed at in such a way made Wu Ziyu feel a lot smaller for no reason.

Wu Ziyu averted his gaze. “The patrol squad that went out last night did not return.”

“The patrol squad that went out last night did not return, and yet you, as the commanding general, sensed nothing odd about it even when noon came around.” Xiao Chiye looked as if he was just engaging in idle chatter. He had an intimidating presence that gave others great pressure, but his attitude was quite mild and calm. “Shayi Camp is the battlefield, while Bianbo Camp is the resource supply site for Shasan Camp. Every slight disturbance here will affect the battle at the frontline. You’re really quite the laidback one.”

Wu Ziyu could tell what he meant by these words. Xiao Chiye had never held a post in the Libei army. His only military rank now was that of an Imperial Army Viceroy in Qudu; what’s more, he was a viceroy whom Qudu no longer acknowledged, so he was in no position to reprimand Wu

Ziyu. But the more insipid his tone was, the more it made Wu Ziyu ashamed.

News that the Second Young Master was going to return to Libei had been circulating in Libei for over two months. Leaving aside the common soldiers, each of the high-ranking military officers like them had their own thinking about it. Of the current military officers in the Libei Armored Cavalry, other than the few who were seniors from Xiao Fangxu's era, the rest were all juniors whom Xiao Jiming himself had promoted.

Xiao Jiming was wounded, and no one knew when he would be able to return to his position. Would the Second Young Master take Xiao Jiming's place upon his return? All sorts of rumors were running rampant. Whether they were those who were ready to throw in their lots with Xiao Chiye or those who continued to reject and ostracize Xiao Chiye, they were all waiting for Xiao Chiye to return and reveal his true colors. Six years was not a long time, but it was not a short time either. There were all kinds of strange rumors about the Second Young Master. Wu Ziyu was also observing Xiao Chiye.

"We are the troops that retreated from the battlefield at Shayi Camp only yesterday. Our main task is to plan and coordinate the transportation of equipment and grains for the battlefield." Wu Ziyu paused for a moment. "The original garrison squad from the Bianbo Camp has already been switched over to Shayi Camp, so there are no main force troops here for the time being. What's more, Bianbo Camp is located behind Shasan Camp. I truly didn't expect..."

Wu Ziyu's voice gradually faded away. The disquieting atmosphere was getting to him. That niggling, pressing sense of urgency was even more pronounced than the blazing sun. He quickly looked at Xiao Chiye. His Adam's apple throbbed, but he did not dare to continue speaking.

Meng turned its head a little to look at Wu Ziyu. Its beak, which looked like an iron hook, had yet to be wiped clean.

Xiao Chiye's nape lay exposed to the scorching sun. He lifted the other hand to cover it and raised his head slightly. He was still looking at the horse stables. "Aren't you people the Libei Armored Cavalry?"

Wu Ziyu remained standing still in silence.

Xiao Chiye's left arm was steady. The combined weight of Meng and the arm guard was nothing to him, but he did not let Meng rest for too long.



Once Chen Yang was done doing a headcount of the bodies, Xiao Chiye released Meng into the air again.

“Master.” Chen Yang lifted his head to look at Meng. “Should we get a squad to follow?”

“Considering that the Biansha men brought along the stone catapults to launch a sneak attack, it’ll be tough for them to avoid the Shasan Camp’s patrol. But they were able to make their way here, which shows that Shasan Camp has already fallen into the enemy’s hands.” Xiao Chiye did not smile. “Father allowed the transportation squad to retreat to Bianbo Camp, likely because he still doesn’t know that Shasan Camp has already been breached. Meng is going over to Shayi Camp to deliver news of it. We’ll rest for a night and head for Shasan Camp tomorrow.”

“Second Young Master has no cavalry or supplies. If you continue on east, you will come face to face with the Biansha soldiers. Since they are able to take down Shasan Camp without so much a noise, then it’s very likely that the people stationed there are from the Hanshe Tribe who are skilled in the art of storming enemies.” Wu Ziyu could not refrain from speaking out. “Right now, it’s safer to wait for the reinforcement from the Three Great Training Divisions of Liuyang. I’ll send someone to deliver the message right away. The Hereditary Prince will definitely dispatch Zhao Hui over.”

“If you had sent the message to the Three Great Training Divisions of Liuyang yesterday when you arrived at Bianbo Camp, then there might still be a chance to make it before sunset tomorrow. Send the message now, and it’ll take a day and a night to rush at top speed to the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path. Zhao Hui needs another one day and one night to rush to the Three Great Training Divisions of Liuyang from Dajing. By the time he arrives at this place, Bianbo Camp will be of no more.” Xiao Chiye pointed to the spot where the watchtower collapsed. “Rebuild the watchtower now. Don’t set it up in areas facing the east; shift it to the southeast corner. Do a headcount of the grains and battle steeds, and have the military craftsmen prioritize the repairs of the camp’s defense walls that the stone catapults have smashed.”

“If Young Master is worried about the Biansha soldiers returning, then you should move the grains and battle steed to the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path.” Wu Ziyu caught up with Xiao Chiye. “There’s simply no time to rebuild the Bianbo Camp. Shasan Camp is only tens of *li* away from this

place. The horses of the Hanshe Tribe can make their way over within a day.”

Xiao Chiye took a few steps up the railing and jumped over it to the other end. He turned around, motioned Wu Ziyu not to follow him, and asked in passing, “Honestly speaking?”

Wu Ziyu did not understand what Xiao Chiye meant by this. He continued at lightning speed, “All we can do now is to abandon the Bianbo Camp and try our best to reduce the loss of supplies—”

As Xiao Chiye stepped back, he asked, “Well, don’t you have the slightest notion to step out of this place and give chase?”

By now, the sun has begun to tilt. Wu Ziyu stood on this side of the ruins, baffled by Xiao Chiye’s gaze. The burns on his back stung from the scorching sunlight. With a frown on his face, he watched as Xiao Chiye turned back. He could not help shouting with all his might, “I can’t win them. Second Young Master, I said it before, I’m from the transportation squad...”

Xiao Chiye did not reply to him and merely waved his hand at Wu Ziyu with his back to the latter. The meaning was clear—Wu Ziyu could shut up now. He stood before the collapsed granary, his expression cold and detached, and his lips, tightly pursed.

He stood there for a very long time.



Xiao Fangxu sat unreservedly in the tent and raised his head to drink up the last mouthful of milk tea. The salted milk tea brewed with plain leaves had already gone cold from being set aside. The clotted cream felt moist in his mouth, and there was a milky aroma. His shoulders were bare, and the military medic was applying medicine.

“Amu’er is a good opponent.” Xiao Fangxu moved his shoulder after it was bandaged. “I’ve been observing the Hanshe Tribe for the past ten years or so, but I didn’t expect their attack power to be so strong. When people grow old, their reactions slow down. I’m no longer the man I once was.”

“Libei’s advantages are prominent, and its disadvantages are, likewise, obvious.” Zuo Qianqiu grabbed up a handful of sand and watched as they trickled down between his fingers. “Amu’er changed his attack strategy for you. He definitely won’t dare to make a sudden assault like this in the past when he was facing off against Jiming. Jiming is skilled in the art of war. The camps he set up on the boundary line are all interlocked. The armored

cavalry heads out to face the enemy with chains on their back, supplied by Xiao Jiming himself. Once the situation changes, Jiming can haul the main force back any time to avoid heavy losses. Now that Jiming has retreated and you're back in command, the speed in which news is passed on is a lot slower. What's more, your style is completely different from Jiming. The vanguards don't dare to go all out when they charge, and the reserve troops' initial rhythm is all messed up. Will Amu'er let this opportunity slip?"

Xiao Fangxu got up to get dressed. Scars covered the bulging muscles on his back. He said he was old, but this intimidating body of his was far more sturdy than before. He put on his robe and started to put on his armor meticulously every step of the way.

"If Dazhou is still in the period of resurgence, then Jiming would be the best commander-in-chief of the Libei Armored Cavalry. Ha has performed extraordinarily well, and is the best candidate to keep Libei at the top of its game." Xiao Fangxu strapped on his blade and continued with a stoic expression, "But Dazhou is already in a state of collapse, and our dogged strategy to be the 'wall' is no longer suitable for the Libei Armored Cavalry. Amu'er is the 'Great Hero' Heaven bestowed upon Biansha. He roams around the various tribes, wanting to create a new world. Jiming's conservative strategy is just giving him enough time to grow and develop. Qianqiu, you and I both need to face up to one thing, and that is Biansha is no longer a bunch of incohesive small tribes that rely on looting and plundering to make a living. They are like rivers converging together to become the boundless sea under Amu'er's leadership. Has it ever occurred to you that by the time Amu'er unifies the Twelve Tribes, Biansha will become a behemoth capable of devouring Dazhou? To fight and defeat him, it can only be now."

"I'm the 'spear' of Libei, and Jiming is its 'shield'. At the same time the Libei Armored Cavalry shed off its weight, they are gradually falling into the trap of complacency. An armored cavalry that has lost its desire for victory is akin to a wolf that no longer feasts on meat. Sooner or later, it will be replaced by some other armies."

Xiao Fangxu was expressionless when he spoke to this point.

"Jiming's defeat is not a bad thing for him and for the Libei Armored Cavalry. I put him in the military camp when he was just a teenager not because I hope he can maintain the so-called glory and honor of zero defeats. There are no legends on the battlefield—even I myself will suffer a

defeat. I have to make the current Libei Armored Cavalry understand earlier that what we want is not constant victory, but to win; even if we lose, we will climb swiftly back on our feet. As long as our limbs are not broken, we can still fight. Both Jiming and I have successively accomplished what we ought to have done, and now, it's time for Libei to feel the 'hunger'."

Xiao Fangxu paused for a long time, his gaze meaningfully deep.

"The Libei Armored Cavalry is in urgent need of a new commander-in-chief. This person must be different from us, even to the extent of being our polar opposite. He has to tear off the layer of scholarly elegance that Jiming has implemented. He has to be avaricious and savage. He has to make the Libei Armored Cavalry ravenous and let their wolfish nature rear its head once again."



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**SPECIAL THANKS TO :** [Eggy](#), [Ami](#), and [AliceLiddell](#) for correcting the typo!<3

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 130 : JADE EARRING



At the time Bianbo Camp was attacked, Shen Zechuan was taking a nap.

Qiao Tianya sat under the eaves fiddling with his zither, while Ding Tao and Li Xiong surrounded the copper crock playing with the fishes. It was quiet inside the room. The sunlight spilled over half of Shen Zechuan's shoulders. He had just settled the details of the census register registration with Zhou Gui and the rest last night, and they had begun to do an inventory count of Cizhou's granary reserves this morning. Autumn was just around the corner. If they wanted to do business with Chazhou, this was the best time. He busied around until the afternoon, and that was when he took the opportunity to doze off for a moment while he was sitting at his desk.

An unspecified amount of time later, he woke up.

Shen Zechuan leaned back against the *taishi* chair<sup>1</sup> and pinched the center of his eyebrows. After taking a moment to compose himself, he called for Qiao Tianya.

"The bandits from half a month ago have already returned to Mount Luo. Have there been any movements from Lei Jingzhe?" Shen Zechuan took up his brush and continued to write what he had yet to finish earlier on the paper.

"Even if there are any signs of activity, it will reach us a few days later." Qiao Tianya picked a chair to take his seat. "Besides, the marquis is thorough in his arrangements. When Lei Jingzhe returns to Mount Luo, he will be the target of criticism. Just trying to resolve his own internal affairs on Mount Luo alone will take him about a month or so."

Shen Zechuan said nothing and continued writing. Finding him to be somewhat distracted, Qiao Tianya added, "Master only slept four hours last night, and you still have to go over to the Zhou's residence to discuss official matters with them after dinner later. There's no harm in taking a rest while you can now."

Shen Zechuan said, "I'll sleep after I return. Is Fei Sheng still idling around? Since he wants to do something, give him something to do."

Qiao Tianya rubbed his fingers and said. "I've been thinking about it these few days. You've been leaving him out in the cold for more than a

month. If this goes on, I fear he will harbor resentment.”

“The gears in this person’s brain sure turn fast. He knows Ce’an isn’t willing to take him in, so he wants to remain in Cizhou. Zhou Gui and Kong Ling fear his Imperial Bodyguards background and don’t dare to use him, so he can only follow *shifu* around, hoping to get a job from me through *shifu*.” Shen Zechuan set down the brush to let the ink dry and continued, “Now that Gu Jin has returned to Libei, we are indeed short of people to scout for us.”

When Qiao Tianya and the rest arrived in Cizhou, the various Imperial Bodyguards who had followed them out of Qudu also arrived one after another. But even if these Imperial Bodyguards were to gather, there were only about a hundred or so men, half of which were Fei Sheng’s old subordinates. At first, when Shen Zechuan set Fei Sheng aside without using him, it was because Fei Sheng did not have the intention to follow him; that gaze of his was fixed squarely on Xiao Chiye. A pity Xiao Chiye was unwilling to take him as a subordinate, so Fei Sheng could only settle for the next best option and remain by Ji Gang’s side, deferring to him on every issue. In Cizhou, Fei Sheng was not involved in any of the matters, yet he would often put himself within Shen Zechuan’s sight. His intent was simply too obvious.

Fei Sheng had it all read pretty accurately. Even if Shen Zechuan left him out in the cold for a moment, Shen Zechuan would eventually have to use him still, because he had observed Shen Zechuan’s every move, and he knew that Shen Zechuan lacked manpower.

Qiao Tianya leaned over slightly and asked across the table, “What does Master want him to investigate?”

“Two things.” Shen Zechuan answered. “The first is to get him to keep constant track of the price of tea and rice in the various Zhongbo prefectures and the prefecture of Huaizhou. Cizhou’s proposed price will be in the middle. If we want to avoid suffering any losses, we will have to get a good idea of the prices in these places. The Imperial Bodyguards used to have the same assignment back in Qudu, so he can assign men to carry out this task. The second is for him to get to the bottom of Lei Changming and Lei Jingzhe’s relationship with the Yan Clan of Hezhou. Especially Lei Changming. I want to know all the details of this person’s life.”

Qiao Tianya was a little surprised. “Lei Changming was merely a live target Lei Jingzhe set up for himself on the outside. Why is Master not

investigating Lei Jingzhe but Lei Changming instead?”

Shen Zechuan paused for a moment before saying, “When I was taking a nap earlier, I recalled the way Lei Changming looked before he died. I find him a little odd. The custom of wearing earrings is the most prevalent among the noble clans in Qudu and the Eight Great Cities. Li Xiong is an orphan Lei Jingzhe raised. He rarely socializes with these people and has only met them once, so it isn’t surprising that he can’t remember it clearly. But Lei Changming was the bandit chief of Mount Luo. He had dealings with the prefectural prefects and garrison troops’ commanders of the two prefectures of Dunzhou and Duanzhou; he even had dealings with Yan Heru, the youngest young master of the Yan Clan, a family of wealthy merchants. He should have come across men wearing earrings countless times, yet he kept focusing on my jade earring before his death...”

Shen Zechuan furrowed his brows slightly. He could clearly recall Lei Changming’s expression before his death. If Li Xiong had not mentioned it, he would not have noticed it either. Lei Changming’s deranged and delirious gaze was clearly looking at another person through this jade earring.

This matter was originally inconsequential. Anyone who heard it should not be taking it to heart. This was because Shen Zechuan’s jade earring was nothing rare; it was merely something that Xiao Chiye had polished out of leftover material while he was fleeing. Compared to the box of earrings he gave to Shen Zechuan back in Qudu, this one was nothing valuable. Others could tell at a glance how “treasured” it was only because of its roundness and smoothness. The noble clans considered it a “blessing” to let their most precious children wear jade earrings.

But Shen Zechuan felt subtly bothered by it. He intuitively felt that there was something in there he would want to dig deeper into. There were still some secrets regarding the uncle and nephew pair of the Lei clan that Zhou Gui and Kong Ling were not aware of.

Li Xiong sat by the copper crock, fiddling with a red string.<sup>2</sup> But he was clumsy and kept failing in his attempts.

Ding Tao scooped up the fish, and water splashed over Li Xiong.

All of a sudden, Li Xiong snapped the string broken in anger and threw it at Ding Tao. He pulled a long face and said, “I’m going to look for my big bro.”

Ding Tao, with his sleeves still rolled up, said, "Better not; what's so good about your big bro? Why don't you treat Qiao Yueyue and me as your elder brothers and follow our Young Master? Our Young Master gives out sweets every month, and he never withholds our salaries."

"I don't want money." Li Xiong suddenly stood up. "I want my big bro."

Ding Tao cast a glance at the main room and saw Qiao Tianya still discussing matters with Shen Zechuan on the other side of the partially hanging bamboo blinds, so he pulled down his sleeves and said, "Why don't you come with me to grab some meat?"

"I'm not eating!" For some reason, Li Xiong was agitated. He scratched his cheek and demanded anxiously, "Why aren't you people letting me go? I want to leave the city. I want to return to Mount Luo!"

Ding Tao felt that Li Xiong was truly a brat. He could not reason with Li Xiong, but if they were to come to blows, he was no match for Li Xiong either. Seeing that Li Xiong was about to make a scene again, Ding Tao suddenly hit on an idea. "You miss your big bro so much. He must be really a formidable one, huh?"

Li Xiong answered, "My big bro is the number one hero in Mount Luo. Of course, he's formidable."

Ding Tao clapped his hands together and said, "So what if he's a hero on Mount Luo? Is he as formidable as my master, my young master? I don't think of him as a hero!"

Sure enough, Li Xiong was furious. He glared at Ding Tao. "Your master and young master isn't formidable at all! He's so skinny; my big bro can kill him with just one punch!"

Ding Tao spat inwardly to himself, feeling a little displeased, but he still tried his best to put on a happy act. "Oh? Then that's pretty formidable. Your big bro is Lei Jingzhe, right? His uncle is Lei Changming. I know all about it."

Li Xiong was already envious of Ding Tao to begin with, and he was not willing to lose out to Ding Tao here. To prove that Lei Jingzhe was stronger than Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan, he hurriedly said, "Lei Changming is formidable too. He can lift the little people upside down, but my big bro is even more formidable than Lei Changming!"

Seeing that he had taken the bait, Ding Tao played along and asked, "What kind of martial arts move is lifting the little people upside down?"



Li Xiong had blurted it out offhandedly. Now that Ding Tao was asking, he racked his brain to recall Lei Changming's life. Memories flashed through his mind. "That is, lifting children upside down. Lei Changming loved to do things like this." He suddenly remembered something. "Oh! I remember it now! Earring... round and white earrings. The children Lei Changming hung upside down wore them too!"



Shen Zechuan planned to head out after his meal. As he was changing his outer clothes, he heard Ding Tao and Li Xiong running around the courtyard, yelling and screaming. The maidservant retreated with a bow to the door and was about to instruct them not to make a din when Shen Zechuan looked back and said, "It's fine. Let them play."

Qiao Tianya originally wanted to put his zither on the small table under the eaves, but on seeing this, he feared the two kids would recklessly crash into it while they were playing and damage it, so he sent it back to his own room.

When Shen Zechuan was leaving the courtyard, Ding Tao followed behind him, looking as if he wanted to say something. But seeing that it was already late, he swallowed back his words and said as he stuck to the moon gate. "If it gets dark, I'll go over with a lantern and wait for you."

Shen Zechuan beckoned to Ding Tao. Once the latter walked over, he said, "After your meal later, head over to Grandpa's courtyard. He wants to teach you the Twenty-four Stances of the Ji Clan. I'll be back by the first quarter at the hour of *hai*<sup>3</sup> at the latest."

Ding Tao nodded and saw Shen Zechuan to the door, feeling a little loath to part with him. He had heard a bunch of stories in the afternoon. He did not know if Li Xiong was lying to him or if it was all real. It was almost dark now, and he was a little afraid too. As soon as Shen Zechuan left, he hurriedly brought Li Xiong over to look for Ji Gang. There were still quite the number of guards and the Imperial Bodyguards staying in that courtyard. With more people around, he was not afraid anymore.

Shen Zechuan arrived at the Zhou's residence. The study was brightly lit, with several advisors sitting within. The summer night was warm, and the windows on all three sides of the study were open. They had also lit incense to repel mosquitoes. The room felt stuffy when it got crowded. Kong Ling feared that Shen Zechuan would feel uncomfortable, so he had the doors kept wide open.

“These are the grains that have been counted today. Vice Commander, please look it over.” Zhou Gui presented the book to Shen Zechuan and said from his seat, “The autumn harvest is just around the corner. The way we see it, this is the most appropriate time to discuss business with Chazhou.”

“During autumn in the past, the company of traveling merchants from Hezhou and Juexi has to pass through Zhongbo to head for the area where Libei’s and the Huiyan Tribe’s mutual trade market is to deal in goods. However, the war is intense this year, and with this business undoable, they will most likely head for Chazhou to make up for it.” Kong Ling lifted his robe slightly and sat down. “If we were to fall behind them, then no matter how cheap we sell the grains when the time comes, Chazhou will not have the money to buy. So this matter has to be done as soon as possible.”

“That’s the thing.” Shen Zechuan looked over the quantity of grains carefully and said, “This matter is the most important right now. If all goes smoothly, life in Cizhou will be better next year. No such trade was made in the past, so the merchants from Juexi and Hezhou could not have anticipated it, but they should more or less get wind of it when our men go over to discuss business. This involves us getting a slice of their pie; they might not necessarily be willing.”

“That’s the hard thing.” Zhou Gui chimed in. “Leaving aside the question of whether the negotiations with Chazhou’s prefectural prefect and the bandits can go smoothly, we have to rack our brains just to guard against the others. Our Cizhou’s garrison troop has been established for less than a month. The military drill ground isn’t ready, and the soldiers are still untrained. If the others were to have designs on the grains and plot against us, we wouldn’t be able to win against them.”

Shen Zechuan had been waiting for a few days for Zhou Gui to say these words. He closed the book and tapped soundlessly on it with his finger. “Cizhou has no commanding general at present. You gentlemen and I are not well-versed in the art of training soldiers. However, the Imperial Army left some soldiers and horses behind at Beiyuan Hunting Grounds to keep guard. If Your Excellency is willing, why not let them train the garrison troops first? We have to come to an agreement with Chazhou first before we give them the grains. Has the negotiator been decided? I’ll get Qiao Tianya to lead the Imperial Bodyguards and escort him for protection.”

Zhou Gui looked at Kong Ling before looking back. “I can’t leave Cizhou, so I can only send Chengfeng over and assign some clerks who can do the accounts to tag along. If the Vice Commander is willing to dispatch some men to protect them, that’d be really for the best.”

Zhou Gui did not understand, but Kong Ling understood it perfectly well. He composed himself and said to Shen Zechuan, “But I’m a greenhorn when it comes to doing business, and I feel very apprehensive not knowing if there are experts there... so I’d like to ask the Vice Commander to bestow upon me an ingenious stratagem I can bring along.”

Shen Zechuan smiled and said, “Mister Chengfeng, you are too modest. Where on earth would I have an ingenious stratagem? If it’s permissible, I’ll go with Mister Chengfeng on this trip.”

How would Zhou Gui dare to let Shen Zechuan venture deep into the tiger’s den where dangers lurked? Xiao Chiye “hasten over within a day” was still echoing in his ears! He hurriedly said, “The Vice Commander is \_\_\_”

Kong Ling was already making his bow and expressing his gratitude. “I feel reassured with the Vice Commander around.”

This man really knows how it is done.

Shen Zechuan looked at Kong Ling with a gentle expression.

Truly too clever.



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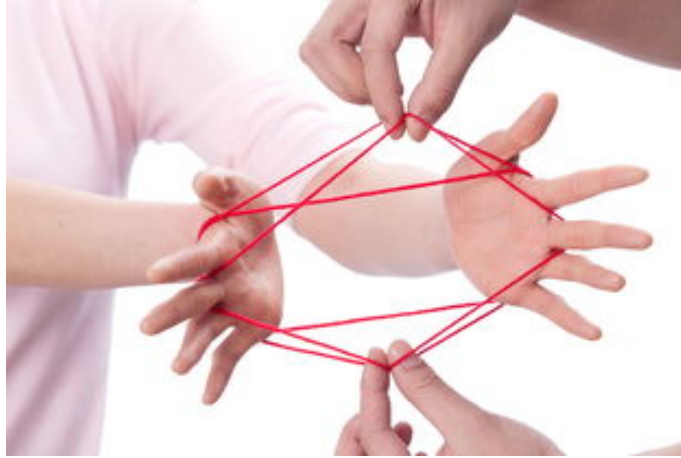
If you like this story, consider supporting the author!

SPECIAL THANKS TO : [Ami](#), [Eggy](#)<3

Footnotes



2. 太师椅 *Taishi* Chair or Grand Preceptor Chair, is a classical style of a wooden armchair in ancient China.



- 3.
4. Cat's cradle, a game which involves making string figures with the hands.
5. 亥时 9-11 pm, based on the system of two-hour subdivisions used in former times

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 131 : SPIDER WEB



It was already the end of the sixth month, so the departure date was scheduled for the seventh month. After Shen Zechuan left, the advisors withdrew from the room, and Zhou Gui asked Kong Ling, “Why did you insist on letting the Vice Commander go? It’s complete chaos in Chazhou. If the Vice Commander were to meet with mishap, there would be no way Cizhou could explain it to the marquis. I was initially thinking of getting you to go and have yourselves disguised as merchants during the journey. We are still on friendly terms enough to negotiate with Luo Mu, the prefectural prefect of Chazhou.”

Kong Lin poured tea and nodded when he heard him. After swallowing it, he replied, “We can still disguise as merchants with the Vice Commander going, and there are Imperial Bodyguards going along too. It’s much safer than our own plan.”

Zhou Gui pointed at Kong Ling and said, “You’re generally smart as a rule, but this time you’re a fool. With the Vice Commander’s... appearance, how can he disguise as a merchant? Those sharp-eyed ones can tell something off at just a glance.”

Kong Ling looked at Zhou Gui for a moment with tea leaves in his mouth. He felt that Zhou Gui really did not understand, so he said, “You’re truly an honest one. Let me ask you, from the rebuilding of Cizhou’s garrison troops to the planning of our business in Chazhou, which one of them is not a proposal of the Vice Commander? Cizhou has been truly benefiting from him, but there are no free meals in this world.”

Zhou Gui said, “I don’t understand? I do! We currently can’t afford to recompense them for military expenses; that’s why we are supplying the Imperial Army with grains and giving them Beiyuan Hunting Grounds. Doesn’t this more or less repay our debt to them? Cizhou is also doing its best to repay the Vice Commander for his kindness to Cizhou.”

Kong Ling swallowed the tea leaves he had chewed on until bitter. “We can’t repay it now, and all the more we can’t repay it in the future. The marquis repelled the bandits from Mount Luo, leaving plenty of time for Cizhou to rebuild itself. We currently can’t even afford to supply half a year’s worth of grains for the 20,000 Imperial Army soldiers. We did give

them the Beiyuan Hunting Grounds, and I'm telling you, that will be the Imperial Army's camp-cum-drill grounds in the future. No matter how we try to draw a line between them and us on our end, Cizhou already belongs to the Imperial Army in the eyes of others. Moreover, once the business in Chazhou gets moving, how are you going to repay the Vice Commander for this bonus? Also, the Vice Commander said he's going to assign Qiao Tianya to protect me, but who is Qiao Tianya? He's the former Imperial Bodyguard Vice Commander in Qudu; his rank is way higher than you if you were to compare. When we enter the capital in previous years, we not only have to get off our sedans to pay our obeisances to him when we see him, we also have to move aside to make way for him. The Vice Commander assigned him to protect me, but how is a mere commoner like me worthy of receiving such a favor? And between him and me, who exactly will be in charge when we reach Chazhou? Yet you still agreed to it so readily! That's why I said you are truly an honest one."

Zhou Gui had never been an official before. He was already holding office in Zhongbo right from the start. His teacher was also his superior and benefactor. Zhou Gui served as a Tax Circuit Intendant under him. He did a good job of it, and he was a man of knowledge too. His teacher valued talents, and so he betrothed his daughter to Zhou Gui. As such, Zhou Gui was spared a lot of the nastiness that took place in the official circles. He was later promoted to the position of Cizhou's Prefectural Prefect based on his qualification and experiences. Before the defeat of the Zhongbo's troops, his career had been pretty much smooth-sailing. He was not like Liang Cuishan and the rest who were trampled upon by the officials from the noble clans in Qudu. He never had to endure that kind of hardship, so he truly did not understand much of that circuitous and convoluted stuff.

Zhou Gui was stupefied on hearing this. He said hesitantly, "I am worried too. I have to worry about your safety when you head over with the others to discuss business. The garrison troop is recently established, and the Imperial Army has left. The only ones at present who can be of use are the Imperial Bodyguards by the Vice Commander's side."

Kong Ling said, "Initially, when the Vice Commander said he wanted to remain in Cizhou, it was because we could not trust the Imperial Army then. Before the marquis left, you and I no longer harbor the same doubt, but the Vice Commander still stayed behind. To Cizhou, he is 'the rain that

bedews all things in silence'.<sup>1</sup> I fear he has already planned it all before entering Cizhou. It's too late for you and me to realize it now."

After getting along with Xiao Chiye these days, Zhou Gui felt that Xiao Chiye was hard to speak to, but he was very efficient when it came to handling matters, and he showed others the respect due to them. He was someone who laid his cards on the table. However, Shen Zechuan was different. Shen Zechuan sat in the seat of honor when he discussed matters with them, yet he treated all those advisors courteously and even respectfully addressed Kong Ling as "Mister Chengfeng". He was open to discussion when an issue cropped up, thereby giving the others the impression that he was a humble and unassuming person who showed respect for the learned. Zhou Gui's wariness of him had already vanished over time.

Zhou Gui stood up, his hands still grasping his robe. He was rendered speechless for a long time. No matter how obtuse he was, he understood it now. Shen Zechuan had been going all out to help them all because he saw Cizhou as good as his. He said in a daze, "If the Vice Commander... is willing to restore Cizhou to its former glory, then I wouldn't mind giving this prefectural prefect position to him."

Kong Ling looked out into the night. A gray moth, attracted by the light from the study, pounced towards the side of the eaves, only to barge into the spider web concealed between the upturned eaves.

After a moment of silence, Kong Ling said, "Zhou Gui, it's time to dispense with the title 'prefectural prefect'. With Hai Liangyi's death, the moderates in Qudu have come under attack by the students. There is no longer anyone who can maintain the peace in Dazhou on his own. The empire is falling apart. If Qudu is the 'deer',<sup>2</sup> then Cizhou is the 'rabbit'. Without the wolf and fox to guarantee our safety, Cizhou will be the 'meat' in the eyes of the jackals in Qudu, and you and I are powerless against them."

Zhou Gui and Kong Ling were fellow students in their youth. They had many years of friendship between them, and Zhou Gui had rarely seen him so solemn. Thus, he said, "I know how much care and thought you have expended on it. All I ask is that the Vice Commander will live up to our expectations today and won't let us down... I'm afraid of such a person."

Kong Ling remembered the night when he met Lei Changming. Shen Zechuan had simply changed on a whim, chatting with a smile while

surrounded by sharp blades all around. He spoke so genuinely, and even the expression in his eyes was sincere. Not only had Lei Changming believed him, but even Kong Ling himself had also believed the act. It was precisely after that incident that Kong Ling began to size up the man, Shen Zechuan.

Kong Ling retracted his gaze and said with a slightly troubled heart, "I stood out too much tonight and is already considered to have crossed the line. I fear the Vice Commander will remember this. I'm your advisor, and I shouldn't have shown off before the Vice Commander... I should watch myself in the future."



While both of them were having an in-depth discussion in the study, Shen Zechuan returned to his residence. Ji Gang was already resting, so Shen Zechuan did not send someone over to disturb him and simply returned to his own courtyard. He crossed the veranda and saw Fei Sheng still on night duty in the courtyard, keeping guard with his men.

It was only when Shen Zechuan went into his room that Fei Sheng relaxed a little. Qiao Tianya shared some of his remaining tobacco with Fei Sheng. When he saw the light in the main room extinguished after a while, he got the men to put out the lanterns in the courtyard as well.

"It's hard for Master to fall asleep without the marquis here." Qiao Tianya stood under the tree and said in a hushed tone. "And his sleep is fitful too. So if you hear any noise in the second half of the night, don't let anyone enter and disturb him."

The gears in Fei Sheng's head turned, and he knew what was up. He shifted the pipe away and puffed out a breath into the night. "Understood. The Chashi Sinkhole is a nightmare. Thanks."

Qiao Tianya, however, did not smoke his pipe. He braced an arm on the tree trunk and listened to the croaks of the frogs in the pond for a moment. "You've been idle for so long. Master finds it a pity for you to be a guard. There are two missions. I'll get *shifu* to hand you the authority token tomorrow morning."

Fei Sheng understood very well that Shen Zechuan wanted to use him, but did not intend to keep him close by. At least, he would not be able to replace Qiao Tianya. He smoked in silence for a moment, then knocked the pipe a few times, and answered with a smile, "Sure, I look forward to it. But give me a hint. What missions?"



Qiao Tianya looked at Fei Sheng and said, "Keep track and record.<sup>3</sup> Easy-peasy."

Fei Sheng probed, "And the other one?"

"Investigate both men from the Lei clan, especially Lei Changming. Report every detail of his life to Master." Qiao Tianya smiled. "It's truly a waste of talent to hand this task to you. Actually, Ding Tao works fine too, but he's too young, and I fear he has no sense of priority when it comes to carrying out the task, so you are still needed. You're an expert when it comes to this. How about it?"

Fei Sheng smiled too. He nodded and said, "As long as it's Master's instructions, there's nothing that can't be done."

Qiao Tianya went on. "On my end, there's another matter that I'd like your help with."

Fei Sheng twirled his pipe. "You and I are brothers, so no need to stand on ceremony. What is it?"

Qiao Tianya retracted his arm and said, "I'd like you to check the whereabouts of a person for me when you send someone out to keep track of the prices."

Fei Sheng took note of it and cast a few glances at Qiao Tianya. "Who?"

Qiao Tianya answered, "Yao Wenyu."



It was in the dead of night, and the Imperial Army had yet to rest.

Wu Ziyu was drinking milk tea with Chen Yang. The military medic applied medicine for him, and he simply squatted on the ground and asked Chen Yang, "What exactly does the Second Young Master intend to do?"

As Chen Yang sorted out the name registers of military craftsmen in the Bianbo Camp, he said, "It's Master who has the final say. Why ask me?"

Wu Ziyu said, "You and I are old acquaintances. Can't you just give me a little hint here?"

Chen Yang compiled the name registers and looked at Wu Ziyu, unruffled. "If you want to have a personal chat, we will drink and dine here. If you want to discuss military affairs, I'd first have to address you as the battalion general. What am I supposed to answer you when you mix personal and official affairs together?"

Wu Ziyu put on his clothes and said, "Well then, I'll lay it all out clearly for you. The Second Young Master wants to head over to the east to

fight the invaded Shasan Camp. I don't think it's workable. It can't be done. The current Libei Armored Cavalry in Bianbo Camp is my squad. We are not the vanguards; we are the transportation escort squad between battlefields. We can still play with the Liaoying Tribe, but if we have to fight the Hanshe Tribe... then I'm sorry, I'll retreat with my men right away."

Chen Yang nodded. "Excuse my inability to escort you farther."

Wu Ziyu clicked his tongue. With a look of impatience, he asked, "What do you mean by this?"

Chen Yang set aside the name registers and said, "If you say these words to my Master, this is how he will answer you too. If you want to leave, then sure, just go."

Wu Ziyu said, "When I talk about leaving, it's not because I'm afraid of fighting a battle with the Hanshe Tribe, but because I can't afford to fight a battle against them at present. Why throw an egg against a rock and court defeat by fighting against overwhelming odds? The battle steeds and military craftsmen from the Bianbo Camp are valuable resources for Libei. What good will it do to waste more time here with those Bianbo people? Send them on to the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path as soon as possible, and we will have reinforcements from the Three Great Training Divisions of Liuyang. It won't be too late to turn back again then."

"Won't be too late." Xiao Chiye just so happened to lift the curtain. He stooped over to enter, then wiped away the water on his hands. "How did you come to this conclusion? Tell me about it."

As soon as Xiao Chiye entered, Wu Ziyu felt it growing darker in the tent. The military medic packed his medicine case, bowed in farewell to Xiao Chiye, and withdrew from the tent.

Feeling somewhat embarrassed, Wu Ziyu did not dare to continue looking at Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye tossed the handkerchief to Chen Yang and made his way over to sit by the stove. There was still milk tea being kept warm on it. It had been a long time since Xiao Chiye had last drank it. Gu Jin came over from behind and poured a bowl for Xiao Chiye.

Silence descended in the tent, and Wu Ziyu felt unaccustomed and uncomfortable. Even when he erred in Xiao Jiming's presence, it was not as oppressive as being in Xiao Chiye's presence.

Xiao Chiye drank a mouthful and asked Wu Ziyu, “Any more fresh milk?”

Wu Ziyu shook his head hastily and said, “No, just this one pot, and this one was specially kept for the Bianbo Camp to satisfy its cravings.”

“How about plain tea?”

Wu Ziyu answered in the affirmative and said, “How would we not have something to perk ourselves up? There are plenty of tea leaves in the granary. If you like it, I’ll get someone to pack some for you.”

Xiao Chiye propped up his elbow and looked at Wu Ziyu. “Even if you stand here all night, I’ll still leave before dawn tomorrow morning. You run at the sight of an attack. Aren’t you people the Libei Armored Cavalry?”

This was the second time Wu Ziyu heard Xiao Chiye say “you people the Libei Armored Cavalry”. He was fuming inside. He endured it for a moment and was just about to say a word when Xiao Chiye spoke up. “Go pack some. Gu Jin, seal it in the case later and send someone to deliver it to Cizhou tomorrow morning. While you are at it, tell Lanzhou that all is well.”

How would Wu Ziyu know who “Lanzhou” was? The way he heard it from Xiao Chiye’s tone, Xiao Chiye wasn’t taking the war seriously; instead, he was thinking of gifting tea to someone else. Unable to bear it, he blurted out, “Second Young Master—”

“When we are talking about military affairs, I’m not the ‘Second Young Master’; I am the Viceroy of the Imperial Army, Xiao Ce’an. I asked if you are the Libei Armored Cavalry, and not once did you answer me in the affirmative. Libei doesn’t have an independent ‘transportation escort squad’ in Libei; it only has the Libei Armored Cavalry. Your soldiers ride the same battle steeds at the vanguards and are equipped with the same long sword<sup>4</sup> as the vanguards.” Xiao Chiye stared at Wu Ziyu, drank up the milk tea, and said in a slightly mocking tone, “Is this all a commanding general of Libei has to offer?”



**Author Words:** (Lianyin’s addon in brackets)

Six Prefectures of Zhongbo: Cizhou, Dunzhou, Duanzhou, Dengzhou, Chazhou, Fanzhou

Eight Cities of Qudu: Quancheng, Dancheng, Chuncheng, Chuancheng, Dicheng, Jincheng, Wucheng, Cuo Cheng

Five Commanderries of Qidong: Cangjun, Chijun, Cejun, Chujun, Bianjun

Huaizhou is located behind Luoxia Pass, northwest of Quancheng. Hezhou is south of the military grounds on Mount Feng, the outskirts of which can be connected to the mountain ranges where Suotian Pass is. (Probably a typo. It's Tianfei Watchtower on the map :V) Although these two are called "prefectures", they are not under Zhongbo's jurisdiction. For reference, please refer to the military grains case in book 1.

Yuzhou is in Juexi, along with Baimazhou, Qinzhou, and the Thirteen Cities, including two great harbors/ports.

So far, the tribes from the Twelve Tribes of Biansha that have made their appearances are: Liaoying (Eagle), Gouma (Horse), Hanshe (Snake), Changjiu (Vulture)

Referring to chapter 43 of book 1, the Huiyan Tribe that Ce'an first mentioned has already defected to Dazhou. It's a small tribe that's active around the fringe of the mutual trade market.

The Libei's Camps that have appeared thus far are: Changzhu, Bianbo, Shayi (Sand #1), Sha'er (Sand #2), Shasan (Sand #3), Three Great Training Divisions of Liuyang.

I'll draw a more detailed map for everyone when I have the time. (NOTE: you can refer to the audio drama map [HERE](#).)

Thank you for reading.

### **Support the Author!**

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**Special Thanks to:** [Peach](#) for the correction!

### Footnotes

1. 润物细无声 from Spring Rain (春夜喜雨) Du Fu (杜甫), a distinguished poet of the Tang Dynasty who is widely regarded as an undisputed genius of Chinese poetry. In Tang Poetry, spring rain is seen as gentle and crucial for the spring sowing season by moistening the soil, which in turn helps germination and thus, bringing hope and life, and it does this gently and quietly, almost unnoticed.

2. Deer is also a metaphor for the throne, as in 「秦失其鹿，天下共逐之」 from Records of the Grand Historian • Biography of Marquis Huaiyin 《史记·淮阴侯列传》
3. To recap (chapter 85), “keep track and record” was to have the Imperial Bodyguards record all minor and major matters in a book, including the prices of grains, rice, noodles, and tea



- 4.
5. Specifically a changdao, or a two-handed, single-edged Chinese sword.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 132 : TROOPS ADVANCE



When Wu Ziyu ran from the battle site to Bianbo Camp, he passed by Shasan Camp and also went to Changzhu Camp. However, in the eyes of the commanding generals from these battle camps, he was not considered a “commanding general”. He was only good for grain delivery during discussions relating to military affairs. When the Hanshe Tribe launched a sudden assault on the Libei’s mutual trade market in the eighth year of Xiande, the fastest squad to respond to the enemy attack was the transportation escort squad led by Wu Ziyu. That was the one and only battle he had ever fought.

“You are the commanding general of Bianbo Camp now that the main forces of the Bianbo Camp have been dispatched into battle up north. The Imperial Army currently wants to scout for news of the Shasan Camp, and I hope to have the assistance of the Bianbo Camp.” Xiao Chiye set down his bowl and continued, “It’s obvious that the Liaoying Tribe’s surprise attack this time has been planned for a long time. Cut off access to the Shasan Camp’s horse track, and the Bianbo Camp will lose its source of information in addition to its protective barrier. It’s indeed true that you can ensure the safety of the supplies by retreating this moment, but the site of battle – with Shayi Camp as the boundary line – will completely end up surrounded by the Biansha people on both sides. No matter how many people there are in Zhao Hui’s Three Great Training Divisions of Liuyang, they will still have to split up and assign a team to bypass Dajing and head for the battle site in the northeast as long-distance reinforcement. By then, even if there are supplies left, all the frontline troops will have been wiped out.”

Xiao Jiming chose to use Bianbo Camp as a supply site because it had horse tracks directly connecting it to Shasan Camp and Northeast Provisions Bridle Path. It could swiftly provide supplies, as well as rapidly send in troops for reinforcement. Once this place was gone, Xiao Fangxu, who was still on the frontlines, would be cut off from his backup forces. There were no direct connecting horse tracks leading to the northeast from the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path. Zhao Hui would have to take a detour, which would still take four days at the earliest. In these four days, Xiao

Fangxu would have to face the Hanshe Tribe to the east and the Liaoying Tribe to the south without reinforcements and supplies. The Biansha men could just deploy the tactics of taking turns to fight them, and it would have been sufficient to wear down Xiao Fangxu's elite forces, who were already exhausted from the long battle.

Wu Ziyu's fury had already been extinguished. He stood in silence for a moment before saying, "The Three Great Training Divisions of Liuyang under Zhao Hui's command is one of the Libei Armored Cavalry's elite forces. The Liaoying Tribe that has launched a sudden assault here won't be able to stop him. He can abandon the faraway route in the northeast and head over to the battle site from this place."

"The Three Great Training Divisions of Liuyang, as the cream of the crop in Libei, have exchanged the most blows with the Hanshe Tribe. Amu'er's understanding of them won't be inferior to your and my understanding of them. You know that Zhou Hui can forcibly break out of the encirclement and rush to the battlefield from here, so Amu'er should have also thought of it at the start of the surprise attack. Today was such a good opportunity for a sudden assault, and yet he only sent the Liaoying Tribe over. Guess what he's thinking?"

Wu Ziyu's expression gradually turned dark.

Of the thirty-six stratagems,<sup>1</sup> there was a stratagem called "letting the adversaries off in order to snare them". Wu Ziyu's squad encountered a surprise attack today at the Bianbo Camp, and in the midst of the crisis, his guard rushed on to the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path with the supplies. By the time Zhao Hui received this batch of crucial supplies, it would have already been too late. Reinforcement from afar was the most inadvisable and unwise. So he could only turn his attention back to the seized Bianbo Camp and make the corresponding adjustments to his strategy based on the number of soldiers from the Liaoying Tribe as provided by the guard. Once he came, it was very likely that Amu'er would have already withdrawn the Liaoying Tribe and replaced them with the Biansha's elite cavalry to lie in wait here. Zhao Hui would then be up against an all-out assault from Amu'er.

Win or lose, Zhou Hui would be held up at the Bianbo Camp, and Xiao Fangxu, over at the site of battle, would be wholly stranded without reinforcement. Amu'er simply understood the Libei Armored Cavalry all too well.

“Zhao Hui can’t come. We can’t win either. The army provisions on the battle site are rapidly depleting. His Lordship is still going to have to fight an arduous battle in a few days.” Wu Ziyu walked over to the shelf, pulled down the map, and spread it out forcefully on the ground. “Shasan Camp is close to Sha’er Camp. When Amu’er launches a sudden assault up north when the time comes, it’ll be His Lordship’s back that he’s attacking.”

Tantai Hu was done washing up and walked in barefooted with his robe hanging off him. When he saw them gathering around the map, he squatted at one side to look too.

“What are we to do?” Wu Ziyu lifted his eyes and looked at Xiao Chiye. “We’ll lose if we advance, and we’ll lose if we retreat. Any move we make will be within Amu’er expectation.”

Tantai Hu touched the scar – caused by a blade – on his face and said, “Not really. He doesn’t know about the Imperial Army. We are the troops he couldn’t have anticipated.” He pointed to Shasan Camp. “This place is close to Mount Luo in Zhongbo, where bandits abound. The Liaoying Tribe must have had the help of the bandits to be able to evade Libei Armored Cavalry’s eagle patrol and bring along heavy equipment – that is, the stone catapults – around to the south of Bianbo Camp to launch a sneak attack. I don’t know much about all these devious schemes, but there’s something the Vice... Young Master said that makes sense.”

Xiao Chiye raised his eyebrows slightly. “What did Lanzhou say?”

“Smart people don’t do redundant things.” Tantai Hu’s expression turned grave. “Why would Amu’er go to all the trouble of stopping Zhao Hui? If it has been going smoothly for him in his battle with His Lordship at the battle site, why would he need to split up his forces and send them here?”

Xiao Chiye bent over slightly and looked at the map. As he twirled his thumb ring, he said, “That’s right. Making such plans shows that Amu’er is having a hard time on the battlefield too. It’s already the seventh month now. If the war drags on beyond autumn without any progress, Amu’er will have to face the bitter coldness of winter. All the Biansha grain reserves this year have been delivered to the battlefield. The longer the war drags on, the more unfavorable it will be for Biansha.”

Wu Ziyu remembered something.

It just so happened Xiao Chiye spoke up. “After my eldest brother was injured, Amu’er changed the battle strategy he has been using these few



years. When I was in Cizhou, I heard that the Biansha Cavalry had already fought their way to the Tudalong Banner. In the past, their cavalry always fled after a fight, yet it wasn't the case this time. Not only did they not run, they even advanced in full force. Amu'er has already lost his patience back in the desert. He's progressively encroaching upon Libei, trying to occupy our grasslands and camps. It can be seen just from this point alone that Bianbo Camp is vital. If we lose this place, Libei will have to take a big step back. Shasan Camp will soon fall, and our so-called line of defenses in the east will completely collapse. But if we can hold on to Bianbo Camp, we will be able to give Father some breathing space to recharge himself. With him at the site of battle, Amu'er will not be able to shift this boundary line even the slightest."

At this point, Xiao Chiye pointed out Bianbo Camp's location to Wu Ziyu.

"You just have to hang in there until the first snowfall of this year, and you'll deal a heavy blow to Amu'er. No matter what, we cannot lose Bianbo Camp. Mark a north-south boundary line here. We can only pull forward; we must never retreat again."

Wu Ziyu said, "Since Amu'er wants to trap Zhao Hui's Three Great Training Divisions of Liuyang here, how can we stop him with the 25,000 men we have at present? Shasan Camp is a key strategic point. If Amu'er had the Hanshe Tribe stationed there to guard it, then all the more we will have no chance to launch a counterattack."

Xiao Chiye retracted his arm and thought for a moment. "The Biansha Cavalry is already used to the passive rhythm of the Libei Armored Cavalry. Amu'er dared to place such a bet because he was sure that the troops in Bianbo Camp would not dare to head east and launch a sudden assault arbitrarily. Their surprise attack troops were caught off-guard. Going by the distance, they will retreat to Shasan Camp only tomorrow morning. If we set off before dawn, we will arrive at the border of Shasan Camp just at the time when they are resting."

Wu Ziyu shifted the legs on which he was squatting and looked at the map without a word for a long time. It was only when his legs went numb that he hardened his heart and decided. "If you have made up your mind to go, we can let you use the remaining battle steeds in Bianbo Camp."

"The Imperial Army isn't a cavalry, and so has no need for battle steeds. Besides, the battle steeds of Libei are too heavy, and they make quite

a commotion when they run. They aren't suitable for launching a surprise attack." Xiao Chiye swept his gaze around to look at Tantai Hu, Chen Yang, and Gu Jin. Finally, he said to Wu Ziyu, "Let the Imperial Army say hello to Amu'er this time."



Before dawn the next day, the Imperial Army set off.

Although Gu Jin was still injured, he still assumed the position of a scout. Tantai Hu followed Xiao Chiye, and only Chen Yang was left behind in the Bianbo Camp. Wu Ziyu did not understand, but seeing as Chen Yang had no complaints about it, he did not probe further.

Dew was still visible at this time. The Imperial Army had only been walking among the grassy fields for a short moment, and already their armors were wet with dew. They did not follow the horse track, but the path the Liaoying Tribe took when they retreated.

"This place isn't that far away from Zhongbo's borders. Master, why isn't there a relay station arranged here?" Tantai Hu looked south and said, "Cross this grassland and run for a day and a night, and you'll be at Mount Luo."

"The defenses of the Libei Armored Cavalry are all set up with the Biansha Cavalry in mind." Xiao Chiye looked for a moment with his blade at his side. "The bandits did not dare to go this way before. But times are different now."

"Whoever throws in their lots with the Biansha baldies are fucking bastards." Tantai Hu said hatefully as he plucked at the grass.

The speed at which the Imperial Army advanced was not slow, and it was already afternoon when they arrived within range of the Shasan Camp.

Gu Jin lay prone among the grass and remained still for a long time. Tantai Hu followed suit and waited for a moment, but he could see nothing of interest ahead, so he asked, "What do you see?"

Gu Jin reached out his hand to brush aside the grass and said, "Wu Ziyu is right. There is cavalry from the Hanshe Tribe in Shasan Camp; the horse dung is fresh. And they have set up patrols around the camp with far more vigilance than the Bianbo Camp."

Then Gu Jin turned over and squinted up at the sky.

"No whistles, and no saker falcons. The Liaoying Tribe that carried out a sneak attack on Bianbo Camp yesterday was indeed just a front."

“This isn’t a good place to fight a battle.” Tantai Hu said. “The camp site has an open view, and it’s all grassy fields. There will be nowhere for us to hide if we go any closer.”

“This is the Shasan Camp.” Gu Jin felt for the tobacco in his robe and stuffed it outright into his mouth to chew on. “Not only will we have no place to hide, but there are also iron spikes<sup>2</sup> on the outskirts of the camp, and defensive barriers<sup>3</sup> set up in the front and at the back. All four corners have a watchtower too.”

“How about going through the ditch?” Tantai Hu looked back and said softly to Xiao Chiye. “They still have to eat, drink, shit, and take a piss.”

Xiao Chiye did not answer, and Gu Jin looked a little embarrassed. He lowered his head and lay low among the grass, saying in an even softer voice, “There were indeed ditches that lead out in the past. Didn’t Master use this move to take down the Biansha soldiers during the battle at the eastern mountain ranges? The Hereditary Prince felt this to be a loophole and so sealed off the various camps’ ditches upon returning.”

Tantai Hu wordlessly shut his mouth and lay low too.

The advancing troops’ selection of a site to set up camp was very important, and the latrine was the most important of all. Generally, filthy ditches like this could not be close to the army provisions and the tents for dwelling. It had to be deep, or lead out. As a commonly used camp, a ditch that led out was naturally the most convenient for the Shasan Camp. But Xiao Chiye previously dug his way into the Biansha Camp with just a small number of cavalry and fought from within the Biansha Tribes until the Biansha Tribes were utterly routed. This left a deep impression on Xiao Jiming. In order to play it safe, the ditches of Libei’s military camps were reconstructed into deep ditches with wastes to be disposed of on a fixed schedule. Who would have known that such a change would instead go on to be a problem for Xiao Chiye a few years later?

How were they to fight now?

Xiao Chiye looked at the sky and said, “No worries... I have a way.”



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Footnotes

1. 三十六计 a Chinese essay used to illustrate a series of stratagems used in politics and war.



- 2.
3. 铁蒺藜 Specifically caltrops, a four-spiked iron ball or four joined spikes laid upon the ground as a device to lame cavalry horses, etc.



- 4.
5. 拒马 Specifically chevaux-de-frise. I have no idea what this term is in English, and it seems weird to have them suddenly spouting French lmfao. It's a portable barrier of spikes, sword blades, etc, used to obstruct the passage of cavalry.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 133: NINE YEARS



At the third quarter of the hour of *you*,<sup>1</sup> the sun made its descent in the west.

At this time, Huhelu<sup>2</sup> was having his meal. He was the Biansha commanding general who launched a surprise attack at the southeastern camp of Libei. He was born in the Changjiu Tribe, and at almost forty years of age, he was in the prime of his life. After Amu'er took command of the four tribes, Huhelu not only became Amu'er's adopted son, but also a capable general under Amu'er's command. Coincidentally, he was also the one who led the squad Xiao Chiye launched a sudden assault on nine years ago at the eastern mountain ranges.

Huhelu was an irascible and narrow-minded man, but he was also quite resourceful and knew when to advance and retreat in a war. Guo Weili had previously suffered in his hands. Both men had hurled insults and spat spittle at the other on the battlefield more than once. The reason Amu'er had transferred Huhelu to the southeast was because the Tudalong Banner had already been captured, and also because Huhelu was a fearsome one when it came to military field operations. He once had Guo Weili surrounded in the swamp for a day and a night, routing Guo Weili's main forces and sending the morale of the Changzhu Camp plunging.

"The Hero wants me to treat the Libei military craftsmen well, but these people won't yield at all. It's a waste of food to keep feeding them." Huhelu stripped the mutton flesh clean from its bone and said to his vice general in the language of the desert. "I'm thinking of transporting away all the equipment and food here and slaughtering off this batch of military craftsmen. The Changjiu Tribe still has some remaining troops in the east that can temporarily hold the supplies for the Hero."

"Before you left, the Hero specifically instructed you not to hurt the military craftsmen." The vice-general, Bayin, was a man with a dark complexion. He was no longer young, but as he was a follower of Huhelu, he never had the chance to be promoted. He faced Huhelu and tried to persuade him, "The Hero has high regards for this batch of military craftsmen. Don't infuriate him."

Huhelu threw the dagger in his hands onto the tray and grabbed a handkerchief to wipe his hands. He got up and looked out through the gap of the tent flap that had been hung up.

“But they infuriate me.” Huhelu bent over slightly and looked askance at the bound military craftsmen detained outside in the open field. “You understand the language of Dazhou too. They called me a butcher of the eastern mountain ranges, and they even want to screw my mother.”

Bayin said, “They have been exposed to the sun for four days without food and water. Even the saker falcons of the Liaoying Tribe have to consume meat at this point in time in order to survive. It is said in Dazhou’s Art of War that if you want to make them submit, you should not only make them feel fear, but also gratitude. You have already made them afraid, so you can give them water and food next, untie them, and show them concern with a pleasant countenance. Then they will be grateful to you and to the Hero too.”

Huhelu stroked his short stubble and did as advised. But they overturned the water he sent them, and the curses continued until the hour of *hai*.<sup>3</sup> Huhelu could not sleep well. He decided to abandon the Dazhou way and use his own method, so he ordered his men to skin the military craftsmen who had made noises and had them hung up on the pole rack before the open space.

“Xiao Fangxu doesn’t have enough to eat at the site of battle.” Standing in the open space, Huhelu gestured at his belly with his hands and said in the language of Dazhou, “How can he fight a war on an empty stomach? You people are so fat. It’s a win-win situation if I have your meat delivered to him after air-drying them.”

Huhelu whipped all those people to teach them a lesson. Military craftsmen who could not fight war were worthless in his eyes. He even felt that it was a kind of a burden to be retaining these military craftsmen. Only by killing them as soon as possible would they be done with the matter once and for all. He hung up the head of the commanding general of the Shasan Camp on the watchtower and slaughtered all the captured battle steeds. If not for his fear of Amu’er, he would not have remained in the Shasan Camp to await orders. He had already defeated the Shasan Camp; he wanted to charge forward and be the first among the Twelve Tribes of Biansha to breach the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path.

Silence reigned supreme all around at the third quarter of the hour of *chou*.<sup>4</sup>

The Liaoying Tribe did not succeed in their sneak attack of the Bianbo Camp yesterday, which sent Huhelu flying into a rage. As punishment, the squad from the Liaoying Tribe was deprived of food and sleep; they even had to take the night watch. The soldier standing on the watchtower was already so exhausted and sleepy that his eyes glazed over.

The night sky was presently quiet and still, with only a gentle breeze blowing in the air. The soldier on the watchtower rubbed his eyes. Under the faint light of the torches, he saw the grass a distance away from the camp stir in the wind. The walls of the Shasan Camp were high and strong. Limited by the location of the watchtower, the soldier could not see the movements at the foot of the city walls. As the soldier yawned, he heard rustling.

He initially thought that it was the rustle of the grass amidst the wind, but this sound soon intensified into what sounded like tidal waves right in his ears.

The soldier's ears twitched, and he leaned over the railings of the watchtower to look out beyond the camp. It was too dark. All of a sudden, a row of arms reached out from the battlement, followed right after by a row of men flipping up in unison. Both sides looked at each other, equally stunned.

The soldier from the Liaoying Tribe reacted swiftly. He promptly let loose a long whistle even while they were trading wide-eyed stares. The sound resonated through Shasan Camp, and Huhelu, who had only just fallen asleep, immediately got up and put on his boots quickly.

Huhelu lifted the tent flap and was about to mount his horse when Bayin stopped him. "We still don't know the details of the enemy forces. I fear we will fall into an ambush if we rush out after them this rashly."

Huhelu hesitated for an instant, but in this instant, a rain of arrows burst forth from the top of the fortress walls. Enraged, he shoved Bayin aside and said, "Those from the Bianbo Camp are all wimps, and there is no elite squad from the Libei Armored Cavalry stationed here. They just want to launch a sneak attack under cover of the night and throw my deployment into disorder. Get on your horse. The battle steeds of Libei can't outrun us!"

“The Hero’s command isn’t here yet!” Bayin tugged at Huhelu’s reins and said quickly, “This is too strange! It’s true that Bianbo Camp has no more troops, but since they dare to take the initiative to launch an attack, then they must have come prepared! Huhelu, this is a trap! We should remain here at Shasan Camp. Don’t go out. They can’t breach this fortress!”

Huhelu spurred his horse on, causing Bayin to stagger a few steps. He pointed his horsewhip fiercely at Bayin. “You’ve gone silly from reading their books! To hell with your defense. We are the heroic fighters who pursue our enemies on the prairies. If we remain here, we will be defeated!”

There were merely five hundred men in the squad that had scaled the walls, but they occupied the great bows on the battlements, thereby preventing the Biansha soldiers who were responding to the attack from climbing up. The sharp-eyed Huhelu had already seen the ropes on the battlements and the unfamiliar soldiers, who were still continuously climbing into the fort one after another.

“That’s not the Libei Armored Cavalry.” Bayin flipped atop his horse behind Huhelu and chased after him. “They’re not the Libei Armored Cavalry!”

But Huhelu did not care who the other party was. He had fought Guo Weili, one of Libei Armored Cavalry’s elite forces, at the boundary line of the Tudalong Banner, and then he had moved southeast and defeated the Shasan Camp. He was a mighty general blessed by the gods of Gedale. He was on track to become an invincible legend on the battlefield. He had the power to fight, even if he were to come face-to-face with Zhao Hui’s main forces.

The heavy, overhanging gate of the camp opened with a loud rumble. Huhelu led his elite troops out on their horses, but what met Huhelu was not the gentle night breeze, but flames ignited by a lit arrow.

The horse track outside the camp had been padded with hay. The fire burned, but did not blaze. Billows of thick smoke that followed right after completely blocked off the horse track Huhelu was advancing on. Huhelu choked, unable to urge on his horse. The thick smoke threw the battle formation of the Biansha Cavalry into disarray. There was no way to see the path ahead in the dark of the night. Worried that there was an ambush



ahead, Huhelu turned his horse and led his cavalry around the track towards the grassy fields.

Within a few moments of riding, the hooves of their horses suddenly sank. The horses of the Gouma Tribe were fast. The cavalry in front stumbled and tumbled, and the cavalry at the back, unable to rein in their horses in time, crashed into those before them and went down together with them.

Huhelu rolled into the grass and saw the newly dug pits in the ground along with the iron spikes. He was familiar with these spikes—these were all traps the Shasan Camp initially put up around the camp, but he never expected someone to move them right under his feet without so much a noise.

“Retreat!” Bayin followed in pursuit behind them. “It’s an ambush!”

Huhelu climbed to his feet and suddenly heard a loud bellow. Tantai Hu, who had been lying in ambush among the grass for many hours, drew his blade and charged. More than a thousand Imperial Army men crawled out from the billowing grass and engaged the Biansha Cavalry, who had fallen to the ground, in a battle.

Tantai Hu had been wanting to fight with the Biansha Cavalry all his life. He did not recognize Huhelu, but he recognized these horses. The tragic massacre of the cities after the defeat of Zhongbo remained fresh and vivid in his mind as blade collided against blade. Tantai Hu, as his name implied, bellowed and moved swiftly like a ferocious tiger, his strike so powerful as he faced up against Huhelu that Huhelu was repeatedly forced back into a retreat.

The Biansha Cavalry was too used to fighting against the Libei Armored Cavalry, and the Imperial Army’s advantages over them soon became apparent. The Imperial Army completely departed from the ways of the Libei Armored Cavalry, wielding their blades with even more deviousness than anyone else among these pitch-dark clusters of grass. Huhelu’s elite troops, having lost their horses and faced with even shorter blades than the ones the Libei Armored Cavalry used, were unable to meet the attacks as they usually would. Those terrifying heaviness of Libei was gone. On the ground, the Imperial Army’s blades moved just as fast as the Biansha Cavalry’s machetes.

But Huhelu soon realized that this squad was pretty much small in numbers; they could not even encircle around him. Although Tantai Hu was

fearsome in his strikes, he was merely fueled by righteous ardor. These people had no reinforcements to speak of at all in these vast plains. Their so-called ambush was merely those horse traps they had dug.

Rage overcame Huhelu. He slashed down a man and pressed forward towards Tantai Hu, bellowing, "So it's just a few rats."

Tantai Hu was injured. He kicked Huhelu away, wiped away the blood and sweat, and continued to attack for all he's worth. The more Tantai Hu fought, the more Huhelu was convinced that the other side had no reinforcements; otherwise, the reinforcements would have long come to help after all this time.

Both sides fought viciously for nearly an hour. Eventually, Tantai Hu withdrew in disarray. They had no horses and could only beat a hasty retreat among the grass.

Huhelu's bloodlust was already at an all-time high by this time, so how would he be willing to let Tantai Hu go? He immediately regrouped the battle steeds and led his men in pursuit of the latter. He brandished his machete, his curses sounding vague in the night wind. This provocation by the Imperial Army had enraged him so much that he was determined to kill them and sacrifice them to his blade.

Holding on to his injured arm, Tantai Hu dashed wildly without even looking back. He was panting heavily, and he nearly tripped on several occasions. Huhelu was close on his heels behind him. Tantai Hu could not run faster than the horses, and it did not take long for the Biansha Cavalry to catch up right behind him.

A sweat-drenched Tantai Hu covered his nearly sliced buttocks and shouted at the open fields before him, "Fuck your ancestors!"

Battle drums suddenly sounded on the horizon, the sound of it so thunderous and deafening that it made all their ears ache. Sensing something amiss from the change in situation, Huhelu promptly reined in his horse and surveyed his surroundings with his cavalry. Dense clusters of men stood up among the grass all around, wearing grass crowns as they remained concealed under cover of darkness. For a moment, Huhelu could not get a clear count of them.

Huhelu's horse restlessly stomped its hooves. He looked ahead as the torches were lit in successive order, stretching like a long dragon from where Tantai Hu had run into the far distance. The concentrated sound of drumming sent the alarm bells in Huhelu's mind ringing as he sensed

imminent danger. He immediately concluded that he had played into the other party's hands—the main forces of Libei were here, and their numbers far surpassed the Biansha Cavalry's.

"Retreat." Huhelu commanded sharply as he yanked his horse into turning around. "Retreat!"

Huhelu's horse broke into a run. He heard the sound of running horses flanking him. Lang Tao Xue Jin took the lead and charged to the head of the crowd. To Huhelu's surprise, it caught up with him.

Huhelu turned his head aside and promptly felt terror-stricken. He almost thought it was Xiao Fangxu, but Xiao Chiye was even taller than Xiao Fangxu. As they galloped in the dimness of the night, Huhelu got a clear look of the pair of eyes that was completely different from Xiao Fangxu's—a pair of eyes brimming with greed so insatiable that it shook him to the core.

Huhelu felt a chill on his nape. He suddenly had the impression that there was no running away under that gaze. Sharp fangs were pressing in, close at hand. To break free of this oppressive pressure, he lashed out at his horse hard. Huhelu remembered it now. Nine years ago, at the eastern mountain ranges, this wolf pup had bitten off a chunk of his meat. His troops, with exponentially more men, had suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of a youth covered in filth.

The horse galloped wildly in pain, breaking up the incohesive formation of the cavalry.

Huhelu could already see the Shasan Camp. He wanted to call out to Bayin for reinforcement, but he had only just opened his mouth when the sky spun before him as his head rolled off into the grass.

Xiao Chiye had already charged his way into the Biansha Cavalry's formation. Langli Blade flung off droplets of blood as he slashed. Spatters of the warm, spurting blood stained his cheeks. At the same time he reined his horse in, he wiped the blood off with the thumb that had the thumb ring on.

Huhelu's horse was still galloping when the headless body jolting on its back slid off and tumbled to the ground before the camp, a pool of blood spreading beneath it.



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### Footnotes

1. 酉时 5-7 pm, based on the system of two-hour subdivisions used in former times.
2. As usual, using pinyin for foreign names in this novel for the time being due to unfamiliarity with the language involved and to avoid mistranslations with the actual names in its original language. (Basically, Lianyin sucks at names). If we do get official subtitles someday, I will replace them in the translation (the same goes for titles). Until then, please bear with me. \_(:3 丿 ∠)\_
3. 酉时 9-11 pm, based on the system of two-hour subdivisions used in former times.
4. 丑时 1-3 am, based on the system of two-hour subdivisions used in former times.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 134 : MENGZHENG



Huhelu was known among the Changjiu Tribe as the person most likely to become the *Hero*. Although he was a cruel and savage man by nature, he was pretty skilled in fighting battles. His squad comprised the best from the various Biansha Tribes, and these cavalymen only had fear and no reverence for Huhelu, but it was precisely because of this fear that the shock hit them like a ton of bricks.

In just a few blinks of an eye, Huhelu was cut down, and going down along with him was the Biansha Cavalry's morale. Huhelu had hastily concluded that there were countless Libei reinforcements behind them, and this consequently snuffed out the determination of the now general-less Biansha Cavalry to fight on. They scattered in all directions, with Xiao Chiye as the center.

Countless torches formed into a long line that pressed in towards them from behind, like a procession of a million valiant soldiers.

Within the Shasan Camp, Gu Jin was also launching a surprise attack. Bayin was trapped both on the inside and outside. Seeing how composed Xiao Chiye was, Bayin was also of the impression that Xiao Chiye was leading the main forces of Libei. The crux was that when Bayin cast a glance over, he could see the obscure dark shadows behind those torches that seemed to stretch all the way into the horizon.

Bayin did not want to repeat the same mistake. Holding his horse by the reins, he took a few steps back and gave the command to abandon camp and flee. The Biansha Cavalry beat a retreat so hastily that they did not even collect Huhelu's corpse before they faded into the night. Xiao Chiye stopped where he was. Tantai Hu led his men and put on a show, shouting and baying for blood as he chased after them for a few *li*. Only when Bayin dared not look back did he swiftly withdraw and returned to Shasan Camp.

Even by the time Bayin looked back, he could still see those torches extending into the distance.

If Bayin had been willing to look a little more closely, or perhaps if he had been able to calm down, then he would have realized that tonight's sudden assault was riddled with loopholes. Huhelu's ability was a cut above the others, but as he had said himself, he was the commanding general in

military field operations. Getting him to guard the camp and go on the defensive was to put the cart before the horse. If he had heeded Bayin's advice and remained in Shasan Camp instead of heading out, he could have swiftly dealt with the small batch of Imperial Army Gu Jin had led in, and he would have then gained the upper hand. The Shasan Camp was an impenetrable fortress with its gates shut. Xiao Chiye had no supplies, and that meant he had no military weapons to launch an assault on the fortress, so there was no way he could forcefully storm his way in. But Huhelu had gotten complacent with his repeated victories after the start of spring this year and could not hold his own against trickery and deception. He thought it was a sudden raid by the Bianbo Camp when he saw Gu Jin scaling the walls, and he thought it was the Libei Armored Cavalry's reinforcements when he saw all those uncountable torches. When he eventually saw Xiao Chiye, he had already been thrown into turmoil, and that was how he was defeated without ever fighting a battle.

Xiao Chiye lifted Huhelu's head and scrutinized that face with the stubbly beard for a moment, but he could not remember who this man was. He handed the head to Tantai Hu, who refused to take it, so he passed it over to Gu Jin and said, "Clean up all the bodies in the camp. Bury our brothers from Libei nearby, and bury the soldiers from Biansha far away. The weather is hot, so the corpses can't be kept around for long. Let's not start an epidemic."

Gu Jin took the head and recognized this to be Huhelu. He never expected Xiao Chiye to hack Huhelu dead at their very first encounter. Guo Weili had fought with this man for half of his lifetime, but in the end, the man was gone in just one night.

Xiao Chiye removed Langli Blade and asked, "Why? You recognize him?"

Gu Jin replied, "This man is called Huhelu. Master, he's the one who beat back Guo Weili in the north and occupied the Tudalong Banner."

Xiao Chiye had been running for two nights in a row. He still had other matters to attend to at present, so he merely nodded his head in acknowledgment before sending Gu Jin away on his task. He called out to Tantai Hu and tossed the blade over for him to hold as they both headed inside together.

"This camp sure is big." Tantai Hu surveyed the surroundings and marveled, "The construction of these walls can almost rival those of a

decent city. There are even large bows on the battlements and trap pits at the foot, which would allow battles to be fought from close quarters and afar.”

“My big brother spent a lot of money on this place.” Xiao Chiye looked at the walls and said, “Memorize the layout on that wall. If there’s anything you don’t understand, you can keep it in mind to ask Chen Yang or Gu Jin later. Tomorrow, I’ll get the military craftsmen to pass the map of the camp layout to you as well. Memorize it too until you know it by heart.”

Tantai Hu hurriedly accepted his orders. Any discerning person could tell from this that Xiao Chiye was planning to entrust Tantai Hu with heavy responsibilities. From Qudu to the present times, Xiao Chiye had brought Tantai Hu along with him every battle. Despite being barely literate, Tantai Hu still made an effort to learn how to read from Chen Yang, just so he would not let Xiao Chiye down for Xiao Chiye’s recognition and appreciation of his worth and abilities.

It was to see the military craftsmen that Xiao Chiye had been in a hurry to enter. He had laid it all out clearly for Wu Ziyu, but there was one thing he did not mention—he had no plans to return to the Shasan Camp after he had reclaimed it. This place had the best of both offense and defense, and it was also a protective shield for the Bianbo Camp. It could provide Xiao Fangxu with support from the north, and access the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path from the east. It was simply too suitable a location for him.

Whoever wanted to ask him for it would have to come and negotiate with him in person.

By the time Xiao Chiye managed to lie down, it was almost dawn. He slept in the tent for several hours. Chen Yang hurried over from the Bianbo Camp while he was sleeping and did not disturb him. Xiao Chiye only woke up when it was near dusk. As he stood outside the tent with his head lowered to wash up, he heard Meng returning.

Xiao Chiye secured his arm guard and blew a whistle at Meng. Meng hovered in the air for a while before landing on Xiao Chiye’s arm. Xiao Chiye took out the prepared strips of meat from the leather bag and fed them to Meng. As Meng ate, he looked at the large walnut on Meng’s leg.

“His Lordship is well.” Chen Yang smiled. “He’s letting you know he’s safe and sound.”

But Xiao Chiye did not smile. He was, in fact, quite unhappy. He removed the walnut and grasped it in his hand for a moment before tossing it to Chen Yang. “By specifically releasing Meng back, Father is conveying

his military orders. Open it up and read it to me. This old man is up to no good.”

Chen Yang opened the walnut and smoothed out the paper.

Xiao Fangxu’s handwriting was bold and wild. He said he had long known that Amu’er would send men around to the southeast camp, but he made no mention of why there had been no measures taken in advance. He also asked if Meng had secretly attacked Yu, and that Meng was too combative, just like Xiao Chiye. Finally, he told Xiao Chiye not to act recklessly and to remain where he was and await his orders...

Xiao Chiye extended a finger and turned the letter over. He skimmed through a few paragraphs in front and pointed to the few brief and concise sentences at the back.

Chen Yang coughed and read out in a steady voice, “No one knows a son better than his father. By the time this letter arrives, it’d have been too late. I know you will definitely go for Shasan Camp. In that case, you can handle the escort and transportation on behalf of Wu Ziyu... as the general in charge of military supplies.”

Dead silence all around.

Tantai Hu could not understand Xiao Fangxu. Even if the Prince of Libei would not praise Xiao Chiye, he still ought to have deployed Xiao Chiye over to the site of battle. Letting Xiao Chiye render meritorious service as soon as possible was the best commendation and recognition he could give. Under the present situation in Libei, making Xiao Chiye a logistical general behind-the-scenes was akin to suppressing back the abilities he had displayed in Qudu. Was His Lordship insane? Or, would he not hesitate to hide Xiao Chiye away for another nine years just to appease those in the Hereditary Prince’s camp?

Xiao Chiye pursed his lips into a tight, thin line and endured it for a while. Without saying a word, he turned his head to look once again at the setting sun descending in the west.



A few days later, the company of traveling merchants set out from Cizhou and made their way down south along the public road to Chazhou. Kong Ling played the role of the steward, while the Imperial Bodyguards disguised themselves as the attendants and servants of a wealthy family. Shen Zechuan, using illness as a pretext, remained within the horse carriage and rarely showed himself in public.



Kong Ling brought along the travel permit issued by Cizhou, which saved them from a lot of trouble on the way. Nowadays, those who were able to get the proper official documents could not be underestimated. What's more, with the large number of guards they had, the common bandits did not dare to rob them recklessly, for fear of offending someone powerful.

The beggars they came across on the way multiplied after they left Cizhou's territory. Even children as young as eight or nine years old were forced to swindle as a means of livelihood. They made all kinds of wild, exaggerated claims – even touching on the supernatural – all in an attempt to cajole the passing merchants into spending money for peace of mind and a safe passage.

It was still fine the first few days, but it rained the next few days. With the weather abruptly turning cold, Shen Zechuan fell ill. Swindlers and charlatans abounded everywhere they passed by, with unscrupulous shops lining the streets one after another. Even if Kong Ling dared to call a physician over to take a look, Qiao Tianya would not dare to let the other party get close to Shen Zechuan. The good thing was that his illness was not serious. His fever persisted for only two days before it slowly receded.

Shen Zechuan was now spending more and more time bent over at his desk, so it was inevitable for him to neglect his martial arts training. After he had sent Qi Huilian off on the Qi Huilian's final journey, he would often find his body easily overwhelmed, and he was prone to falling ill as the seasons changed. In fact, there had been warning signs of this as early as the epidemic case back in Qudu, where he had simply fallen ill without warning.

The carriage rolled over the mud and arrived in Chazhou in the rain.

When Luo Mu, the prefectural prefect of Chazhou, received Kong Ling's visitation card,<sup>1</sup> he was in his concubine's room. He turned it back and forth to look it over repeatedly, as though he was going to perform some magic tricks and conjure flowers out of it. Still, he remained seated and refused to move his butt.

His fourteenth concubine was new; they had only just held the banquet a few days back. As his recent favorite, it was inevitable for her to be spoiled and pampered. The concubine, who could read a few words, took the card from Luo Mu's hands and asked, "Who is this Kong Ling?"

Luo Mu held her on his lap and answered, “Kong Ling? A poor scholar. In his early years, he was a subordinate of Tantai Long, the commander of the Dunzhou’s garrison troops, but after Tantai Long’s death, he went to work for Zhou Gui.”

The concubine giggled as Luo Mu’s beard nuzzled against her. As if afraid of being contaminated by the aura of poverty, she shook the visitation card with her little finger sticking up and asked, “Then how did he come to know Master?”

Luo Mu replied self-mockingly, “We were fellow students.”

“Oh my, then you’ll have to play the good host to him.” This concubine was always giving Luo Mu’s principal wife the attitude. Her elder brother was Cai Yu, one of the bandits in Chazhou whom Luo Mu relied on for backing. She thus harbored the intention to make Luo Mu divorce his principal wife. Plotting to use these outsiders’ visit as a pretext to get the rights to host a banquet herself, she frivolously swatted at Luo Mu with the card and said, “I’ll host a banquet for you, and you can invite my elder brother over too to put them in their place. I heard that a batch of the Libei’s military grains this year came from Cizhou. These people have money.”

Luo Mu did not answer. He merely said, “Why waste all that money? We can just dismiss him with a few steamed buns. He’s most likely here to borrow money. I’m not going to meet him.”

The concubine would not budge and threw a little hissy fit like a spoiled child before Luo Mu. The visitation card slid to the ground.

Luo Mu’s eyes followed the visitation card as it fell. He loosely grasped the concubine’s arm and said, “It’s not too late to do so when we meet him again in Cizhou. Look, the card has fallen, pick it up...”

Seeing as persuasion did not work on him, she rose to her feet and threw a tantrum. Her embroidered shoe stepped upon the visitation card, and she stomped on it lightly a couple of times. “I have yet to entertain any guests on Master’s behalf ever since I married into the family. We are both formally wedded to you, but why am I lower in rank than her? I’m—”

Before she could finish her words, she saw Luo Mu’s expression turn frosty. He bellowed, “Move away!”

Concubine Cai had been doted on and spoiled ever since her marriage to Luo Mu; she had never been shouted at or scolded before by him. This thus came as a shock to her, and she took a few stunned steps back.

Luo Mu bent over to pick up the visitation card. There was a shoe print on it, and he could not wipe it away. He kept away the visitation card with a glum face, then took the concubine's hand and said with a forced smile, "Don't bother yourself with the affairs in the front hall. I'll have a detailed chat with Elder Brother myself. I won't be staying today, but I'll come and see you again later."

Without even waiting for his concubine to get over her shock, he lifted the curtain and left.

It was still raining outside. The attendant opened up the umbrella, and Luo Mu walked under it. "Is he still there? Invite him to the front hall. I'll go see him now."



When Luo Mu arrived at the front hall, Kong Ling had already been waiting for a while. On seeing Luo Mu heading up the steps, he rose to meet him. Both men smiled the moment they saw each other. Luo Mu gestured for Kong Ling to take a seat. They exchanged pleasantries for a moment before getting down to business.

"It's also at His Excellency's direction that I've made a trip here to see you." Kong Ling drank the tea and said, "Cizhou has gradually shown improvements these few years. The fields are recovering well, and there is an abundance of grains. However, the population in Cizhou has been on a steep decline, and we can't consume that many grains. Store the remaining grains for a year, and they will either turn moldy or end up being gnawed on by mice."

Luo Mu listened attentively as Kong Ling spoke and noted how healthy his complexion looked; he did not have that much white hair either.

Kong Ling met Luo Mu's gaze and gave him another smile. "So, we were thinking. The prefecture of Chazhou is still buying grains from Hezhou and Juexi these years at a high price. You're really getting short-changed. So why not work out a collaboration between our prefectures? Both prefectures are close to each other, which greatly facilitates the transportation of goods. We are willing to offer you a lower price than Juexi for the grains. How about it?"

Luo Mu realized there were wrinkles around Kong Ling's eyes when he smiled. Looking as though he had just awakened from a dream, he averted his gaze and thought for a moment before saying, "I more or less get what you mean. It's a good thing, but it can't be done."

Seeing as Kong Ling still had more to say, he raised a hand to stop him.

“Chazhou is not Cizhou. It’s indeed bold and resolute of Zhou Gui to just go ahead and do it, but just how much of this courage is built upon his father-in-law? In his early years, His Excellency Liu resolved to eradicate the bandits in Cizhou, and that’s why Cizhou is free of bandits today. But this is not the case for Chazhou.”

Kong Ling had expected this. He fell silent for a moment, then said, “Mengzheng, is there not a chance at all?”

On hearing Kong Ling call him by his courtesy name, Luo Mu hastily turned his head away.

Kong Ling thought Luo Mu was in a difficult position, so he said, “Cizhou has now rebuilt its garrison troops. As long as this deal can be sealed, we are willing to contribute to the important task of suppressing bandits in Chazhou in the future. Mengzheng, the world is in turmoil at present, and all kinds of heroes will no doubt rise from among the people. As long as you live among them, you cannot avoid the strife. You and I have a friendship that goes way back from being fellow students under the same teacher. Why not use this opportunity to free yourself from the control of the bandits?”

“You and Zhou Gui are in Cizhou, so you aren’t aware of my difficulties.” Luo Mu turned back and continued, “If the bandits in Chazhou were that easy to dispose off, then why didn’t you come to me instead of going to seek refuge with Zhou Gui?”

Kong Ling wanted to explain, but Luo Mu had already risen to his feet. “The current grains are all purchased at high prices from Juexi and Hezhou. Various bandit chiefs have a hand in this, and it is from this profit that they live off on. You now want me to buy grains from Cizhou instead, which means you’re cutting off their source of income. There is no negotiating this deal at all. If news of this were to get out, you and I would be in danger. I think you’d best go back.”

Luo Mu got his attendant to see the guest out. He strode a few steps out of the threshold and looked back.

They had not met for many years. Strangely enough, no matter how old Kong Ling looked now, the way he looked as a student still remained firmly etched in Luo Mu’s mind. The rain spattering under the eaves dampened

Luo Mu's shoulders, and he remained standing in this position for a long time.

Kong Ling had missed plenty in his life, just like this moment, where he could not see Luo Mu's gaze clearly against the backdrop of light. He merely said, "I'm determined to succeed on this trip. If talks fall through today, I'll return tomorrow. Mengzheng, I'm confident that it will work out, as long as you're willing to discuss it with us."

Luo Mu was dumbstruck for a moment. "Who else did you bring with you? You used official paperwork from Cizhou when you entered the city, and you delivered your visitation card to meet me. You've already exposed your whereabouts. I'd advise you not to act rashly. You should return to Cizhou after a few more days."

Without waiting for Kong Ling to answer, he lifted his robe and went down the steps.



A little later, Shen Zechuan ate his medicine and listened as Qiao Tianya reported both men's conversation word-for-word. Unable to help it, he turned back and looked at Qiao Tianya.

Qiao Tianya nodded in understanding and said, "They have been fellow students for many years; their friendship is naturally unlike others. In Master's view, how should we negotiate this deal? Luo Mu is an interesting character. Although it's a mess in Chazhou, his position as the prefect of Chazhou remains firm and unshakeable."

"We'll negotiate however we ought to." Shen Zechuan's nose was a little congested, and his speech sounded a little muffled. "Since he's still standing, it means he has a mind to remain so. Everything he has said today is all grandiose words; they aren't necessarily from the bottom of his heart. Think of a way to avoid scrutiny. I want to meet him."



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SPECIAL THANKS TO : [Eggy](#)<3

Footnotes

1. 名帖 (also 拜帖), a visitation card (or name card) written on paper or wood used by officials, nobles or distinguished people to notify the other party of their visit. It would usually indicate his name, position, and so on. It's like a name card in the modern world.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 135 : EARRING

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



The rain stopped the next day, but the sky was still overcast.

Concubine Cai, who had been rebuked yesterday, pleaded illness early in the morning. Luo Mu did not sleep well during the night either. After his breakfast, his servant came to report that Cai Yu had sent him an invitation to a gathering.

Luo Mu took the invitation, knowing full well Cai Yu's purpose for the invitation today. He wiped his hands. Without even changing his robe, he straight out said, "Prepare the sedan. I'll go over now. Let's not keep Elder Brother waiting for too long."

Cai Yu was a known bandit in the Prefecture of Chazhou. Yan Heru of Hezhou addressed him as pa.<sup>1</sup> Cai Yu was usually generous with his money, and he liked to assist the various bandits financially, so he was well-reputed among them as a loyal and righteous man who was always ready to offer help. However, he did not get along with Lei Changming from Mount Luo. No one knew the reason why. All they knew was that before Lei Changming's death, both men would pay no heed to the other during the bandits' gathering-cum-feasts.

When Luo Mu arrived at the Cai's residence, Cai Yu had already treated them to a round of drinks and food. Cai Yu's residence was even more luxuriously built than Luo Mu's, with more than a thousand servants inside. However, he was not a man who was particular about unnecessary and convoluted formalities; after all, most of his visitors were bandits and robbers. As such, the feasts he held were literally wine-and-meat feasts that boasted of all kinds of roast meats and strong wines.

The moment Cai Yu saw Luo Mu, he leaned back and beckoned to him with a smile, "Mengzheng, you're late. As punishment, you have to drink three cups of wine. Take a seat, quickly."

Luo Mu had always been servile and docile before Cai Yu, so he complied and took his seat. Even when he saw the weirdly-dressed strangers at the table, he did not probe. Cai Yu waited for Luo Mu to finish

his drink before he said, "I heard my younger sister was bothering you yesterday."

Looking panicked, Luo Mu started, "Elder Brother—"

"You were right to tell her off!" Cai Yu pressed down on Luo Mu's arm and said with a smile, "You are her husband, and the man is in charge of the front hall. There are indeed many matters that aren't up to her to dictate as she wishes. She's used to being willful and spoiled at home, and even when she has gotten married, she has no respect for her elders. In the future, just tell her off where it is needed. There's no need to give me face. She's been so pampered that she's getting more and more out of hand."

Cai Yu knew everything that happened in Luo Mu's inner chambers like the back of his hand. He did not apply that much pressure on the hand that was pressing down on Luo Mu, but it was precisely because of this that it seemed to take him no effort at all. If he told Luo Mu to head left, then Luo Mu would not dare to go right. Luo Mu was an official who passed the rounds of imperial examinations at the various levels to make his way to Qudu the proper way, where he then underwent official inspections to be assigned this post outside the capital. But so what? In Chazhou, Luo Mu was just a yes-man. As they said, *the sky is high, and the emperor is far*—the local cities in remote places were beyond the reach of the authorities in the central administration. Banditry in Zhongbo was already a serious issue during the reign of Yongyi. Before the defeat of Zhongbo's troops, they did not give two hoots about the Prince of Jianxing, Shen Wei, and after the defeat of the Zhongbo's troops, they gave even less of a damn about Qudu.

Fine sweat oozed from Luo Mu's forehead.

Satisfied on noticing this, Cai Yu retracted his hand and said with a laugh, "Come to think of it, it's really unheard of. Half a month ago, I heard that there was going to be a change of emperor. That Imperial Bodyguards Commander, Han Cheng, was so anxious that he ran back to his hometown just to find a child to be the imperial heir. But who knew, Secretariat Elder Hai did not agree and banged his head in the hall to his death. Blood and brain matter splattered all over Han Cheng, scaring Han Cheng so much that he peed in his pants right there and then."

All of them burst out laughing in unison. News that had spread by word of mouth had long rendered Han Cheng as a boorish, hunchback scum that bowed to powers that be.



After Cai Yu was done laughing, he let out a long sigh and said, “But even though we are outlaws dealing in illegal trades, we still have to speak of loyalty and benevolence. Respect to the Secretariat Elder for his act! As the saying goes, men who wield brushes die in remonstrations, while men who wield swords die in battles. Dazhou has been through three changes of reign. Emperors have died one after another, and yet upright and unyielding ministers like this are few and far between.”

Luo Mu listened to him, but did not interrupt, nor did he look up. He seemed intent on eating, even if he only dared to pick up the food before him with his chopsticks. Although he looked dignified in appearance, he gave off the impression of someone weak and cowering.

Cai Yu did not look at Luo Mu again. He was speaking with gusto now. “But perhaps the Secretariat Elder himself did not expect the throne to now go to a woman after the Han clan’s child failed to sit on it. There has never been such an incident ever since the founding of Dazhou. Isn’t this a violation of the law of nature<sup>2</sup> and the reversal of gender roles?<sup>3</sup> This is an omen for the collapse of the Dazhou empire! I’d rather listen to the words of an ignorant child than listen to the orders of a woman. What would it look like for a man of indomitable spirit to pay obeisance to a woman?! Qidong has a Qi Zhuyin. I think she just happened to be in the right place at the right time when the Empress Dowager was in power. Otherwise, how could she have gotten the chance to be the Commander-in-chief? If Qudu were to have a female emperor next... gosh, what a mess!”

A chorus of agreement rose all around. One man with a beard smacked the table and said, “Elder Cai is right. That’s what it is. What is it with the female emperor? The first few emperors are indeed awful, but having a man as the head of administration is the law of nature, as Laozi<sup>4</sup> said. I’m not willing to concede either. Imagine if the entire court of civil and military officials were to kneel and pay obeisance to her as monarch and subjects, they would be an entire lair of cowardly good-for-nothings. No wonder we keep getting attacked by the Twelve Tribes of Biansha all these years.”

“A daughter she is, yes? Getting married and keeping domestic peace are her duties. No harm done if they dote on her and raise her into a pampered, delicate lady. But it’s a disaster to let them go out and fight battles or lead the government.” Having said that, Cai Yu sighed with emotion. “I heard the students in Qudu are all rather willing. I think they’ve

all gone dumb and silly from studying! They can't even tell good from bad."

Their conversations went from the political affairs in Qudu to the military affairs in Qidong, then from the military affairs in Qidong to the war in Libei. Finally, the topic turned to Lei Changming.

The bearded man said, "Lei Changming was another one who got a lucky break to have encountered Young Master Yan when the young master was in distress. He gave him a hand, and that was how he could rise in the world. But he was a person who couldn't last long. He was overbearing as heck, and even wanted to establish a regular army in Mount Luo. But look what happened? He encountered the Imperial Army and immediately met his end, no?"

Cai Yu snorted coldly.

The person next to him said, "Elder Cai and Lei Changming could be said to be the Twin Heroes of Zhongbo, but how is Lei Changming deserving of the name? He doesn't even come close to our Elder Cai!"

Cai Yu was not moved by this flattery. He spread his arms open and sank comfortably into the chair. "Do you know why I turn my nose up at Lei Changming? I find him *filthy*." He emphasized the last word, just as the maidservant came over with his smoking pipe. He took two puffs and continued, "Lei Changming worked as an armed escort in his early years. All of you know this. But why did he stop later? The reason he gave the others was that he had married his younger sister off to the Zhu clan in Duanzhou. He wanted to live in comfort, and that was why he didn't want to carry on doing such work anymore. But that was not true. Well, he had an addiction."

At some point, Luo Mu had set aside his chopsticks.

As Cai Yu blew out puffs of smoke, he said, "When I first joined this trade and was about to complete my training, my *shifu* said that one must be benevolent and righteous even if one were to be a bandit or a robber. There are some things you can't touch and can't do. Those are depraved acts that will bring you bad karma. There have been plenty of traveling merchants with families coming and going in Chazhou all these years, but I'd never laid my hands on the widows and orphans when I came across them. However, it was a different story for Lei Changming. He'd also escort family members when he was escorting goods in the past. There was one time he was doing a job in Dengzhou, and the man who was the head of

household died midway through the journey, leaving behind his hapless widow and orphan who couldn't even afford to pay the fees for the escort and transportation service. When they arrived at Dengzhou, the original in-laws on the husband's side only wanted their grandson, but not the daughter-in-law. The woman was unwilling to part with her child, and so, forced into the corner, she thought of attempting suicide. Lei Changming brought both mother and son back home, saying he was going to provide for them."

"At that time, I was still a robber in Chazhou, and I thought well of Lei Changming when I heard of this incident. I felt he was different from people like me; he was the chivalrous hero that *shifu* spoke of. I held him in esteem, and I'd take notice of him when I was out there working. I wanted to find an opportunity to become sworn brothers with him. But when I went to Dengzhou later, I heard that he had quit. It was only when I found the place that I learned that both the woman and child had died. How did they die? He brutalized them after drinking, laying his hands on that five or six-years-old child. The woman resisted, and he beat her to death. The child, having been tormented beyond recognition, lived for only a few days before he died too."

Cai Yu waved away the smoke and frowned as he had the maidservant take the pipe away.

"He went to Duanzhou, and this indulgence of his never changed. This man valued his own reputation, and he never dared to do it openly. Young Master Yan was still very young when Lei Changming saved him. I could be said to be friends with Old Master Yan at that time, and the Yan clan had helped me before. So even though I had yet to see the young master then, I treated him as my own precious son. On hearing of this incident, I immediately gave chase for four days and nights in a row before I reached Mount Luo and got him back. At that time, the young master was wearing a bright, jade earring. He was fair and lovely, and very smart too. As soon as he saw me, he called me pa. Such a lovable child. Seeing as the young master was unharmed, I didn't bother to settle scores with Lei Changming."

Each time Lei Changming met Cai Yu again later, he would self-consciously feel small. Cai Yu held him in contempt, and he did not approach Cai Yu either. To each his own.

“The young master is a good child. He was very grateful to Lei Changming for saving him, so he repeatedly extended a helping hand to the bandits in Mount Luo.” Cai Yu had initially meant to ask Luo Mu about Kong Ling today, but he got carried away talking about these past events. By the time he’d remembered, Luo Mu had already left.



Luo Mu got into the sedan chair, but he had not gone far before he changed course and headed for the cosmetic shop with the intent to buy some rouge powders that were all the rage in Qudu to coax concubine Cai. The largest rouge store in Chazhou was owned by a merchant from Juexi, and Luo Mu was a regular customer there. The moment he stepped off the sedan, a steward came over to welcome and serve him tea in one smooth motion. Finally, he bent over to inform Luo Mu, “Apologies, Your Excellency Luo. Unfortunately, we are all out of stock. All the good stuff is being prepared in the shop at the eastern end and has yet to be delivered here. What do you say if we deliver them to your residence tomorrow? Would that be fine?”

Luo Mu nodded and made to leave when he recalled the way Cai Yu was pressing down on his arm earlier. Changing his mind, he turned back and asked, “Which shop at the eastern end?”

The steward called over an assistant to personally lead the way for Luo Mu.

Upon arriving at the place, Luo Mu noted that while the shop was not a large one, it was indeed close to the horse tracks and convenient for unloading goods. He entered and saw only a few people inside. The assistant led him further into the courtyard in the back, then served him tea and told him to wait for a moment.

Luo Mu sat for a moment. The curtain lifted, but the one who came through was Kong Ling.

“Why are you...” Luo Mu asked in astonishment.

However, Kong Ling did not answer. He lifted the curtain and stepped aside, and a man in white behind him bent slightly at the waist to enter. The instant Shen Zechuan raised his head, Luo Mu rose to his feet.

Shen Zechuan came in a sedan chair, and so he did not get wet. He looked at Luo Mu and gestured for him to sit. Qiao Tianya, who was following behind them, came in to change the tea and handed a fresh cup of hot tea to Shen Zechuan.

Seeing that Luo Mu was still standing, Kong Ling said, “Mengzheng, this is...”

“Your Excellency the Vice Commander.” Luo Mu respectfully paid his obeisances. “I’ve long heard of the Vice Commander’s reputation. This pupil Luo Mengzheng is all ears to the advice you have to offer.”

“I’ve previously heard Mister Chengfeng speak highly of Your Excellency Luo for your prudence and excellent judgment. As I see it today, this is indeed the case.” Shen Zechuan smiled slightly. “I’m no longer the Vice Commander of the Imperial Bodyguards now. Without an authority token and an official post, I’m merely a commoner. It is I who should pay my respect to Your Excellency.”

How would Luo Mu dare to accept his bows? The official in the emperor’s inner ministerial circle, Shen Zechuan—just his position as the Northern Judge of the Imperial Bodyguards alone was enough to strike fear in the hearts of the local prefectural prefects. In the past, the Imperial Bodyguards collaborated with the Ministry of Justice, Court of Judicial Review, and Chief Surveillance Bureau to carry out field works at the local areas to audit the accounts and review the local officials’ accomplishments. Shen Zechuan was also on good terms with Cen Yu of the Chief Surveillance Bureau and Kong Qiu of the Ministry of Justice. Luo Mu did not just hear of him. Originally, the main objective of local officials like him who had been assigned posts outside the capital was to gain experience. After building up their political achievements and taking their credentials into account, they would be able to get a promotion to Qudu and become an official in the capital. Their inspections’ evaluations and the lives of both them and their family all lay in Shen Zechuan’s hands.

The key to this was evident in the way Luo Mu called himself “this pupil”.<sup>5</sup>

Shen Zechuan was different from the Judge preceding him. His origin was not “legitimate”. His birth father was the Prince of Jianxing, Shen Wei, whose Zhongbo’s troops were defeated. Back then, when he entered the capital, he was escorted by the Imperial Bodyguards who had picked him up from the Libei Armored Cavalry. Rumor had it that he was to be executed, but not only did he survive, but he was even repeatedly promoted by Emperor Tianchen, who made an exception for him. The post of the Northern Judge concerned both factions in Qudu, and yet even Hai Liangyi

had been willing to give his assent. What's more, this person was young, which only filled the others with even more trepidation towards him.

It was only then that Luo Mu understood that it was not just a front when Kong Ling said he was confident of success. He was genuinely certain of success.

Fortunately, Shen Zechuan was merely just saying and did not get up to pay his respects. Luo Mu calmed himself down a little. Not daring to sit, he let his hands drop as he stood before Kong Ling and said, "Please excuse this pupil for not welcoming Your Excellency after Your Excellency has personally come all the way to Chazhou. I'll immediately send someone..."

"I followed the Marquis of Dingdu out of the capital, and I'm now already a traitor of Qudu, so there is truly no need for Your Excellency to stand on ceremony." Shen Zechuan drank the hot tea, soothing his throat a little before he continued, "I've been in Zhongbo for quite some time, and I've long wanted to meet Your Excellency Luo. Fortunately, I have Mister Chengfeng to accompany me today."

Kong Ling looked at Luo Mu and smiled. "Mengzheng, there's no need to be so formal. The Vice Commander is now the pillar of Cizhou. It's also to resolve the bandit issue in Chazhou that he came this time. We are all on the same side."

Luo Mu looked at him, his gaze not as blatant as yesterday. He asked cautiously, "How did you know I'd come?"

"Chazhou is only this big. There are plenty of matters that one can find out with just a little inquiry around. That fourteenth concubine of yours has backing, and she has a temper to boot. She loves the rouges from Qudu. You've always had a penchant for pleasing others by catering to their likes, so to coax her, you will naturally make a personal trip down yourself."

Kong Ling smiled at Shen Zechuan and shook his head. "The Vice Commander doesn't know it, but Mengzheng was very popular with the ladies while he was still in the academy. He was a flirtatious one too. Even before he entered the ranks of officials in the imperial court, he was very knowledgeable about all this stuff."

Luo Mu relaxed a little when he heard Kong Ling bring up the academy. "I conducted myself with decorum when I was studying. How could I have been flirtatious when I was with you all day? On the contrary, you had countless friends and could fraternize with just about anyone."

The atmosphere eased up a little at their banter. Kong Ling led Luo Mu to take a seat.

Shen Zechuan sat in the seat of honor. When he spoke, it was not as overbearing and aggressive as Luo Mu expected. “Mister Chengfeng has probably already told you about the purpose of our trip here. It wasn’t convenient to have a thorough discussion yesterday, so it’s inevitable that Your Excellency will have misgivings. Please speak your mind freely today, we can discuss any difficulty you may have.”

Shen Zechuan was mild in his speech, and his expression was natural and at ease. However, there was clearly no room for “discussion” in his last sentence. Beneath his seemingly placid attitude was an unshakeable resolve to get what he wanted. Luo Mu only had to hear this one phrase from Shen Zechuan to understand Shen Zechuan’s intent.

*Discuss any difficulty you may have.* What was the purpose of a discussion? To allow him to take swift action sooner. Shen Zechuan did not give Luo Mu a chance to refuse at all. The moment he opened his mouth, he had left Luo Mu with no other choice.

When Luo Mu looked up again, his timidity was gone. He said, “If the Vice Commander can suppress the bandits in Chazhou, then I’m willing to take the Vice Commander’s lead. However, Cai Yu isn’t Lei Changming, and the Vice Commander doesn’t have the Marquis’s 20,000 strong soldiers either. It will be indeed tough to rely on the strength of just one man alone.”

Shen Zechuan said, unruffled, “With our meeting today, we can stand up to a million strong soldiers.”



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#### Footnotes

1. 阿爷 I’d use pinyin for this except the pinyin is A-ye lmfaio. An address used in Classical Chinese for one’s father in old times, although it’s also used as grandpa. (Using pa here since Cai Yu previously mentioned treating him like a son).
2. literally violation of Heavenly principles, or nature’s law aka feudal ethics as propounded by Song Dynasty Confucianists

3. literally reversal of Yin and Yang, refers to traditional gender roles here. The emperor was traditionally male; women were not supposed to be involved in politics.
4. Laozi (or Lao-tzu), reverent term of address for Li Er (李耳), Chinese philosopher of the late Spring and Autumn Period and founder of Taoism.
5. “学生” literally student or pupil, a humble form of self-address used by a scholar or an official when addressing one’s teacher, master or a member of older generation



# QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 136 : SOWING DISCORD

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



Shen Zechuan spoke with such confidence, as Chazhou was not a place that could be secured through sheer military might alone. During the reign of Yongyi, the Prefectures of Dunzhou and Duanzhou in Zhongbo were the richest and most prosperous. Back then, Shen Wei was in command of the garrison troops of the respective prefectures. He possessed both money and military forces, yet he still could not get rid of the bandits in Chazhou. Before Shen Zechuan made his way to Chazhou, Zhou Gui and the advisors in Cizhou had prepared a detailed report on Chazhou, and they all unanimously thought that the matter regarding Chazhou had to be dealt with strategically.

Cai Yu was indeed no Lei Changming. The biggest difference between the bandits in Chazhou and the bandits of Mount Luo was that while the bandits in Chazhou were still merely bandits, those in Mount Luo had banded together. They not only established their territory, but also had plans for expansion. It was clear that Lei Jingzhe, who was hiding behind Lei Changming, was no longer satisfied with being a bandit. He had the desire to entirely cast off his old self, while Cai Yu did not. Hence, they had to fight against those of Mount Luo, and scheme against those in Chazhou.

Luo Mu was perhaps not as devoted as Zhou Gui in serving the people, but since Shen Zechuan had tacitly assented to Kong Ling's visit, that meant they needed Luo Mu. Having served as the Prefectural Prefect of Chazhou for over ten years, no one understood the ins and outs of Chazhou better than Luo Mu.

"Your Excellency was assigned to Chazhou during the reign of Yongyi, during which you have made many celebrated achievements and previously remonstrated with Shen Wei to suppress the bandits. However, Shen Wei thought Dunzhou was too far from Chazhou, and with Fanzhou between the two prefectures, it would be too inconvenient and a waste of money for the troops to travel long-distance. As the odds of success were too small, Shen Wei rejected the request." Shen Zechuan did not even blink when he

brought up Shen Wei's name. "I noticed that Your Excellency's position on governing affairs started to change from that moment on."

Luo Mu waved his hand and said, "What illustrious achievement is there for me to speak of? The Vice Commander is speaking too highly of me. I have accomplished nothing after my arrival in Chazhou. During the reign of Yongyi, Chazhou was notorious for its bandits. That year, Qudu considered sending officials over, and Jiang Qingshan and I were among those who were assigned. When I came down here, I had plans to distinguish myself and show what I'm made of, but it was too difficult. "

Luo Mu's expression gradually grew heavier.

"During the first two years, my objective was focused on reviving the garrison troops. Although Shen Wei did not approve, he did not stop me. The Ministry of War thought that it was feasible and increased Chazhou's military spending according to the recommendations I made in my memorial, and from this, I had the Chazhou's military garrison troops equipped. I was complacent then, wholeheartedly focused on suppressing the bandits. It was only when the fighting began for real that I realized it wouldn't work at all. The bandits of Chazhou can be traced back way before the reign of Yongyi. There was already a group of bandits here in Chazhou long before the establishment of Chazhou's garrison troops. Hezhou in its earliest times was not as prosperous as it is today, and back then, the Yan Clan had not made its fortune yet. The traders who used this route were mostly wealthy merchants from the Thirteen Cities of Juexi, and the bandits of Chazhou kidnapped these traders to make their living. By the time the Imperial Court took notice, it was already too late; the bandits had already planted their roots in Chazhou and developed into various gangs and factions."

This caused the people of Chazhou to be exceptionally rowdy, as there were fewer rules and regulations compared to other places. Census registration<sup>1</sup> proved to be the trickiest here, as pretty much half the people had been bandits before and were not considered decent citizens, so they could only be registered as military households. Back then, when the officials of the eastern palace discussed this matter in this place, they thought of having these people enlisted in the army so that these people could be part of a regular army. With military fields and a monthly salary, they could just about feed their families and maintain a livelihood, and there would be no need for them to become bandits and violate the law. At the

same time, the officials could regulate the movement of the people, allowing them to stay in Chazhou to farm with peace of mind without creating trouble all around, in turn strengthening the Prefectural Prefect's law enforcement capabilities.

However, the officials of the eastern palace had made a huge mistake. They were all talk and no action, taking strategies that Zhongbo had used in other prefectures and implementing them directly in Chazhou without adapting to local circumstances. The bandits of Chazhou became an official army, but the land was not this easy to cultivate. They followed the rules for merely a short while before they started to leech off the army salary while continuing to be bandits at the same time. They did not even need to feign diplomacy: they could just loot and plunder under the guise of catching bandits. They chased after themselves, forever going round in circles with the imperial court. It was difficult for the assigned Prefectural Prefect to resist the already well-established might of the bandits, and it wasn't long before Luo Mu suffered losses and was dealt a ruthless lesson by the bandits.

And that was not just all. In the later periods, bandit chiefs like Cai Yu appeared in Chazhou. They spoke of the chivalry of the martial fraternity, and were also willing to spend money to finance and assist their like-minded brothers. Over time, their reputation spread, and they were much more popular and admired than all those stereotypical literati. The prefectural prefect was no more than an empty shell that existed in name only.

By the time Luo Mu spoke to this point, Shen Zechuan could more or less understand why Shen Wei had not been willing to deploy troops.

Because Shen Wei did not dare to.

Shen Wei was conferred the title of the Prince of Jianxing, which was just that—a nice-sounding title. In essence, there was no difference between him and a delegated official like Luo Mu; he was also an outsider. He initially did not approve or oppose Luo Mu's proposition because he was adopting a wait-and-see attitude. If Luo Mu succeeded, then he could follow suit. If Luo Mu failed, he could then hold him accountable. He was not willing to step to the fore to offend the bandits in Chazhou, because he knew very well that compared to Luo Mu, Cai Yu and these people were the real "local officials" of Chazhou.

“But times are different now.” Shen Zechuan’s throat felt slightly hoarse, and he coughed a couple of times. “Cai Yu is currently living off the dividends from the Yan clan, and the money he makes are tears of blood, which bandits in power like them profit off the suffering of refugees. There is no lack of basic necessities like food and clothing in Chazhou, but people dying of starvation is a common sight outside Chazhou. Over time, the common folks will come to harbor resentment.”

“To tell the truth.” Luo Mu weighed up his options and said cautiously, “After the defeat of the Zhongbo Troops, the grain supply in Chazhou shrank to pathetic portions. Back then, the Grand Secretariat cleaned out the granaries in the various prefectures and transferred the grains to Juexi in the name of disaster relief. By all reasons, it was necessary to sign a receipt of loan with Zhongbo, but Shen Wei was dead, and Qudu never sent over a person to take charge. The six prefectures each handled their affairs in their own ways. It was an uphill task just to make a living, and they all had no energy to pursue the issue of food arrears—of course, they could not afford to pursue either. Recent years saw a rise in law-abiding families breaking the law in desperation. These were people who were starving and could see no way out, so they could only sink low and become bandits. Initially, the bandits in Chazhou led by Cai Yu were willing to provide financial assistance to the poor, but then, the Yan clan of Hezhou joined the fray, wanting to make use of Cai Yu’s influence and power to push out the Xi clan’s businesses in Zhongbo, and it is for this reason they came to buy and sell grains. They joined hands and made a big fortune out of it. Cai Yu is now sitting on a mountain of money, and he grew increasingly fond of hearing others buttering up to him as he ages. Gradually, he lost the chivalrous heart he used to have. He tore down the porridge booths<sup>2</sup> and grain stores he had set up outside and settled down with peace of mind as the local overlord of Chazhou. Voices of resentments fill the streets of Chazhou. He is no longer the person he used to be.”

However, when the mighty fall, they still command more respect than the common man. Cai Yu still had some influence left in the south of Zhongbo and in the territory of Hezhou. That “pa” Yan Heru addressed him by also carried a lot of weight. It was hard for those small gangs Luo Mu had privately funded to make a mark. He could only remain anxious but helpless about Chazhou’s existing food shortage predicament.

A brief silence fell over the room. The partially opened windows offered a glimpse of the orange jasmine still adorned with the dew of rain. The sky was overcast. A long time had since passed, and Luo Mu was running out of time to remain here.

Despite the open windows, Shen Zechuan still found it stuffy. The teacup under the pulps of his fingers had gone cold. He voiced something contradictory to what was said earlier. "If Cai Yu is still on his guard, then he should understand that the so-called voices of resentments filling the streets are merely underhanded tricks by the other gangs. As his brother-in-law, Your Excellency can give him a reminder or two in this regard."

Luo Mu was slightly taken aback. He did not understand what Shen Zechuan meant.

Shen Zechuan brushed the tea foam aside with the white jade-like lid of the teacup and said, "With Lei Changming's death, Cai Yu is the great bandit whose name has spread far and wide in Zhongbo. This is the perfect moment when he is in high spirits. It doesn't matter if it's Chazhou or the Yan Clan; he will tolerate no one else getting a share of the spoils. What's more, a man in his twilight years fears 'not being the man he once was' the most. If he were to think that the present wrath of the people was the underhanded work of the younger generations, he will definitely not let them off."

It was then Luo Mu understood. He could not help but think to himself just how a ruthless move this was.

Shen Zechuan wanted to make Cai Yu regard public wrath as infighting between the gangs. He wanted him to think that there was someone inciting the others intentionally. Once Cai Yu thought this way, he would intensify his efforts to suppress the smaller bandits in order to tighten his grasp on the money in his hands. The small bandits were already discontented. If they were to be beaten down by Cai Yu again, then their thirty percent of discontent would balloon to seventy percent. As long as both sides bore a grudge against the other, it would be hard for them to join forces again. They might even clash and give tit for tat.

"The small gangs Your Excellency has previously funded in private can be of use here. Once each of them has been badly and brutally beaten by Cai Yu, you can give them a helping hand and a generous gift of grains. Get them to band together and become brothers that bond together in a time of adversity." Shen Zechuan finished his tea and motioned for Qiao Tianya to

refill it. He looked at Luo Mu and continued, "When the small come together, they will naturally become a force to be reckoned with. It's just like a group of jackals hunting their prey. What we need to do is not to fight him head-on, but to add fuel to the fire and fan the flames."

Hearing this gave Luo Mu the chills. He only had to drop Cai Yu a few hints, and he would be able to make Cai Yu destroy himself. The stratagem of sowing discord was not uncommon, but Shen Zechuan had only been in Chazhou for merely one night, and he was able to get such a clear handle on Cai Yu and Chazhou. Luo Mu could not help but recall Shen Zechuan's original identity—the Imperial Bodyguards.

"Once we take Cai Yu out of the picture, we will be able to discuss the trading of grains between both prefectures in detail." Shen Zechuan said calmly. "Your Excellency's experience of having to endure shame and humiliation will become an edifying anecdote in Chazhou in the future. The fact that the commoners can fill their stomachs will be Your Excellency's most distinguished political achievement. Even in other prefectures, you'd be a local official admired by all. Your Excellency Luo, please watch your step. Goodbye."



Soon after Luo Mu left, it started raining again.

Shen Zechuan rode the carriage back to the courtyard. When he stepped off the carriage and saw the overcoat over Qiao Tianya's arm, he said, "The weather is still warm in the seventh month. There's no need to go so far as to wear this... Why did you even bring this?"

Holding up the umbrella, Qiao Tianya said, "I wasn't the one who thought of it. It was *shifu* who specifically gave the instruction."

Shen Zechuan strode through the door. He had gotten Ge Qingqing, who was far away in Juexi, to purchase this courtyard under the guise of doing business. It wasn't big, and was very old. The front porch was waterlogged, and there were not that many flowers or greenery planted in the yard.

"Ever since I arrived in Zhongbo, I've been neglecting my martial arts practice, and subsequently, I've made *shifu* worry. After going back, don't bring up my illness to him." As Shen Zechuan spoke, he looked back partially and smiled at Kong Ling. "It has also been hard on Mister Chengfeng this entire journey."

Kong Ling hurriedly deflected the acknowledgement.

“I saw the lush orange jasmines bathed in the dew of rain planted by the windows earlier when I was sitting inside the house. They are very soothing on the eyes.” Shen Zechuan said offhandedly. “Let’s plant some in the residence after heading back.”

They had only just started up the stairs when they saw Fei Sheng, who had been waiting within, step out to greet them. Not daring to be sloppy in his tasks, he faced Shen Zechuan with a smile and greeted, “Master has returned at long last.”

Shen Zechuan asked, “Looks like you have good news to report?”

“Master is wise.” Fei Sheng lifted the drapes for Shen Zechuan. “Before I set off, I received the items the marquis sent someone to deliver over. I know they are important, so I did not dare to stop on the journey and hurried all the way back to deliver it to Master.”

This person loved to speak in such an ingratiating way. Qiao Tianya found it funny and laughed out loud behind them. He followed them in and teased, “I always find it interesting when Fei the Eleventh comes. Amusing. And fun.”

Shen Zechuan removed his outer wide-sleeved robe and said, “Let me see.”

Ignoring Qiao Tianya, Fei Sheng took the items over from his subordinate and presented it before Shen Zechuan. Shen Zechuan touched the leather bag; it was still cold.

“The marquis sent someone to deliver it back to the residence with the specific instructions to keep it chilled on ice. We don’t have any ice at home, so we had to borrow from Madam Zhou. A pity it wasn’t covered on the way back and melted not long after.”

Shen Zechuan was curious deep down, but he did not let it show before the others. He pinched the leather bag with his fingertips. It was filled with liquid inside. He opened it, but before he could see it, he caught a waft of a pungent smell.

On smelling it, Qiao Tianya, who was not that far away from them, asked, “Isn’t this milk?”

“That can’t be.” Fei Sheng said in puzzlement. “Why would the marquis send milk all the way from afar? It can’t be kept overnight.”

They looked at Shen Zechuan. Shen Zechuan did not mind the smell. The corner of his lips lifted slightly in a smile. Sensing their eyes on him, he looked askance at them and asked, “What?”

Who would dare to say anything else?

Shen Zechuan closed it and opened up another box. As expected, there were loose tea leaves within. He stood for a moment and let loose a soft sigh, thinking that he really understood Xiao Chiye all too well.

Milk was the same everywhere to the others. But to Xiao Chiye, milk from Libei was milk from Libei. It could never be replaced by milk from elsewhere. He saved his own portion, and despite knowing that it could not be stored for long, he still wanted to have it delivered to Shen Zechuan.

What if it was delivered on time and was still drinkable? They ought to try all the delicious food and beverages together.

That was what Xiao Chiye thought. The others did not understand, but Shen Zechuan knew it best.



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#### Footnotes

1. 黃冊 *Huangce* or yellow registers/yellow book served during the Ming Dynasty to provide basic data for taxation and recruitment based on the household's classification according to their occupation. It was mainly divided into three categories: civilian, military, and craftsman.



- 2.
3. 粥棚 a food relief center providing handouts of food to the needy. Like a soup kitchen in modern times.



## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 137 : LETTER READING

Translated with: Jia<3



Shen Zechuan was writing a letter in the room, so Qiao Tianya and Fei Sheng took their leave.

Fei Sheng felt the itch to smoke, but did not dare to do so while standing under the eaves, worried that he would reek of smoke should Shen Zechuan call for him later. He stood still for a moment, but when he saw that Qiao Tianya wasn't moving along, he knew what this was all about.

"Something's the matter, huh?" Fei Sheng took a few steps outwards, leaning against the banisters along the corridor. "Tell me first, what kind of relationship do you have with that 'Unpolished Jade Yuanzhuo'?"

"We've met before, but we're not close. I have some impression of him." Qiao Tianya mentioned casually.

The more Qiao Tianya tried to make light of the matter, the more suspicious Fei Sheng was. He asked, "Yao Wenyu isn't a court official but a commoner who spends most of the year traveling out there. It's even difficult for Marquis Helian to meet him. Where did you encounter him?"

"Fate brought us together." Qiao Tianya did not answer seriously. "I didn't expect it either. Isn't this why I'm asking you to help me ask around?"

As Fei Sheng could get nothing out of him, he gave up probing and reported. "Secretariat Elder Hai, before he met with mishap, had previously wanted Yao Wenyu to leave Qudu and return to Jincheng, the hometown of the Yao Clan. There are students of Grand Preceptor Yao there who could watch over him on behalf of the Secretariat Elder, but Yao Wenyu didn't go."

Qiao Tianya uttered an "oh" and remained standing under the eaves to watch as the rain continued to fall.

Fei Sheng continued, "Yao Wenyu had probably realized at that time that Secretariat Elder Hai asked him to leave because he had already made up his mind to remonstrate to the death. So Yao Wenyu got on the carriage and circled around once before returning to wait in the residence for

Secretariat Elder Hai to finish court. Who would've known that what he ended up with was news of Secretariat Elder Hai's death instead?"

Droplets of rain dampened the toes of Qiao Tianya's boots as he watched the gradually intensifying haze in the courtyard. His gaze fell upon a puddle, and he saw his own reflection.

Fei Sheng paused for a moment. It was only when he observed that Qiao Tianya's expression was normal that he continued. "When Secretariat Elder was buried, tens of thousands of people came to send him off. Yao Wenyu was his only student, and he conducted the funeral for Secretariat Elder as a son would for his own father. It didn't take a few days for the students from the Imperial College to start a riot; all of his books were torn entirely. If not for Kong Qiu hiding him in time, he may very well have ended up getting ripped to shreds by the students. However, he seems to have vanished into thin air after the matter of the emperor's daughter was revealed. My informers in Qudu couldn't find a trace of him either."

Qiao Tianya shifted his gaze to him and repeated, "Vanished?"

"That's right, he vanished." Fei Sheng lifted the arm he had placed against the banister and drew a circle in the air. "When I escaped from Qudu with you, I lost contact with my informers for a period of time, and I only re-established contact with them a short while back. By then, Yao Wenyu had already vanished. Qudu is the territory the Imperial Bodyguards are most familiar with. If my men say he disappeared, it's more than likely he's dead."

Qiao Tianya immediately replied, "Impossible. Kong Qiu still wants to revive the moderates, and Yao Wenyu is an indispensable candidate. Whether it's for official or personal reasons, Kong Qiu would never let him die."

Fei Sheng stared at Qiao Tianya, waiting for him to finish before saying, "My claim that he's already dead is supported by evidence. Hear me out first. Initially, he was just missing. Kong Qiu and Cen Yu were both looking for him too, but to no avail. The last place he appeared at was Mount Bodhi, where Hai Liangyi was buried. When my men went to investigate, they found an abandoned carriage; he had been kidnapped. But if it was purely a kidnapping, the perpetrators would no doubt approach Kong Qiu to negotiate or, at the very least, discuss the conditions for release. That is only how Yao Wenyu could be useful as a ransom.

However, Kong Qiu heard nothing from them at all, and it wasn't just Kong Qiu; even the Yao Clan of Jincheng didn't receive news of him."

Qiao Tianya furrowed his brows. "If a riot hadn't broken out in the Imperial College, Yao Wenyu would be the new star of the moderates, but the Yao Clan suffered a drastic decline after the Imperial College's riot. He can no longer bear the responsibility of commanding all the students in the world. To Qudu, he's a useless pawn. There must be a reason to kill him, but if you ask me, there was absolutely no need to."

"Right?" Fei Sheng turned his head around and asked in puzzlement. "He is without an official position or title, but he is the eldest lawful son of the Yao Clan. Killing him will only bring nothing but problems. I don't understand it either."

Shen Zechuan called out to them from the room. Qiao Tianya ended the conversation and lifted the drapes to enter. He never broached the subject again.



Luo Mu, for the sake of prudence, did not bring up the matter to Cai Yu directly. Instead, he coaxed his concubine until she was happy and allowed her to follow him in and out of the study. The private letters, which were partially concealed in the study, were copied down by concubine Cai's maidservant before being surreptitiously delivered into the hands of Cai Yu.

Upon seeing the letters, Cai Yu immediately flew into a rage. He summoned Luo Mu to his residence and hurled a stream of verbal abuse towards him.

"I thought you were an honest man; that's why I was willing to marry my sister off to you. Was there a single time that I didn't contribute generously to help you out whenever your residence faced a difficulty? I treated you like a dear brother-in-law, yet you were scheming against me behind my back! Luo Mengzheng, look at yourself. If it weren't for my support, you'd have been just a nobody! Do you really think of yourself as a bigshot?!"

Cai Yu was an uneducated and crude man used to mixing around in the lowest stratum of society. He was so vulgar and coarse when he cursed that Luo Mu fell to his knees before the table to repent. "Elder Brother treats me well; how could I dare repay your kindness with enmity? These private letters are anonymous. I have no idea where they came from either. I've

been feeling nervous and afraid, unable to sleep at night and spending the day in a daze, all just to find an opportunity to bring up this matter with Elder Brother.”

Cai Yu got even angrier. He tossed the private letters onto the desk and pointed at Luo Mu. “What opportunity were you looking for? You and I are just a courtyard apart. Have you been crippled that you can’t get over here? If I hadn’t found out sooner, you would’ve already fallen into cahoots with them!”

Cai Yu was so furious that he felt uncomfortable. He stood up to take a few steps, repeatedly stroking his chest.

“You certainly are a piece of work, Luo Mengzheng! I was just wondering why there were so many people scolding me all of a sudden after spring this year. Turns out you were all trying to stab me behind my back! A shameless group of filthy trash. Back then, when I was renowned, you were all just babies who have yet to wean off milk. I always gave all sorts of financial assistance to you, yet you turn around and bite the hand that helps you! Why? You’ve gotten greedy after seeing how profitable the grains are? Bah! Do you think you people are worthy of doing this business? Are you people even capable of handling it?!”

Luo Mu was seized with terror. He wanted to speak, but Cai Yu bellowed, “Keep kneeling! I showed you due respect when we’re outside and thought of ways to support you, yet you don’t cherish it and stubbornly choose to fraternize with those ingrates. I’m telling you, if it weren’t for my younger sister’s love for you, you wouldn’t be going home today!”

Sweat was pouring from Luo Mu like rain. He kept his head lowered and said nothing.

Cai Yu just sneered when he stood looking at Luo Mu’s sweat-soaked back. He spent the first half of his life on knife-edge, and he finally settled down now that he was older. Who didn’t respectfully address him as “Elder Cai” each time he went out for business? All the major and minor bandits of Zhongbo had to give him face, and not even Lei Changming, whom he despised to the core, dared to behave out of line before him.

It was only after Luo Mu kneeled for an unknown period of time that Cai Yu’s anger dissipated some. In his eyes, Luo Mu was a spineless man. If he dared to keep those letters hidden for so long, it was surely because he had been instigated by the other party. This meant the other party was

genuinely plotting against him and was just about to take action towards him.

Cai Yu's heart was still fluttering with trepidation, but then he thought the better of it and ended up feeling so resentful that he was gnashing his teeth in anger. He had always thought of himself as a very generous man. Even though he had taken a large cut of the profit from the grains, he had still saved a share for those under them so that they would not starve to death. But these people did not know how to be grateful.

"Since they're so heartless, I have no choice but to be unrighteous." Cai Yu sat down beside the window where the light was spilling through and said maliciously. "Those insatiably greedy bunches are just like snakes trying to devour an elephant. I'll catch a few and make an example out of them as a warning to the others to make them understand that I, Cai Yu, may be old, but I'm not so old that I'd subject myself to humiliation from others."

While Cai Yu was publicly making a show of dealing with the smaller gangs on one end, Shen Zechuan's cold was gradually getting better on the other. Fei Sheng was very efficient in his record-taking. He not only had all the prices of goods in Chazhou documented in the book, but had also sent someone to Fanzhou to do the same.

During the first few days, Shen Zechuan did not spread the news that Cizhou was here to trade in grains; Kong Ling had only gone around Chazhou to buy non-local products, making it seem as though they had made the trip especially to purchase these goods. When someone came to ask about their visit, Kong Ling's reply was ambiguous and dismissive. After a few days, the number of people who came to probe lessened.

Kong Ling followed Shen Zechuan out to the shops owned by the Xi Clan. The shops operated by the Xi Clan here mainly dealt with parallel imports, rouges, and medicinal herbs.

"Starving refugees swarm the land outside the city, while the city remains peaceful and wealthy. Troubled times or not, the ones who suffer will always be the common people." Kong Ling picked up the medicinal herb, took a sniff, and praised, "This is good quality stuff."

"Xi Hongxuan was a man of foresight when it comes to business." Shen Zechuan glanced around the shop. "Regular people generally would not dare to open such a shop here for fear of getting robbed, or poor business. In these last few years, Zhongbo can't even afford to feed itself. Who would

have thought that men with power in the city would be far more extravagant than the merchants of Juexi? All that's lacking is exactly this kind of shop."

"Money makes the mare go. Anything is possible with money." Kong Ling lamented.

When Shen Zechuan spoke to him about Xi Hongxuan, he was talking about his own money vaults. Kong Ling understood the weight behind his words; this was recognition for taking his side in Cizhou. Kong Ling felt his chest tighten, thinking that he had been far too impulsive that day. As the saying goes, one should hide his inadequacies by staying quiet. It was not a good thing to display his own intelligence before a brilliant master.

Kong Ling did not reply and played dumb, and so Shen Zechuan did not continue the conversation. He took a look at the accounts for a moment and carefully asked the shopkeepers about news on Juexi's end. The shopkeepers presented him with some trinkets as a tribute of respect, but Shen Zechuan rejected the jade ware and the likes and merely accepted a fan that had caught his eye. However, he had already gotten accustomed to the fan Xiao Chiye had gifted him, and it did not feel quite right to be holding this new fan in his palm. While he could make do with this fan, he was still counting on Xiao Chiye to not forget about the matter when he returned.



The rain finally ceased in Chazhou, but it started to fall in Libei. While the weather in Zhongbo was still hot, Libei was already starting to turn cool. With the winds picking up in the seventh month, it would get colder after the end of the rainy season.

Ever since receiving Xiao Fangxu's letter, Xiao Chiye had been in a bad mood. He was still stationed at the Shasan Camp but had set up a patrol range with the Bianbo Camp, taking both camps under his watch and keeping his guard up on all sides.

Wu Ziyu was initially going to send the battle steeds up north after three days, but he had already been delaying it for some days. He couldn't leave on his own and had to follow Xiao Chiye. After receiving the letter, Xiao Chiye was now the commanding general in charge of military supplies in Libei. Wu Ziyu did not have a say no matter where he went; he had to listen to the deployment orders of the respective divisions' quartermasters.

Xiao Chiye came down from the walls of the camp and headed back to the tent in the rain. The sky was about to darken, and the mess cook was banging a pot as a signal for mealtime. The Libei Armored Cavalry and the

Imperial Army were like chalk and cheese as they each squatted on one side with their backs facing the other.

On one hand, the Libei Armored Cavalry, having tasted successive defeats, could not get past the humiliation and were thus awfully on edge. On the other hand, the ways of the Imperial Army were rather unorthodox, and everyone was an old hand at cracking jokes and jesting around. They had few rules to follow once they stripped off their armors, and they were all a playful bunch who loved their fun. This was not something the Libei Armored Cavalry could agree with.

Xiao Chiye received a handkerchief from Chen Yang to wipe his sweat. The tent was wide open, and the drapes were not lowered, or it would be too stuffy inside. Before he could sit down, he saw Gu Jin enter. “Master, Young Master’s letter is here.”

Xiao Chiye took it and raised a hand as a signal for them to leave. He brewed himself tea and drank it as he unwrapped the bundle that was neither too big nor too small. There was nothing much inside, just a neat stack of clothes under a bulging bag. He paid no attention to the clothing, but opened the bag first.

The bag contained only two items inside: a bunch of pressed, dried orange jasmine, and a letter. The letter was a little damp after being soaked for a long time. When Xiao Chiye picked it up, he could still smell the scent of flowers. He drank up the tea in one gulp, then opened the letter.

The letter was short. By the time Xiao Chiye finished reading it, he had already swallowed his tea. He turned his head towards the entrance of the tent, where Chen Yang and Gu Jin still stood, and said with composure, “Lower the drapes. I’m cold.”

Gu Jin wanted to ask, *didn’t you find it ridiculously stuffy a moment ago*, but Chen Yang had already removed the hooks and let the drapes down.

The moment the drapes shielded him from view, Xiao Chiye read the letter over and over again. Finally, he collapsed heavily onto the bed and held up the letter, reading it word for word.

Days have passed since we parted, I know you yearn for me. So here’s a little gift to comfort you with.

Touching it is akin to touching me.

Xiao Chiye stared at that line of text and repeated it once more.

Touching it is akin to touching me.

Xiao Chiye's throat felt dry. He inexplicably started laughing, his gaze a little fierce.

Written at the very bottom in light and cursive penmanship were the words:

It's hard to sleep by my lonesome self. When will you return?

A good night's sleep is only possible when you hold me in your arms.

Xiao Chiye loosened his grip and gazed towards the ceiling. Half a moment later, he flipped himself over and buried his face into the pillow. But it was as though Shen Zechuan was lying right next to him, nibbling his ear and whispering in that lazy, laid-back way of his, "*A good night's sleep is only possible when you hold me in your arms...*"



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SPECIAL THANKS TO : [Eggy](#), [Suika](#)<3



## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 138 : STRATEGIST

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



When Shen Zechuan woke up in the morning, the day was just starting to break. After Shen Zechuan had his breakfast, he boarded the carriage and headed back to the cosmetics shop with Kong Ling. It was still business-as-usual in the front hall. Qiao Tianya and Fei Sheng stood guard in the courtyard, while the Imperial Bodyguards kept careful surveillance both inside and outside the shop.

Half an hour later, Luo Mu's sedan arrived too. He was wearing his usual attire—a deep red robe with a slanted collar. The shopkeeper at the front desk was sharp. Seeing as the attendants following behind Luo Mu were unfamiliar, he raised his voice and said, “It’ll be scorching hot soon, and it’ll be tough on you all to be standing outside. Men, lead these brothers into the room for some tea and a rest.”

Those few attendants exchanged glances. Presuming that Luo Mu would not be able to escape, they followed the shop assistant into a room. After entering, they insisted on hanging the curtains up so that they could keep an eye on the entrance of the front hall.

The shop assistant followed beside Luo Mu and offered a handkerchief to Luo Mu to wipe his hands. Luo Mu wiped his hands as per usual and took a look at the goods on the counter. The shopkeeper greeted him with a courteous smile and said, “The last time Your Excellency came by, we didn’t have all the goods. This time we have prepared them well in advance. There are even new jade pieces and trinkets that have just arrived from the east. They are all in the back. This way, please!”

Luo Mu appeared to be hesitating as he cast a glance at the attendants.

The shop assistant continued, “This short distance will not take too much effort. Some goods are hard to come by, it’s not very convenient to bring them to the front for you to choose from, and it doesn’t look good on you when you view them there.”

Only then did Luo Mu reluctantly nod and follow the shopkeeper to the courtyard at the back.

Qiao Tianya personally drew the curtains. Luo Mu said his thanks and bent over to enter. He first paid his obeisances to Shen Zechuan, then looked at Kong Ling. It was only after seeing that both their expressions were relaxed that he took his seat.

Shen Zechuan noted that Luo Mu was dressed as a literati today and presumed that he must have chosen his clothes and shoes carefully before leaving the house. Although he sat impeccably upright after entering, he would subconsciously look at Kong Ling wherever there was a conversation. The moment Kong Ling opened his mouth, Luo Mu's eyes would be fixed on him.

"Cai Yu has been going all out to hit out at the smaller gangs these days, but he knows not to go too far. He understands the principle of interdependency given that they share a common lot; if one falls, the other will be in danger too, and he also fears he will end up isolated by all if he crosses the line. So at the same time he strikes out at the smaller gangs, he attempts to win over the remaining younger generation by 'offering low-priced grains to help the masses'." As Shen Zechuan was at the side, Luo Mu was already trying to hold his gaze in check. "This approach is to sell the grains cheaply to the gangs who had not been stirring up trouble."

Kong Ling asked, "How much is that?"

Luo Mu answered, "One tael for five *dou* of grains."

Kong Ling smiled and said, "The price isn't really that lowered. His so-called 'low-priced grains' merely means he makes just a tiny bit less profit than the others out there. Cai Yu used to be generous in helping the needy, and he never used to think much of money and worldly possessions, but he's so miserly now that he's older."

At this price, the grains could not be called "low-priced grains"; instead, they ought to be called "expensive grains". Chazhou's current rate for the grains was one tael of silver for two *dou* of rice, while the rate in Qudu was one tael of silver for two *dan* of rice.<sup>1</sup> Cai Yu was making big bucks off the profits. What's more, it was profit that forced the common folks into dead ends. To think he merely changed it to one tael of silver for five *dou* of rice just to win over the others. It was clear he was hankering over the money and could not bear to drop the price too much.

Shen Zechuan brushed aside the floating foam in his tea and said, "Cai Yu is in a predicament too, with no way to back down. Everyone inside and outside the city is now complaining about the high price of the grains. If he

were to drop the price drastically to win those smaller gangs of bandits over to his side, the common folks would hate him even more, so naturally he wouldn't dare to do so."

"It's not just Chazhou. Public wrath is running high even in Fanzhou." Luo Mu was the most acquainted with Cai Yu's business. "At the beginning of this year, Lei Changming broke off contact with the Yan clan for some unknown reason, and Yan Heru no longer gave financial aid to the bandits from Mount Luo. That was why they thought of seizing Cizhou and robbing Cizhou's granary. Part of the reason was that they could not afford Cai Yu's grains."

"Let Cai Yu sell for a few days first." Shen Zechuan turned over his folding fan and tapped it lightly against the table. "It doesn't matter if it's one tael for two *dou*, or one tael for five *dou*, the common folks and the smaller bandits all can't afford it. Cai Yu forced himself to show such kindness naturally because he hopes those under him will acquiesce to him and stop opposing him. But his attitude isn't humble enough, and this will only backfire on him."

"It's not just the common folks." Kong Ling lamented. "Even governmental officials can't afford to buy with their monthly salary issued by the imperial court. On our way here, we saw people selling themselves everywhere outside Chazhou, even to the extent of selling off all the children in the family in the hope that they would have a chance to live."

"People aren't worth much nowadays, and even if they sell the children, it's all at low prices." Luo Mu had long heard of this. "Besides, who in Zhongbo will be willing to spend money to buy the people given the present situation? Only the brothels in Fanzhou will be willing to take them in. And even if they sell down someone from a decent origin into a low-class trade... the money won't be enough for them to exchange for one *dou* of rice."

Shen Zechuan was still not familiar with the situation in Fanzhou, so he asked, "Since Fanzhou has difficulty feeding its people, then where does it get the money to operate all these brothels?"

Luo Mu answered, "They are run by bandits too, for the specific purpose of dealing in the flesh trade with the bandits from Mount Luo and the Prefecture of Dengzhou. Prices are extremely low, and even this bit of profit is all swallowed up by the procuresses of the brothels."

Perplexed, Kong Ling asked, "But they have to feed all those people they brought back to do business, right? Do they buy grains from Cai Yu too?"

Luo Mu shook his head. "Humans are worth less than dogs. They are fed swill and weeds. If they starve to death, the bandits can come and buy more again. Anyway, the prices are so cheap they won't suffer any losses either way."

Kong Ling sat in a daze. Anguish gradually came over his face. "Zhongbo has been reduced to such a state. If the imperial court had been willing to lend a helping hand, the situation would not have deteriorated to this point. I said many years back that Hua Siqian..."

Shen Wei's name was still wedged in his throat.

Knowing Kong Ling well, Luo Mu feared he would say something unfavorable and leave a bad taste in Shen Zechuan's mouth, thus he hurriedly switched the subject and said, "So what should be the next step according to Vice Commander's plans?"

Instead, Shen Zechuan replied, "If Shen Wei had not cowered and recoiled from battle, Zhongbo would not have been so badly defeated. I hold Mister Chengfeng in the highest esteem for his concern for the common people, so there is no need to make a special point of avoiding certain subjects."

Shen Zechuan was so sincere that Luo Mu felt embarrassed instead. Kong Ling felt his heart sink. He had recently been both following and avoiding Shen Zechuan. He was a clever man; he was willing to work for Zhou Gui because he was familiar with Zhou Gui's character. However, he still felt some unease towards Shen Zechuan, and one of the biggest reasons was that he thought that following Shen Zechuan was a dangerous move. Masters that were difficult to read were the hardest to serve. The more calm things appeared to be, the more he had to tread with caution.

Kong Ling could side with him, but he was unwilling to assist Shen Zechuan the way he supported Zhou Gui. Shen Zechuan had been dropping hints repeatedly this entire trip, but Kong Ling feigned ignorance and turned a blind eye to it all. And now, he was filled with even more trepidation when he saw how Shen Zechuan was not only not angry but even giving him a way out.

Seeing the changes in Kong Ling's expression, Shen Zechuan gently turned over his fan and paused for a moment before speaking. "Suppress the

news that Cizhou is here to sell grains for a few more days. Wait until the bandits prioritize their own interests and are no longer willing to be pushed around by Cai Yu before releasing the news. When that happens, keep the reserved grain wagons from entering the city. We'll set up the porridge booth right outside of the city. Tell the refugees that Cizhou is here to sell the grains at a regular price."

Luo Mu probed, "What if they have no money?"

Shen Zechuan smiled and looked towards Luo Mu. "Isn't this all funds for Chazhou's future garrison troops and wasteland reclamation? The common people may be poor, but you've acquired quite the sum of money while sticking to Cai Yu. Furthermore, once Cai Yu is out of the picture, most of his family assets will fall into Your Excellency's hands. Use those taels to do business with Cizhou in exchange for winning the people's hearts, and that would solve Your Excellency's future problems. Now, I still need to remind Your Excellency that Cizhou is here to do business, not to tighten its belts just so it can offer financial aid to others."

Sweat materialized on Luo Mu's forehead. He dabbed a little of it off with a handkerchief, nodding as he said, "But of course, but of course..."



When Shen Zechuan returned to the courtyard this time, he did not return with Kong Ling.

Qiao Tianya, with a bamboo hat on his head, sat at the head of the horse carriage with both arms behind his head as a pillow. He said on the other side of the curtain, "Does Master not want him anymore?"

Unable to stand the heat, Shen Zechuan closed his eyes in the stuffy interior to take a rest. He listened to the peddlers hawking their wares along the street for a moment before he said, "I've tried both carrot and stick, but he's determined to turn me down."

With a young stalk of grass between his lips, Qiao Tianya said, "That's to be expected. He has been lying low and hiding his abilities in your presence all because he fears being coerced. After he graduated from the academy, he did not go along with Zhou Gui and Luo Mu to join the imperial court as an official. He had simply wanted to be a commoner. Men like him are natural-born strategists. His only pride is the ability to choose his own future."

Shen Zechuan opened his eyes partially. "It's not like he's my only option."

Shen Zechuan did not want to impose his will on Kong Ling and force him into it, but he really lacked manpower. At first, he thought the pair of Kong Ling and Zhou Gui were the best arrangement. Both men, when put together, could maintain the stability on one end. At the very least, it would not be a problem for them to maintain the stability in Cizhou. But now, Shen Zechuan was lacking a talent who could give counsel. What he lacked was no longer a pair of eyes or a pair of hands, but a strategist who could assist him in devising strategic and tactical plans for the overall game.

Kong Ling had quite the reputation in Zhongbo for his talents. He was fellow student with both Zhou Gui and Luo Mu. With just his personal friendships with both men, he would be able to assist Shen Zechuan with many issues in both the prefectures of Cizhou and Chazhou, just like how he was able to deliver a visitation card to pay Luo Mu a visit outright. He also had the social connections he had built up in the Dunzhou army from his time as Tantai Hu's adviser. As long as these people were still alive, they could be of use in the future. Besides, Shen Zechuan did not think highly of Kong Ling back then. When Lei Jingzhe plotted to hoodwink them, Kong Ling had been so easily deceived. But that shout Kong Ling made before the city of Cizhou made Shen Zechuan take note of him once again. It was not until Kong Ling had swiftly taken his side right before they set off for Chazhou that Shen Zechuan fully set his mind on taking Kong Ling into his employ.

But Kong Ling did not have the intention to swap masters.

Shen Zechuan was too young. His background not only left much to be desired, but he also studied under Qi Huilian. Qi Huilian had been through many ups and downs in Qudu, and he also served as the head of the eastern palace for many years. What kind of student would such a teacher produce? Qi Huilian was the emperor's teacher. Kong Ling simply did not dare to continue thinking further. The most crucial thing was that he feared Shen Zechuan; he was unable to trust Shen Zechuan.

In Kong Ling's eyes, Shen Zechuan was a cold-hearted man who could readily cast aside personal relationships. If it had been Zhou Gui today, he would never speak of such words to Luo Mu.

Vexed, Shen Zechuan raised his head to look at the curtain of the carriage that was swaying because of the jolts and bumps. Sunlight flickered through the gaps onto his knees and blossomed over that particular patch of his white robe.

After Qi Huilian's death, Shen Zechuan wore white. He never asked Qiao Tianya where Han Cheng placed his teacher's body after he left Qudu. His anguished wails that night were known only to Xiao Chiye. But the names of Xue Xiuzhuo, Han Cheng, and the Empress Dowager, along with the city walls of Qudu that had been stained red in that pouring rain, were all seared into Shen Zechuan's heart and mind.

He had to stand firm. He needed a strategist.

Shen Zechuan said to himself silently.

A strategist who could stand up to Xue Xiuzhuo as an equal.



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Thanks to [AliceLiddell](#) for spotting the typo!

#### Footnotes

1. 斗 dou, a dry measure for grain equal to one-tenth of a 石 dan.
2. 石 dan, dry measure for grain equal. 1 dan = approximately 90kg (see author's note in chapter 113)

# QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 139 : THE PRICE OF GRAIN

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



Knowing that he had humiliated Shen Zechuan with his rebuff, Kong Ling barely approached him over the next few days. Instead, he focused his attention on inspecting the goods in the respective stores, too busy to even pause. On the other hand, Shen Zechuan behaved as he always did and continued to greet him as Mister Chengfeng whenever he saw him. This filled Kong Ling with even more dread, and he deferred to Shen Zechuan in every matter.

Just as they had expected, Cai Yu's low-priced grain did not impress the smaller bandits. With Luo Mu in the midst acting as a go-between and pulling the strings, several parties gradually started developing feelings of dissatisfaction towards Cai Yu. Cai Yu had a taste for extravagance in recent years, and each year when he celebrated his birthday, he would surely receive rare and priceless gifts. He would also rank his friends and relatives close and far according to the presents they gifted him, and this subsequently stirred up a great deal of unhappiness among a great number of them in private. At the same time, news that Cai Yu was distributing cheap grains suddenly spread outside the city, and with the price falling lower and lower, the starving commoners outside the city grew more and more outraged.

Cai Yu used to consider himself a respected elder of Chazhou, and yet he was ignoring them all with the city gates shut, leaving them to fend for themselves. Shen Zechuan was right; it wasn't that he did not understand, but that he was in a predicament with no way to back down.

The grain in Chazhou was presently supplied by Hezhou and subsidized by the Yan Clan. By taking all these grains, Cai Yu had to pay back interest to the Yan Clan, and the portion he could not pay back had to be paid out from his own pockets. Lowering the price would only disadvantage himself, and as he was unwilling to make a loss, he could only force himself to push on ahead. He had already sent multiple letters in succession to Hezhou to enquire about the situation.

This was what Shen Zechuan had been waiting for.



Cai Yu could never imagine that over one night, the entire city would be in discussion over the price of grain.

“Where did these people come from?” Cai Yu called for the maidservant to help him put on his clothes, and asked his trusted aide, “Why have I heard nothing about Cizhou’s grain wagons entering our territory!”

His aide replied, “They took the public road and suppressed the news of their arrival outside of the city; it never managed to reach us.”

Cai Yu’s expression was somber as he put on his boots and took a few steps. “I’d found it strange when Kong Ling entered the city. What would Cizhou be doing here for no rhyme or reason? Turns out it’s to steal our business! They’ve prepared so thoroughly, all to challenge me! What did they say?”

His trusted aide picked up the hem of Cai Yu’s robe from behind. “I’ve sent someone to make inquiries this morning. The price of the merchants from Cizhou is one tael for seven *dou* of rice.”<sup>1</sup>

On hearing this, Cai Yu promptly sneered. “I thought they were here to play Bodhisattva and save the people, but they are also just here to profit from others’ misfortune. Has there been any reply from Hezhou?”

The aide estimated the time and answered, “At this point in time, the letter hasn’t been delivered yet.”

Cai Yu stood by the door and contemplated it in silence alongside the murmuring stream in the courtyard and the clear, melodious chirps of the birds under the covered walkway. He had spent a huge sum of money on this compound with the intent to pass it down to the younger generations as a family residence. He still had a few sons who were waiting to take over the family business and properties from their old man, and there were more than a thousand people in his family whose livelihoods depended on his sale of grains. He did not dare to lose this business.

“One tael for seven *dou*.” Cai Yu muttered. “One tael for seven *dou*... Isn’t Cizhou belittling me a tad too much by thinking of snatching away my business at this price? Since they lowered their price, then we will go even lower. Go tell the grain stores under us that I’m going to reduce the price to one tael for eight *dou* out of pity for the commoners outside the city.”

The aide hesitated. “But the Young Master has yet to reply. If...”

“Lower it.” Cai Yu’s expression gradually grew grave. “The Young Master still addresses me as ‘pa’. Even if we can’t make a profit this time, I

can thicken my skin and go to Hezhou to ask for a favor. With the Young Master at the head of the Yan clan, no one would dare to do anything to me! Cizhou came bearing down on us so menacingly this time. There will be trouble in the future if we don't make them think twice and bow out."

Cai Yu's trusted aide had only just left the house, and Shen Zechuan knew all about it.

Fei Sheng's network was everywhere. When he whispered the information to Shen Zechuan, Shen Zechuan was handing out free porridge outside the city.

The weather was bright and clear today. Shen Zechuan left the city at the hour of *mao*<sup>2</sup> and started giving out free porridge to the poor and needy from the hour of *chen*<sup>3</sup> right up to the hour of *shen*.<sup>4</sup> The sun was so scorching hot at this moment that the muddy ground was cracked. Refugees all sought shelter under the shades of the trees. Shen Zechuan gave a slight nod after hearing Fei Sheng out and said, "Since he has taken the bait, he won't be able to escape. Go to Luo Mu and get him to tell the smaller gangs of bandits not to get anxious. Cai Yu's price of one tael for eight *dou* can be further reduced."

Fei Sheng was clearly aware of Shen Zechuan's intent, but he just had to play dumb before the latter and asked like a student eager to learn, "Then, Master, are we going to reduce our prices too? We can't let Cai Yu get his way."

Shen Zechuan tossed the handkerchief to Qiao Tianya and said, "Of course, but we'll have to wait for nightfall before we reduce the price."

Because he had matters to attend to during the day.

A white-robed gentleman wearing a white jade pearl with two or three attendants in tow suddenly appeared outside the city of Chazhou and stayed at the porridge booth from morning to night to personally distribute the porridge to the people. The refugees who received the porridge made a little inquiry and found out that these grains from Cizhou were initially meant to be sold in Chazhou, but Cai Yu refused to let them into the city. Since they pitied the commoners outside the city, they used those grains to hand it out to them instead.

Shen Zechuan's attitude was cordial and amiable, and he spoke humbly and politely. What's more, he was good-looking. If there were any households with orphans and widows, or with the old, weak, ill, and disabled, he would not only give them food but even send the physician

over to take a look at them. He even absorbed all the consultation fees and cost of the medicinal herbs himself. In less than two hours, the refugees who had come forth on hearing of his name had converged into a flock. Whenever the others asked about Shen Zechuan's name, Qiao Tianya and Fei Sheng would answer with "His Excellency Zhou's aide" and "Mister Chengfeng's comrade".

Even still, Shen Zechuan was young, and he had a distinguished air about him when he moved and acted. Speculations started swirling around in no time. None of the common folks knew who this young master was, and that subsequently made him appear all the more mysterious and conspicuous.



Cai Yu was restless with anxiety as he kept waiting at home until the hour of *chou*,<sup>5</sup> all the while not daring to close his eyes. When he heard someone coming to report, he hurriedly stood up to let his trusted aide in before asking, "How is it? Is there an update on Kong Ling's end?"

The aide had been running to and fro the entire day, and even if he had taken the sedan mid-journey, he still could not endure this degree of exhaustion. His back was presently drenched in perspiration. He wiped his sweat with his sleeves and gasped for breath as he answered, "It went down! As Old Master predicted, Cizhou has also lowered the price again!"

Cai Yu worriedly asked, "By how much?"

The aide replied, "One tael for nine *dou* of rice."

Cai Yu's expression was calm; this price was within his expectations. He paced. "We lowered by one *dou*, and they followed suit. It seems that they do not have enough confidence either."

The aide followed alongside Cai Yu. "Old Master, then should we still lower the price? If we lower it any further, it's going to reach one *dan*!"

From two *dou* to one *dan*, Cai Yu was already thinking about the kind of punishment he was going to face when he went to Hezhou after this disaster. However, he could only continue forcing the issue right now. He clenched his jaw and said, "Lower it further! To one tael for one *dan*!"



When Luo Mu heard the news in his residence, he said to Kong Ling, "If Cai Yu continues to lower the price, it'd be difficult for him to raise it again in the future. He's fallen for the ploy hook, line, and sinker."

Kong Ling faced the window and confirmed that there was no one else around before speaking. "It's all thanks to the Vice Commander's foresight."

Thinking of Shen Zechuan made Luo Mu sigh. "If it had been me, I would have been deceived too. How could Cai Yu have known that Cizhou was planning to veer towards Qudu's price? This is a lucrative business. Every increase of one *dou* of grain per tael is a loss of real money."

"Riches cannot be brought to the grave; how long can he profit off misfortunes in Zhongbo? You're a fool! If Cai Yu had any foresight, he would've shown restraint this year. Cizhou had no confidence due to a lack of resources six years ago, but we've been recuperating and rebuilding our strength in these six years. The transportation of the army provisions for Libei's military from Cizhou last year was decided on by Secretariat Elder Hai and the marquis. Think about it, Qudu already knew then that Cizhou had the ability to bear this responsibility. Once Cizhou is revitalized, those with ambition from the respective prefectures will also vie with each other to rise to the top. When the time comes for these places to re-cultivate their grain fields, the price of grain in Zhongbo will surely fall. This path to fortune cannot last for long; the only question is who will be the one to crush it." Having spoken to this point, Kong Ling paused for a moment. "Both the time and place are right. The Vice Commander meant to make a killing in Zhongbo."

Upon noting that Kong Ling was in a daze, Luo Mu asked, "I noticed that the Vice Commander has intentions of using you, yet you continuously turn a blind eye to it. Chengfeng, could it be that the Vice Commander can't be compared to Zhou Gui either?"

Kong Ling gazed at the tree shade outside the window and replied only half a moment later, "My abilities are mediocre. The only reason I can support Zhou Gui is that he can only be the Prefectural Prefect of Cizhou in this lifetime. Keeping the calm in one corner of the world is easy enough that someone of my caliber can do it. But stabilizing a vast territory can only require talents who are pillars of the state. The Vice Commander is no mere fish in a pond; I dare not be so presumptuous as to claim connections with such a man."

Luo Mu was struck dumb.



Neither the men inside or outside of Chazhou slept well this night. Cai Yu drank cup after cup of strong tea, afraid to shut his eyes lest the other party surreptitiously lower the price again the moment he lay down. He had never been a man with business acumen, and he had been only relying on his status as a bandit to keep up a farce for the Yan Clan. And now, he was a bundle of nerves, having been driven to a state of anxiety.

The people from Cizhou remained passive for a long time. Only the porridge booth outside the city was still operating. Cai Yu had heard that more than a thousand people had converged outside the city, but he was sure that what he had in his hands were the bona fide armed forces; the gathering outside the city was merely a motley crew. Even if they were to converge together, they could not affect the situation.

Time continued to pass by. When afternoon came around, Cai Yu decided to take a nap fully-clothed, but he had only just shut his eyes when he heard a report coming in. He hurriedly sat up and let a maidservant support him on his way out. The moment he saw the aide's expression, his heart sank. "How much did they lower it to?"

The aide anxiously reported, "Old Master, the price drop this time is crazy! They've dropped it to one tael for one *dan* and three *dou* of rice. The people who were adopting a wait-and-see attitude yesterday are already starting to leave the city one after the other. They are all making a beeline for the Cizhou's grain wagon to buy grains!"

Cai Yu was rendered speechless for a moment. "That low?!"

The aide replied, "It's already close to the price of grain in Juexi. If it keeps getting lower, we will have to give up all our profits after spring this year to repay Hezhou!"

Cai Yu held on to the man and said in disbelief. "Didn't Cizhou just send army provisions to Libei? Now that Libei has rebelled, they'll be getting all of their provisions from Cizhou in the future. If Zhou Gui sells off all of the grains, how is he going to account for it to the Prince of Libei? Furthermore, what are they even earning by lowering the price this much?!"

The trusted aide followed behind Cai Yu, similarly panicking as he spoke, "Exactly! If they continue lowering the price, it will be no different from Juexi. Wouldn't that be making a loss? What profits could there even be?"

Cai Yu was getting on in years, and he had not slept all night; he was presently so unsteady on his feet that he had to let someone help him to the

seat. “They’re determined to steal our business...” Hatred bubbled up in him. “How dare they! Go gather my men. Tonight, we’ll overturn their grain wagon, capture Kong Ling, and kill all those that came along with him! I have ferocious bandits on my side; why would I be scared of them? Zhou Gui, that ignorant brat. I’ll see if he has the guts to fight me head-on!”

The aide slapped his knee, thrilled as he spoke, “That’s the way, Old Master! We should’ve retaliated long ago and not wasted all that effort playing nice to them! I’ll go right now!”



#### Author’s Words

Okay, I get it. You all want them to meet, right? Alright, alright.  
Coming your way soon.

Thank you for reading.

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#### Footnotes

1. 斗 *dou*, a dry measure for grain equal to one-tenth of a 石 *dan*.
2. 石 *dan*, dry measure for grain. In QJJ, 1 *dan* = approximately 90kg (see author’s note in chapter 113).
3. So a *dou* would be about 9 kg.
4. 卯时 5-7 am based on the system of two-hour subdivisions used in former times
5. 辰时 7-9 am
6. 申时 3-5 pm
7. 丑时 1-3am

# QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 140 : CITY OUTSKIRTS

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



As Cai Yu gathered his men with great fanfare on his end, the refugees outside the city had already amassed into a horde. It took merely one night for the news that someone had set up a booth to give out porridge to spread more than ten *li* around. Refugees who were so starved that they were sallow and emaciated came in droves and crowded around the Cizhou's porridge booth so closely that not even a drop of water could trickle through.

Qiao Tianya watched as the people came swarming to them. There were no longer enough hands at the front to help maintain the queue of people who came to receive their porridge, so he signaled to Fei Sheng with his eyes. Fei Sheng backed away in understanding and led the Imperial Bodyguards to guard the wagon. He also swapped the guards from Cizhou over to help with the maintenance of the queue order. These Imperial Bodyguards were all dressed in black robes with blades on them, and every one of them looked capable and tough, thus producing a deterrent effect on the restless people all around.

"Master." Qiao Tianya raised his arm to hold back some people and whispered to Shen Zechuan. "It's getting dark. We've already been here for two days and a night. It's almost time. You should retreat to the rear."

Shen Zechuan had just finished chatting with an elderly among the refugees. He did not look back upon hearing him, but he put away the blue handkerchief that he had taken out and said, "There's no harm in staying."

Qiao Tianya surveyed the surroundings and looked at the people around them jostling against one another. These were all emaciated refugees. Worried that there would be a conflict in a while and someone might fish in troubled water to make a grab for the grains and hurt Shen Zechuan in the process, he said, "Master, stand behind, or stay close to the wagon."

Shen Zechuan looked at the forest bathed in the sunset glow of red clouds that looked like torn pieces of red cotton. The setting sun was already midway in its descent; it would not be long before the sky turned

dark. He had already stayed outside the city for two days and a night, and now, he withdrew his gaze and said, "There's no hurry."



The sky gradually darkened, and the various stores along the streets in the cities all hung up their lanterns. Chazhou had no wine taverns and tea houses at present, but owing to the proliferation of human traffickers here, there were plenty of brothels set up at remote corners. Cai Yu wanted to rally his men, and the ones he called were all the various heads and chiefs within his own gang. These people relied on Cai Yu for a living and rarely did any proper jobs to earn their keep. Instead, they liked to bully the weak and tyrannize the city. They loved to make their way to the brothels and laze around in there all year round. When they were called out one at a time, they were still holding up their pants, looking all bleary-eyed. Many of them were dead drunk. Cai Yu's trusted aide did not dare to offend them and had to coax and flatter them before he could get these people to step out.

While they were taking a roll call and lining up in formation on this end, Luo Mu and Kong Ling had also started making their moves on their side.

Kong Ling bowed to the various chiefs of the small-time gangs that Luo Mu had helped in secret and said, "As everyone knows, Cizhou is here this time to sell grains. As long as we can get through this crisis safely tonight, the price of rice tomorrow can only be even lower."

One of them asked, "Talk is cheap. How do you expect us to believe you with no proof or guarantee?"

So Kong Ling turned aside and gestured to Luo Mu and said, "My words can't be trusted, but surely you can believe His Excellency Luo's words?"

Luo Mu had repeatedly extended a helping hand to these gangs, funding them with quite the amount of silver in just this half month alone. They had been beaten down by Cai Yu so badly lately that they did not even dare to step out of their alleys in broad daylight. They were not given a share of that cheap one-tael-for-five-*dou* grains. Cai Yu had already driven them into the corner, and it was all because of Luo Mu's financial support that they could survive, so naturally, they were willing to believe Luo Mu's words.



Luo Mu cleared his throat and said, "At present, all the granaries in the city are managed by Cai Yu alone. The prices are indeed exorbitant. Even people like us can't afford it, let alone the common folks. Cizhou's offered price is just right; it's close to Qudu's price. What's even rarer is Cizhou's promise never to inflate the price in the future. I have already signed the documents with Cizhou. It can't be fake when it's all been written down in black and white."

The various chiefs put their heads together to discuss it among themselves.

Kong Ling continued, "I know all you fellows are worried about the Yan Clan, but it's better to just get it over with than to prolong the agony. Instead of allowing the Yan Clan to lean on Cai Yu's authority to control the lifeline of Chazhou, why not let my fellow brothers here decide yourselves? Moreover, the only reason Cai Yu is willing to lower the price today is because Cizhou's grain price is too low. If we can't get rid of him tonight, then once Cizhou's grain wagons leaves, the price of grain in Chazhou will rise back up to what it was originally."

If one wanted people to work together as one, one first had to talk to them about the benefits. Kong Ling knew this very well. The original price set by Cizhou was one tael for one *dan* and eight *dou* of rice,<sup>1</sup> but Shen Zechuan had not mentioned this amount at all during these past few days of price reductions, and this was precisely because he was waiting to use this information to inspire the people at the right moment.

Kong Ling paused for a moment before continuing, "According to the Vice Commander, as long as everyone is willing to pitch in, once Cai Yu has been taken down, the price of grain will be lower than one tael for one *dan* and three *dou*, by three *dou*!"

The moment those words were out, the people began to seethe with excitement.

The price of grain in Qudu was just one tael for one *dan* and five *dou* of rice, yet Cizhou was willing to offer one *dan* and six *dou*. The impact had far exceeded that of Cai Yu's small gesture. What they were concerned with was not just the grains, but also their future means of subsistence and survival in Chazhou. Most importantly, the first batch of grains this autumn were not paid out of their pockets, but by Luo Mu. After Cai Yu was knocked off his pedestal, Chazhou could still loot from the granaries of

Cai's residence. With the combination of these two sources of grain, they would not have to worry about getting through winter this year!

Sounds of assent beneath rose in harmony, and in no time, morale was running high.

Kong Ling nodded to Luo Mu, then said to the various chiefs, "Cai Yu's men haven't left the city, so there's no need for everyone to fret; we naturally have plans in place."

At around the hour of *zi*,<sup>2</sup> Cai Yu's men left the city. These bandits were all using army supplies from the armory belonging to the garrison troops of Chazhou, and even though the equipment was old, it was fully intact. With swords, blades, and shields all in place, they had, at a glance, the appearance of a proper army.

When the trusted aide had sent someone to check up on the situation in the morning, there were only a thousand or so people outside the city, but when he headed out of the city for a look now, the crowd was too dense for him to see through. Clearly, the number of people had doubled. The number of men and horses under Cai Yu in the city amounted to only one thousand five hundred, and he had brought one thousand this trip, and yet they felt a little cowed as they crowded around the city entrance.

"Why are there suddenly so many people here?" One of the chiefs in the back craned his head, "It's crowded to the ends of the earth!"

The aide turned around, smiling obsequiously as he said, "They're too hungry to even walk. How can they be considered people? What's important are the grain wagons. Old Master has already said, as long as everyone can take it down, the grain from Cizhou can be split between each of the chiefs here."

The chiefs silently observed and saw that they were indeed just some refugees in rags, and the number of guards from Cizhou was pathetically small; thus, they said, "With this assurance from the big boss, we'll do it! See those guards from Cizhou? We'll split up according to the number of wagons. The more you kill, the more share of the grain you get later!"

The crowd of the people rubbed their palms, eager for a fight. They did not even need the aide to give a command before they swarmed forth.



Shen Zechuan had only brought the porridge to his mouth when he heard the battle cries. A bunch of bandits charged out from the public road and brandished their blades to start slashing. Fortunately, the Cizhou guards

were guarding at the periphery, and both parties began to combat at close quarters. Fei Sheng immediately opened his mouth and shouted at the group of refugees, "Robbery! Cai Yu sent his men over to snatch the grains!"

Fei Sheng shouted at the top of his voice. His shouts were not loud, but the refugees nearby were already scared out of their wits. They jostled and bumped into one another and shouted after him, "Robbery! Cai Yu sent his men over to snatch the grains!"

Upon hearing this, a chief on the other end grew emboldened and roared with savage laughter. "We're here to rob grains! Whoever dares to stand in our ways will be sacrificed to our blades! Brothers, charge!"

The Cizhou's guards were too few in numbers to withstand the momentum of the bandits' charge, what's more when all the refugees were right behind them. As they jostled together, cries of those being trampled on rang out all over. On seeing this, the bandits started to harbor the intent to toy with the people, and so they yanked out the elderly, the weak, women, and children and terrorized them with their blades. "Not only are we robbing the grains, but we are also going to kill, kill, kill!"

The bandits dragged along a woman with a child in her arms by her hair, and the gleaming blade frightened her so much that she was trembling all over as she wept and pleaded. But the bandits were used to committing all kinds of atrocious acts, and when they saw her wailing, they did not feel any pity and instead burst out laughing in unison. They even reached out their hands and made to haul over the child in her arms.

Unexpectedly, a hand suddenly reached out from among the crowd of people to stop that blade.

Qiao Tianya tossed aside the hem of his robe and grinned, "Killing is one thing, but why humiliate others? It's so annoying to hear all these weeping and wailing. Raise your hand and drop the blade in one swift move; get it done and over with!"

This bandit exerted his strength, but the blade did not budge the slightest. He bellowed, "Good grief, bro! Let go!"

Seeing his face flushed with anger, Qiao Tianya took a few steps back, causing the chief to stagger to keep up pace with him.

Shen Zechuan, who was standing back, said, "What's the point of making a fool of the others? Qiao Yueyue, let go and give it back to him."

Qiao Tianya said, "Sure, no problem. I'm letting go. I'm letting go right now!"

The words had only just left his mouth when Qiao Tianya really did let go. That bandit was forcefully dragged forward in a lunge towards Qiao Tianya. Qiao Tianya stepped aside to dodge him, then lifted his foot and kicked that bandit in the ass, sending him flying into the crowd and landing right in front of Shen Zechuan's feet.

As that bandit made to get up, his gaze shifted up along the white robe. Just as it was about to slide up to Shen Zechuan's chest, the tip of Yang Shan Xue's sheath pressed against the center of his hair, bringing the upward trajectory of his head to a stop.

Shen Zechuan's expression turned cold, his gaze sharp and fierce as he spoke with righteousness. "Cizhou is here to provide aid relief to the common folks of Chazhou. It's fine if Cai Yu doesn't allow me into the city, but do you people have to tear down the porridge booth too? Then go ahead and tear them down. Don't hurt anyone."

His voice was neither loud nor soft, but it had enraptured those in the surrounding vicinity. Chazhou had suffered greatly at the hands of Cai Yu and the Yan Clan's schemes to increase the price of grain, and the people were presently overwhelmed with sorrow and indignation. As the woman who was rescued cried, quite a number of the others also started to cry.

How could the bandit have known that he'd fallen into a trap? All he could remember was the headcount the chief had mentioned earlier. Unable to raise his head high due to the humiliation, he braced himself and spat hatefully, "Chazhou is the big boss' domain. If he wants to tear it down or kill its people, can you people stop him?!"

Shen Zechuan very slightly decreased the amount of strength he had been using, "These grains—"

In an instant, the bandit grabbed the blade that had fallen nearby, lifted his arm, and moved to slash Shen Zechuan's chest. Qiao Tianya had already moved, but the bandit was far closer, and that blade went straight for Shen Zechuan. However, it was at this very moment that the bandit saw the composure in Shen Zechuan's eyes, as if he had been waiting just for this.

The sheath of Yang Shan Xue made a 'thump' sound as it struck the side of the bandit's blade. However, a few drops of fresh blood followed in the wake of the sound, splattering on Shen Zechuan's sleeve.

A man standing alongside Shen Zechuan dropped onto his butt, paralyzed and terrified. "They're killing people!"

Qiao Tianya had initially thought the blood belonged to someone else, but upon closer inspection, it was actually Shen Zechuan's left hand that was bleeding.

Cries of alarm rang out all around. Fei Sheng, who was far away, bellowed with all his might, "Who dares to harm my master?!"

As soon as he said that, the Imperial Bodyguards all drew their blades. From the moment Qiao Tianya intercepted the blade, one of the chiefs standing in the back knew that they had encountered someone difficult to deal with. He quietly took a few steps back and commanded, "Do as the big boss says. Hack them all to death!"

The bandit in front of Shen Zechuan was not dead yet, so Qiao Tianya kicked him from the back, sending the man rolling onto the ground. But, before Qiao Tianya could draw his blade, several people rushed forward from behind Shen Zechuan, swarming towards the bandits as they threw punches and kicks at them. The crowd was roused to action, their anger having reached its peak. The refugees stampeded forth in unison, fearlessly colliding with the bandits without a care for their lives.

"Cai Yu, open up the granaries! You evil bandits must die! Don't hurt our benefactor!"



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#### Footnotes

1. 斗 *dou*, a dry measure for grain equal to one-tenth of a 石 *dan*.
2. 石 *dan*, dry measure for grain. In QJJ, 1 *dan* = approximately 90kg (see author's note in chapter 113).
3. So a *dou* would be about 9 kg.
4. 子时 11pm-1am based on the system of two-hour subdivisions used in former times

## Qiang Jin Jiu – Chapter 141 : Rain

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



How could the bandits have expected that the commoners would rally together and fight back? The deafening sound of trampling feet roared like sudden claps of thunder, while the cacophony of curses and cries blended together and engulfed the bandits like a surge of floodwater. The commoners were already all seeing red as they shouted in the melee, “The evil bandits deserve to be killed!”

The bandits were not a match for this many people. Stones and broken bowls went flying and smashing all over, causing the bandits to scurry for cover. Seeing as the situation did not bode well, that particular chief intended to flee, but when he looked back, Cai Yu’s trusted aide was already running away!

“Son of a bitch!” The chief flew into a rage and took to his heels too.

But he was unlucky, and the sharp-eyed Fei Sheng deftly hauled him back. This chief was merely a commoner, and there was no way he could defeat a well-trained Imperial Bodyguard like Fei Sheng, so he promptly fell into the horde of people who swarmed around him to beat him up while he covered his face and rolled on the ground wailing.

The rest of the bandits were thrown into disorientation. Seeing how the commoners outside the city were all acting like man-eating evil spirits as they pummeled the chief, they abandoned the battle and fled back into the city.



Cai Yu was waiting for updates in his residence. The dishes left aside on the table had already gone cold. He suddenly heard a commotion outside and hurriedly got up, but he had only taken a couple of steps when he saw his attendant stumbling his way in. The latter reported in a panic, “Old Master, there are plenty of people outside. They have surrounded our mansion!”

Cai Yu’s main forces had already been dispatched out of the city, and at present, he had no more than five hundred people left behind in the city. It immediately dawned on him, and he hissed through clenched teeth, “I’ve been had!”

He had no men by his side at present, and this gave the small-time gangs an opening to exploit the situation.

Cai Yu immediately said, "Tell the guards guarding the compound and the remaining men to keep an eye on the various courtyards' gates. Bring my cloak over. I'm going to meet them personally!"

Cai Yu draped his cloak over himself and secured his broadsword, then briskly made his way outside with his entourage. The residence's doors were tightly shut. Cai Yu peered through the gap in the door and saw torches everywhere outside the residence. Even though his heart was heavy, he still faked a laugh and said, "Who do we have here? I'm not hosting a feast today, and there's no joyous event going on either. So why raise such a big hooha coming over to give your congratulations?"

Outside, Luo Mu leisurely replied, "I heard Elder Brother has been haunted by nightmares lately and has trouble sleeping, so I made a special trip to invite the various brothers over tonight to dispel the evil energy in Elder Brother's residence."

Cai Yu expressed displeasure on hearing Luo Mu's voice. "Mengzheng, I married my younger sister off to you, and I treated you well too, and yet you return my kindness with enmity. I'm afraid that's a violation of moral principles."

Without batting an eyelid, Luo Mu said, "Cai Yu, you shut the granaries to sell grain and profit off others' misfortune, and you turn a blind eye to the destitute and displaced commoners outside the city. You are no longer considered a chivalrous bandit who robs the rich to help the poor. As the prefectural prefect of Chazhou, I had no choice but to socialize with you for years in order to make you let down your guard. Now that you've lost the heart of the people, you should surrender without resistance as soon as possible."

Cai Yu had never been one for pretenses. He was instantly beside himself with rage. "What a shameless lad! You were so sincere and earnest in your words when you asked for my younger sister's hand in marriage, and now you're turning against me. You, you despicable scum!"

Luo Mu strode a few steps forward, not wanting to engage further with Cai Yu. "Open the doors quickly and surrender, or we'll break the doors down!"

Cai Yu gripped the broadsword at the side of his waist and hollered, "I'll see who dares to force their way in! My blade hasn't aged one bit. I'll

kill whoever dares to come forth!”

But even if Cai Yu cut an imposing presence, he still would not be able to withstand a siege on all sides. The guards in the Cai’s residence were all ordinary people, and they all had the urge to flee when they saw the sinister glints of the broadswords and swords outside.

Under the protection of his bodyguards, Cai Yu avoided the rain of arrows that had been unleashed upon him. “I’ll handsomely reward anyone who guarded the compound! My position in Chazhou was personally appointed by the young master; he even calls me ‘pa’. Luo Mu, if you harm even one strand of my hair tonight, the young master will definitely make you pay back two-fold in the future!”

Before Luo Mu could respond, he heard Kong Ling, who was standing next to him, speak, “And who exactly does this Chazhou belong to? It’s enough that you’re the Yan Clan’s lackey, yet you even want the commoners of Chazhou to join you and be his lapdogs too?! You’ve played accomplice to a villain and helped him do wrong by the people, causing many innocent commoners to die! Let’s not even begin to talk about tonight; we’re definitely taking you down!”

The main gates of the outer courtyard had already been smashed open the moment Kong Ling’s words left his mouth. Even as he watched them rush in, Cai Yu refused to resign to his fate and followed the few remaining men in his residence as they fought and retreated. In under an hour, they had already been forced back to the perimeter of the courtyard in the rear.

In the vast expanse of the night, Cai Yu became a prisoner caught in the trap. He had spent half his life being chivalrous, yet he had fallen, all for the word “money”. And now, at the sight of his fortune going up in flames, and of his wives and children weeping, he could not help but feel a sense of grief akin to that of a hero reaching the end of his rope. But it was too late for regrets.

Feeling contemptuous about Luo Mu’s behavior, Cai Yu was determined to fight back until the very end. It was pandemonium on the streets outside of the Cai Residence, with different gangs all joining the fray. Cai Yu’s men were decreasing by the minute. Just as Cai Yu had completely lost heart and was ready to take his own life, he suddenly heard a cry of “*gege*” from amidst the chaos.

Luo Mu, lamenting the ill-timed arrival, turned back and shouted, “Send the young madam back!”



Concubine Cai had always been pampered and coddled, and yet, she had run all the way in her haste to hurry over, losing not just her shoes in the process but also falling and injuring her arms. She couldn't care less about her sweat-drenched hair as she pointed at Luo Mu and trembled uncontrollably. For all her shrewish nature, there were now only insuppressible chokes of sobs emitting from her throat. "Luo... Luo Mu! You..." she wailed, "You despicable and vile man!"

Although cognizant of Kong Ling who stood by him, Luo Mu could not help but take two steps forward.

Concubine Cai's hair was disheveled as she held her head high amidst her panic. She spat at Luo Mu, tears streaming down her face. "I gave my heart to a dog! How could I have been deceived by a bastard like you?!"

Concubine Cai and Cai Yu were siblings, with a large age gap between them. Although she was his little sister, Cai Yu nurtured her like his very own daughter. Brother and sister had both grown up depending on each other and were thus very close to each other.

Seeing Cai Yu completely surrounded, Concubine Cai understood that Cai Yu would not escape death tonight. So she covered her face and cried out, "It was me who brought harm upon *gege*!"

When Kong Ling saw Concubine Cai covering her face, he realized things were about to go south and hurriedly said, "Quick, stop her!"

But it was too late. Concubine Cai made use of the action to pull out a golden hairpin in her hair. In the blink of an eye, blood had already splattered all over the silks and satins she was adorned in. Cai Yu was overwhelmed with grief at seeing this. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he stood among the crowd, his head tilted back as he shouted in sorrow, "My silly sister, it's clearly I who have ruined you!"

With that, he severed the idea of brandishing his broadsword to slit his own throat. With a loud bellow, he charged into the group of bandits and hacked away at several people until he eventually died of exhaustion, but even then, he was still shouting before his death, "I am Cai Yu of Chazhou. My time has thus come to an end!"

When the first glimmer of dawn appeared during the hour of *mao*<sup>1</sup> after a night of chaotic battle, the strife in the city had already ceased. Nearly half of the Cai's residence courtyard walls had collapsed, its prosperous image of yesterday completely evaporated. Attendants and maidservants swept the

gold and silver ornaments in the residence into their bundles, taking it along with them as they fled into the night.

Kong Ling stood at concubine Cai's side and watched as the pool of blood stained the hem of his robe. Cai Yu's entire family lost their lives this night, most of them killed under the bandits' blades. Kong Ling waited for Luo Mu to come and collect concubine Cai's body for burial, only to hear an attendant say that Luo Mu had gone over to check out the Cai clan's granaries.

Kong Ling stood where he was and waited right until late afternoon. But Luo Mu never came.



Once Cai Yu fell, the grain stores in Chazhou all came under Luo Mu's charge. He was now not only sitting on Cai Yu's grains, but also Cai Yu's wealth. Cizhou's grain wagons finally entered the city, but the money he promised Cizhou earlier never materialized. The price of grain in the city was still one tael for one *dan* of rice, the same price Cai Yu had set while he had been alive.

Fei Sheng said with a sigh in the courtyard, "While I was still in the imperial prison in the past, I often heard that son of a bitch Han Cheng talk about how fieldwork isn't easy, and how the local "officials" are all very shrewd. Their notoriety is truly well-deserved."

"Their craftiness is much stronger than the officials in the capital." Qiao Tianya pillowed his head on his arms and laid down on a stone bench to bask in the sun. "No wonder he could be the prefectural prefect in Chazhou for so many years. He sure is something."

Beside them, Kong Ling brewed tea in wordless silence.

Shen Zechuan, who had been in the principal room, lifted the curtain and emerged. The three of them made to get up, but Shen Zechuan motioned for them not to. "What time is it now?"

Fei Sheng competed to reply, "It's almost noon."

Shen Zechuan grasped his folding fan. Seeing as the sun was blinding, he shook open the fan to cover his eyes. "Chazhou has scored a victory, but we still have yet to hold the celebration feast, right? Go send Luo Mu an invitation. Tell him that we'll be having a drink here tonight."

Fei Sheng acknowledged the order and added, "Master, but what if he doesn't dare to come?"

Shen Zechuan revealed his eyes that had a hint of a smile in them. "If he doesn't, then he's a gutsy one."

Fei Sheng could hear his displeasure. He hurriedly retreated out of the room and went over to deliver the invitation.

Kong Ling had been drinking and gambling these few days, looking as if he was having so much fun that he forgot all about his home and duties. But he still stood up when he saw Shen Zechuan coming down the stairs.

Shen Zechuan said, "I heard it was Mister Chengfeng who paid for concubine Cai's burial."

Kong Ling folded his arms in his sleeves and touched the remaining fried soybeans in his sleeve pocket. "Oh. Yes, it was me."

Shen Zechuan closed his folding fan and looked at Kong Ling for a moment.

Kong Ling thought Shen Zechuan was displeased, but he had no wish to explain further.

He did not expect Shen Zechuan to let the matter drop. Instead, Shen Zechuan drank half a cup of tea and probed no further.

Kong Ling remembered the wound on Shen Zechuan's left palm that night and felt even more tired. He was conscious of the fact that he had barely done anything this trip, and yet he was even more exhausted than he had been in Cizhou.

To Fei Sheng's surprise, Luo Mu not only showed up that night, but he had also come alone. The cook in this residence was new, and his culinary skills were just passable. Shen Zechuan did not nitpick on the food, so even though this was proclaimed a feast, the dishes were only very slightly more exquisite than usual. Refugees were still a common sight in Chazhou at present, and as such, Shen Zechuan ate simply too.

The atmosphere between both parties was harmonious by the time they had been through three rounds of wine. Fei Sheng noted that whether it was Shen Zechuan or Luo Mu, they were both cordial and amiable, neither one displaying any sign of displeasure over the standstill the last couple of days.

Luo Mu made a toast as he spoke. "We are all good to discuss matters about the grain now that everything is in place, but I was just wondering when is the Vice Commander planning to return? It will be easier for me to get the advisors in my residence to draft up a charter if I have a date to work with."

Cai Yu had already been dead for three days. This matter had been discussed long before they took action. Luo Mu's refusal now to proceed as per the initial agreement was because he was intentionally trying to stall for time and go around in circles with Shen Zechuan. It was just as he had said to Kong Ling, every increase of grain by one *dou* per tael equal to a reduction in profit, and that was all real money at stake there. And now that all this money had landed in his hands, it was simply impossible to expect him to forfeit it the way he used to think.

There was a girl and her blinded old man in the hall singing a tune. As Shen Zechuan watched the old man play the *erhu*,<sup>2</sup> he tapped his fingers gently on his fan, as though he had not heard Luo Mu. It was only after the tune was finished that Shen Zechuan responded with a smile, "I'm on a tight schedule; it'll be in the next two days."

Luo Mu looked to be in a spot as he spoke. "Two days is too much of a rush. Can't the Vice Commander stay for a few more days? Chazhou has many scenic spots that the Vice Commander has yet to visit."

Shen Zechuan's gaze shifted and landed on Luo Mu's face. "My family at home are worried, and I'm anxious to return."

Shen Zechuan's answer had been gentle, but Luo Mu unwarrantedly reined in his frivolity. He straightened up in his seat and said with a solemn expression, "That's true. How about this then? The Vice Commander may return first, and when my side is done drafting up the charter, I'll send someone to bring it over. Chengfeng can stay to supervise and act as a witness."

Kong Ling was about to speak up when Shen Zechuan tapped his fan lightly against the edge of the table at the same moment. He then kept his mouth shut and did not speak.

Holding onto his fan, Shen Zechuan kept his eyes on Luo Mu even as he spoke to the blind old man. "Play another tune, one from Chazhou. Doesn't Chazhou have that song<sup>3</sup> 'To Kill A Bandit'?"

That blind old man gave a slight nod of his head and shifted a little to get his granddaughter to switch over to the *pipa*<sup>4</sup> and start playing.

Shen Zechuan did not respond to Luo Mu's words, and Luo Mu, who sat across from him, did not dare to bring up the matter again. Initially, he could still look at Shen Zechuan in the eyes, but as the tune gradually took on a murderously sinister overtone, he began to sweat profusely.

Shen Zechuan opened the lid of the teacup. "This tea was a gift from Your Excellency. It's good-quality tea. Is it from Hezhou?"

Luo Mu forced out a laugh. "We found them from our search of the Cai's Residence. I'm not knowledgeable about tea, so it's better to present this to the Vice Commander as a show of my respect."

Shen Zechuan smiled and replied, "I don't like tea."

The girl's fingers slid along the *pipa*. The clanging of the *pipa* was just like slashes of blades slicing through the air to perforate into his ears and rupture his eardrums, so intense was it that Luo Mu's back was soaked with sweat. This one song felt unbearably endless to him. That entire table full of dishes had already gone cold, the most striking of which was the Lion's Head<sup>5</sup> in front of him. By the time Luo Mu left the feast, his legs had already gone numb.

Shen Zechuan stood under the eaves and said to Fei Sheng, "Send His Excellency back. It's a long journey to make."

Luo Mu forced himself to bow, looking over at Kong Ling several times before finally being led out the door by Fei Sheng. In no more than four hours on the very same night, the previously agreed-upon documents and money were all delivered to Shen Zechuan's residence. As he lay awake in the middle of the night, Luo Mu could only think of one thing, and it was that Shen Zechuan knew what he had been planning to do.

Luo Mu had been stalling for time because he wanted to send off Shen Zechuan and wait for the message from the Yan clan originally meant for Cai Yu. Cai Yu was no more, but he had stepped forth. He could also do what Cai Yu did for the Yan clan. The price of grain offered by Cizhou was indeed low, but that was only from the standpoint of the commoners. There was nothing beneficial in it for Luo Mu at all. He might not even be able to get that small profit he used to get from staying by Cai Yu's side.

He initially thought that Shen Zechuan had not brought that many men along and so would not dare to lay a hand on him. Then, by the time Shen Zechuan returned to Cizhou, Luo Mu would already have been in contact with the Yan clan. When the time came for Cizhou to consider coming back to collect their debt, he would have the backing and confidence to reject Cizhou.

However, Shen Zechuan's meaning tonight was clear. He had not fallen for Luo Mu's ploy at all. He was in a rush, and if Luo Mu couldn't get matters settled and placed his hopes on the Yan clan of Hezhou instead, then

Shen Zechuan would dare to make his move and kill Luo Mu right away. That song was as clear of a response as ever.

Closing his eyes, Luo Mu thought about Shen Zechuan's actions outside the city. A man who even dared to put his own life at stake would not care about the consequences of killing him at all. Before they took action against Cai Yu, Shen Zechuan had said that "they were here to do business". Now that Luo Mu thought about it, he realized that those words had also been an early warning from Shen Zechuan to him.



Two days later, Fei Sheng remained stationed in Chazhou, where he could keep track and take records of the prices as well as keep an eye on Luo Mu. Cizhou's grain wagons entered the granaries, with the shopkeeper from the cosmetics shop keeping the accounts for them. And so, the grain trade between Cizhou and Chazhou was decided. The price Shen Zechuan settled on with Zhou Gui and the rest back in Cizhou was one tael for one *dan* and eight *dou* of rice, but it was now a little higher at one tael for one *dan* and six *dou* of rice. This price, though, was already lower than Qudu.

By buying the grains from Cizhou, Luo Mu not only had to set up booths to hand out porridge, but he also had to think of the most effective way to optimize the money being spent. Chazhou's problem of utmost priority was re-registration in the census register. He now held the food of the small-time bandits in his hands; he could enlist them in the garrison troops. There were still some issues when it came to the follow-through, but all of these could be discussed again when the large batch of grain arrived from Cizhou. With Fei Sheng here, they could also keep a constant eye on the movements of the Yan Clan in Hezhou.

Shen Zechuan had successively taken out two of the Yan Clan's main forces in Zhongbo, and the Yan clan was not one to forget about this debt. They initially had nothing to do with each other before, but now, he had to put his attention on Zhongbo, on Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan did not stay for long. He got on the horse carriage that very day and left. Just as they were almost out of Chazhou's territory, they suddenly heard someone in a carriage chasing after them from behind.

Qiao Tianya lifted a corner of the curtain and whispered to Shen Zechuan, "It's Luo Mu."

Luo Mu was here to see them off, but Qiao Tianya said Shen Zechuan was not feeling well today, so he let that matter drop. He was mainly here to

see Kong Ling off, anyway. Both of them got off their carriages and walked for a while along the public road.

Luo Mu took out the pastries wrapped in oil paper from his arms and said, "You loved to eat these back at the academy. I saw someone selling them when I stepped out and bought them in passing. Take it with you to eat during the journey."

Kong Ling looked at the oil paper. "It was so many years ago, and you still remember it."

Luo Mu smiled ruefully. "It's... something I ought to remember. Will you come along with the next batch of grain wagons?"

Kong Ling took the oil paper and walked a couple of steps. He did not answer.

Luo Mu looked at Kong Ling like how he had always done so many years ago.

Kong Ling squeezed that bundle of pastries and said inexplicably, "Back then when we left the academy, you asked if I was going to Qudu, and I didn't answer. We later went our separate ways. Have you ever gone back for a look?"

Luo Mu said, "When I left the academy, I headed west with my family and lived in Qudu for quite some years..."

Kong Ling turned his head back and finally looked Luo Mu in the eyes. "Mengzheng."

Luo Mu waited for a moment, but Kong Ling did not continue. He could not help but laugh. "Later, while I was in Qudu, I heard that you threw in your lot with Tantai Long and worked under his command. He's a good official, and you guys have achieved quite the result there too... Why didn't you marry?"

Why didn't I marry.

Kong Ling silently repeated it to himself and slowly smiled. He was already old, and yet at present, he was giving off an aura of gentleness and composure that he had possessed in his youth. Somehow, there was still will and spirit in this pair of eyes that had already turned cloudy. He grasped that bundle of pastries tightly and merely said, "... I should leave now."

The wind surfed past the blades of grass. Kong Ling turned around. He did not wait for Luo Mu's answer.

Luo Mu stood in the wind and watched as Kong Ling's sleeves and robes fluttered along with the breeze. His throat tightened. He could not

help but take a step after him; he even reached out with his hand. The white hair mixed in Kong Ling's bun disappeared in the wind, covered by the dancing leaves. In his trance, Luo Mu saw time as it was many years ago.

Kong Ling missed many a number of things in this life of his, but that was not because he never tried to fight for them. He once tossed and turned in bed because of an invitation, but all he got after pacing to and fro as he waited in the academy was a bout of seventh month's rain. He waited in that rain until his eyes were wet. And from then on, he went away to a distant land far from home.

Mengzheng was a free-spirited man.

This was something Kong Chengfeng came to understand in that rain. Many years later, he waited again, but all he had to show for that endeavor in the end was a robe with a bloodstained hem. No matter which time it was, Luo Mu never came.

From then on, Kong Ling and Luo Mu never saw each other again.



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#### Footnotes

1. 卯时 5-7am based on the system of two-hour subdivisions used in former times



- 2.
3. 二胡 Erhu, a two-stringed bowed musical instrument.
4. Specifically 词 *ci*, a form of classical Chinese poetry dating from the Tang dynasty, in which verses are written to fit pre-existing tunes, often in lines of varying length.





- 5.
6. 琵琶 Pipa, a four-stringed Chinese musical instrument, belonging to the plucked category of instruments.
7. 狮子头 Lion's Head, or stewed meatball, is a dish from the Huaiyang cuisine of eastern China; nothing to do with real lions, these are large pork meatballs that are steamed/braised and served with vegetables

# QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 142 : INKLING

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



Who exactly was the young master in white handing out porridge on the outskirts of the city? Countless commoners inside and outside the city were all scrambling over themselves to guess. Some said he was an adviser of Zhou Gui; some said he was a distant nephew of Kong Ling. Rumors flew all over without a single concrete explanation. It was only when Shen Zechuan left the city that his identity as the eighth common son of the Shen clan spread like wildfire and promptly became the talk of the town in Chazhou.

Compared to the storm of public opinion in the city, Shen Zechuan's return journey was calm and quiet; it could even be said to be silent. They returned along the public roads, in not that much of a hurry.

Because Shen Zechuan had fallen ill once on his way over. Kong Ling and Qiao Tianya went to great pains to make prior arrangements before they embarked on the journey back; they even bought an overcoat from a peddler from Hezhou, just to cope with the sudden turn of cool weather during their journey.

Kong Ling, being attentive, told Qiao Tianya, "It'd be better to get a physician to take a look at the Vice Commander when we return. He can afford to build up his health while he's at home. Otherwise, we're all going to be on tenterhooks if he has to venture out again on business the next time."

Qiao Tianya held the bowl of water in his hands and looked at the horse carriage parked under the shade of trees. "Where are we going to find a good physician? With the way my master's health is... only a formidable physician would be able to make a diagnosis. As his guards, there is no matter concerning our master that is troublesome. I'm just worried that my master will feel apologetic for inconveniencing us."

Kong Ling knew nothing of Shen Zechuan's consumption of medicine in his early years; he always thought that Shen Zechuan was just not in good health. But from the way Qiao Tianya put it, Shen Zechuan used to be in better health back in Qudu than he was now.

Qiao Tianya drank a sip of water and made no further mention of this matter.

He had been feeling bored during the journey these two days, and thus he had repeatedly thought back to that night the bandits went on a rampage to hurt the others. He felt that even if Shen Zechuan wanted to deploy the trick of injuring himself in order to trap the enemy, he should not have been so badly hurt. Once his body was used to reacting swiftly, it would be even tougher for him to control himself from warding off the blow right that very instant.

Qiao Tianya had seen Shen Zechuan draw his blade before. To the others, Yang Shan Xue was too long, but because Shen Zechuan was swift enough, it was solely just right for him. Qiao Tianya saw the wound on Shen Zechuan's palm after the incident and found this injury to be unusual.

Although Shen Zechuan looked as he always did usually and never revealed a word of it, Qiao Tianya guessed that it was for the sake of concealment that Shen Zechuan did not draw his blade recently. If that was truly the case, then Shen Zechuan might have sensed that his body was no longer what it once was much earlier than the people around him. However, it had not even been six months since the day they left Qudu.

This matter had to be conveyed to *shifu* and the marquis.

As Qiao Tianya thought about it, he splashed away the remaining water, kept away the bowl, and rose to instruct the men around him. "It's almost time. Let's hurry on with the journey."

The sound of movements outside woke Shen Zechuan up. His neck was sore and aching. Thus he leaned his head to one side to rest it against the wall of the carriage and slowly exhaled. The curtains of the carriage were not lowered, and he was too lazy to move, so he remained in this position and watched the trees along the way shift backwards slowly as the horses started to run.

"Where are we?" Shen Zechuan's voice was slightly hoarse.

Qiao Tianya put on his bamboo hat to block out the sunlight and sat outside the curtains to drive the carriage on. "We can arrive at Chazhou's borders tonight. Travel for another two more days, and we'll be within Cizhou's territory."

This public road had fallen into disrepair in the last few years, and traveling along it made for a journey so bumpy that it gave Shen Zechuan a

headache. "The next time the grains are sent to Chazhou, get Luo Mu to fork out money and hire a repair team to fix it up properly."

Qiao Tianya pretended to sigh with emotion, "Then what about when we travel to Libei? The roads there are even more difficult to travel on."

"The tracks in Libei are all bridle paths." Shen Zechuan perked himself up a little as he spoke. "They were constructed to be wide and flat to facilitate the passage of the armored cavalry. Be careful not to let the marquis hear you fabricating stuff up behind his back."

Qiao Tianya took down the stalk of grass he had been holding in his mouth. "It's fine even if I said it to the marquis's face. If he comes back this time, you should first make sure he doesn't see that injury of yours."

Shen Zechuan raised his left hand. Even though the wound had been bandaged, the wound area was prone to being soaked with sweat due to the hot weather, and the sensation was akin to being bitten by ants. "Xiao Ce'an is currently busy; there's no way he'll be back for a month or so. If you don't mention it, he naturally won't find out."

Qiao Tianya bit back down on the stalk of grass.

Shen Zechuan asked, "Are you going to tell on me?"

Qiao Tianya said as he steered the carriage, "Later. Let's talk about it later. I can't hear you clearly from here."

Shen Zechuan lowered his arm. "I'll write him a letter when we get back, and we're considered done with this matter." He thought about it for a moment after saying so, feeling the nape of his neck starting to tingle with itch faintly, then as if remembering the sensation of being bitten by Xiao'Er, he emphasized his words, repeating once more, "The matter is considered over and done with."

Agreeing on the surface, Qiao Tianya pulled at the reins as he thought about it.

As expected, telling the marquis is the best way to handle him. Tried and tested!



Shen Zechuan had left for a little less than half a month this time. Gradually, the heat of the seventh month subsided. Due to its proximity to Libei, Cizhou was much colder than Chazhou, with signs of autumn already beginning to show.

Zhou Gui had been looking forward to their return, and he started waiting outside the city very early on. Upon seeing the horse carriage

approach, he lifted his robes and walked over with a beam. “Vice Commander, Chengfeng! It has been hard on you the entire journey. Please enter the city now. I’ve already prepared a feast to welcome you back!”

They paused for a bit outside of the city gates to exchange courtesies before heading in together. Zhou Gui hosted the feast in his own residence, hardly discussing official affairs at the table. He knew that Shen Zechuan had fallen ill during the journey, and so after the meal was over, he personally saw Shen Zechuan out of the residence. He emphasized that there was no urgency regarding the affairs on hand, so there would still be time for a discussion after the Vice Commander had rested for the night.

Even then, Shen Zechuan still had Qiao Tianya remain in the Zhou residence, so that when Zhou Gui and Kong Ling gathered the fellow advisors in the study to discuss the trip to Chazhou, Qiao Tianya could stand by to listen and answer any questions so as to not slow down the proceedings.

On the other end, Ji Gang, who had also been waiting for a long time, came over to receive Shen Zechuan when he saw the latter coming from where he stood at the entrance of the alley a distance away. The sky had turned to dusk, and with Shen Zechuan’s sleeves hanging down, Ji Gang did not see his injury. He gave Shen Zechuan a once-over, and followed up with a question, “How did you fall sick on the road? I even asked Songyue to prepare a coat in advance, worried that the weather would change while you were travelling.”

Shen Zechuan lifted his right arm and led his shifu through the door. “It’s just a cold; I’m fine, it’s no big deal. Has *shifu* taken your meal yet? I sat down for a meal earlier in the Zhou residence, but I haven’t eaten my fill yet.”

Ji Gang walked side by side with Shen Zechuan through the door. He still meant to ask about his illness, but Shen Zechuan’s “haven’t taken my fill” steered him off course, and he happily said, “I’ve guessed it. I knew you’d arrive home today, so I made a special trip out this morning to choose some plump fishes. What do you want to eat? Shifu will prepare it now for you. They have already been cleaned up, and the ingredients are all prepared and ready, so it’ll be ready in no time!”

Ding Tao came up from behind them and poked out his head. “Young Master, Young Master is back!”

Li Xiong followed suit behind him and shouted “Young Master” too. Ding Tao’s sparrow leaped onto his shoulder and chirped away. It was merely a few steps from the entrance to the courtyard, and yet it was even more lively than it was outside. The flowers and plants in the courtyard had been tended to with such care that they were in an even better condition than they had been before he left. The hall of the principal room was spacious, and the bamboo blinds had all been lifted; it looked comfortable.

Shen Zechuan ate another meal with Ji Gang and asked about Ding Tao’s and Li Xiong’s progress in their martial arts. Fortunately, it was his left hand that was injured, and he rested it on his knee the entire time during the meal, so Ji Gang did not suspect a thing. The lively vibe in the room kept up until the hour of *zi*,<sup>1</sup> when Ji Gang told Shen Zechuan to rest early. As it was Qiao Tianya’s turn to be on duty tonight, he took up Ding Tao and Li Xiong away.

It was only when the room fell silent that Shen Zechuan breathed a sigh of relief and took off his outer robe. The maidservants let down the curtain and lit the incense. All along, no one was permitted to remain in the room to serve at night, so the maidservants withdrew from the room to the hallway, leaving only Shen Zechuan behind.

Shen Zechuan took a bath, changed his clothes, and returned to the room where he put on the outer robe again. Then he lit a lamp and began to write a letter. At the first quarter of the hour of *chou*,<sup>2</sup> Qiao Tianya returned and set the new book *Zhou Gui* and the rest had newly drafted up on Shen Zechuan’s desk.

Shen Zechuan sealed the letter and asked, “What’s the latest news in Libei?”

Qiao Tianya, who had his coat over his arms, said, “Bad news. It’d be better for Master to hear it tomorrow morning so that you can get a good night’s sleep tonight.”

Shen Zechuan flipped through the book. “The worst news I can hear is that those from Biansha have already fought their way to our threshold. So go ahead and tell me.”

Qiao Tianya turned the chair over and sat astride it. “Not to that extent. It’s the marquis. The marquis brought the Imperial Army into Libei territory, but he did not head north back to Dajing to meet with the Hereditary Prince. Instead, he went to Bianbo Camp near Zhongbo. The marquis stayed in Bianbo Camp for a night, then led the troops east the next

day to launch an assault on the Shasan Camp, thereby scoring a military achievement and distinguishing himself to His Lordship the Prince.”

Shen Zechuan lifted his eyes and thought for a moment. He smiled. “The Shasan Camp is no small achievement.”

“Right?” Qiao Tianya picked up the conversation. “Such a significant merit ought to be rewarded.”

On hearing this, Shen Zechuan asked, “What did His Lordship reward him with?”

Qiao Tianya stretched out a finger. “One camp.”

Shen Zechuan raised his eyebrows slightly.

Qiao Tianya continued, “The Bianbo Camp. His Lordship kept the marquis there and handed over the Shasan Camp, which the marquis fought to take back, to Guo Weili instead. Does Master still remember this person? It’s the same dude who previously framed Gu Jin for colluding with the enemy. The handover between both parties was not pleasant. The marquis retreated to the back, sandwiched between Shasan Camp and the Three Great Training Divisions of Liuyang. There was completely no sign of him in the battles to the north and east.”

Shen Zechuan released his fingers and closed the book. “The Bianbo Camp is a main camp the Hereditary Prince used as a supply site. By remaining there, Ce’an would be managing Libei’s military supplies and gears.”

However, there was no shortage of generals of military supplies in the Libei Armored Cavalry, so why did Xiao Fangxu insist on getting Xiao Chiye to do it? All else aside, it was far harder for Xiao Chiye to be a general of military supplies than to be a commanding general of Shasan Camp. If Xiao Chiye were in the Shasan Camp, then as long as he led the Imperial Army to fight successful battles with the Biansha men and earned military merits to his name, all sorts of rumors and gossip against him would naturally evaporate into thin air. When the time came for him to step into the battlefield in the north, he would have the confidence and credence to engage with the other Libei commanding generals. But as the general of military supplies in Bianbo Camp, he would be lower in rank than the other commanding generals. He had to heed the requests assigned to him from the various parties and run all over Libei to deliver supplies. This was not only a hard job to do, but would also make him easily susceptible to being bullied and mistreated. When it came to it, his military achievements would

not be up to par as the commanding generals fighting battles ahead of him, and yet the hardships he had to put up with would be no less than the others.

After a moment of silence, Qiao Tianya probed tentatively, "Did His Lordship pick up the marquis from somewhere and adopt him? The disparity in his treatment of the marquis and the Hereditary Prince is really great."

Shen Zechuan looked at him and said, "Seems to me like you're the one who was picked up."

Qiao Tianya raised his hands in surrender and shut his mouth.

Shen Zechuan passed the sealed letter to Qiao Tianya and said, "Get someone to deliver it tonight. It's late now; there's no need for you to stand guard outside. Go back to your courtyard and get some rest."

Right before Qiao Tianya was about to step out, Shen Zechuan called out to him.

When he looked back and saw Shen Zechuan's expression, he said in earnest, "I know. I remember it. The part about you getting injured is over and done with. I won't mention it to the marquis."

His quip made Shen Zechuan forget what he was about to say, so Shen Zechuan waved his hand at him in speechless silence as an indication for Qiao Yueyue to leave.

Shen Zechuan did not remain sitting for long after Qiao Tianya left. It was already late at night now. He blew out the lamp and lay on the bed, listening to the croaking of frogs from the courtyard pond. He did not know if it had been Ding Tao or Li Xiong who had caught them and brought those frogs to the pond, but they created such a din that he could not sleep.

It was only after an unspecified amount of time later that Shen Zechuan's consciousness started to dim. There was no one beside him except for the refreshing sweetness of the incense for company, but somehow, it turned into the metallic stench of blood in his dreams. The Chashi Sinkhole, which had not appeared for a very long time, now lay beneath his feet. Shen Zechuan looked down at it, but there was nothing inside.

The faint croaking of the frogs hovered in the air. Shen Zechuan broke into a sweat and subconsciously turned over with his back to the croaking.

There was no snowstorm over the Chashi Sinkhole tonight. The sun rode high up in the sky, blazing to the point Shen Zechuan felt the stinging



pain on his skin and sweated profusely. There was evidently no corpse in this pit, and yet Shen Zechuan felt himself surrounded all around by people he could not see. They smothered him, making it hard for him to breathe. He could not help but pull apart his tightly fastened collar. Drops of sweat dampened both of his eyes as he gasped for breath. He saw a person lying in the sinkhole.

It was his own self.

A chill suddenly ran down Shen Zechuan's spine. He thought of Qi Huilian. His teacher shouted for him, but his voice was drowned out by the croaking of the frogs. Shen Zechuan never used to be afraid of returning to the Chashi Sinkhole again; he had no fear of this place at all. Yet, at this moment in time, he had the urge to flee.

Someone approached Shen Zechuan, and Shen Zechuan opened his eyes almost instantly.

Xiao Chiye had only just partially removed his armor as softly as he could. How could he have expected Shen Zechuan to wake up so suddenly? He promptly froze by the bedside, still with his arm guard in his lifted hand.

Both men looked at each other for a moment

Sensing something amiss, Xiao Chiye tossed the arm guard onto the desk and pulled up a portion of his sweat-drenched, narrow sleeves. He squatted at the side of the bed and cupped Shen Zechuan's cheeks with his palms. "What are you peeking at?"

Only then did Shen Zechuan seem to snap back to his senses.

Xiao Chiye drew closer to him and looked at Shen Zechuan with a sharp, penetrating gaze. His eyes were like stars in the pitch-dark room, so bright and calm that Shen Zechuan's mind gradually cleared. Xiao Chiye stroked his slightly damp hair and whispered, "It was such a bumpy ride here. Get Zhou Gui to fix the road as soon as possible. He closed off the city; I squatted outside and yelled for half a day."

For some inexplicable reason, Shen Zechuan was amused into smiling as he nestled in Xiao Chiye's palms. It was then that he woke up from his nightmare. The scene of his own corpse lying at the bottom of the pit was still clearly imprinted in his mind, but in just the twinkling of an eye, he had forgotten it all.

Shen Zechuan let out a partial smile before asking dubiously, "Then how did you get in?"

Xiao Chiye took a deep breath and answered slowly, “I somersaulted over. Lang Tao Xue Jin is still tethered out there.”



**NOTE:**

The next chapter 143 (° 5 °) is up in advance for readers who have purchased the web novel or physical copies of QJJ. ↓↓↓ Please read the whole section below first ↓↓↓

First things first, regular updates will remain the same @ the current schedule.

But readers who have bought the novel will get chapters in advance (no fixed limit; depends on how fast we go and how long the chapters are really, e.g. we might just post 144 tomorrow or so in advance).

We want to actively encourage readers to buy the novel to support the author whenever possible, so please do so if you can!

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Footnotes

1. 子时 11pm to 1am
2. 丑时 1-3 am

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 143 : HIDDEN

Translated with: Jia<3



Xiao Chiye's body temperature was running hot. He was bathed in sweat all over after riding for half a night. He retracted his hand and continued to disrobe, looking at Shen Zechuan as the latter sat up and asked, "Have you eaten tonight? I'll look for something to fill your stomach. I met the courier horse delivering your letter on my way back, so I intercepted it, and now the letter you wrote me is with me."

Shen Zechuan, who had been making to get off the bed, paused. He lowered himself and watched Xiao Chiye from that position with a hint of seduction in his gaze, "Where is it?"

Xiao Chiye raised a finger and tapped at his chest.

Shen Zechuan extended his right hand in an expectant gesture to ask for it.

Xiao Chiye placed his armor to the side and rose with his hands on his knees, staring at Shen Zechuan as he did so. "Want it back? Come get it yourself."

Shen Zechuan felt a tingle run down his spine from Xiao Chiye's gaze. He felt his way to Xiao Chiye's chest and slid the pads of his fingers down along his chest. All he could feel was Xiao Chiye's sweat-drenched muscles. He whispered in a soft voice, as if he did not seem to understand, "Give it back."

On the surface, Shen Zechuan still had the dazed look of one still not fully awake, yet his fingertips were feeling Xiao Chiye out with ease and familiarity. His fingers wandered, mindlessly and almost imperceptibly, not minding in the least to let Xiao Chiye know that his appearance now was merely an act.

Xiao Chiye relaxed his breathing, afraid that he would lose himself to his own desires and devour Shen Zechuan clean in just a twinkling of an eye. He seemed to be unmoved, using only an ardent gaze to pursue Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan felt all over that sturdy torso, his breaths intertwining with Xiao Chiye's as he moved. They pressed close together in this position, one higher than the other. Shen Zechuan's expressive eyes

glistened with ripples of desire. Despite this, he still spoke guilelessly, “Ce’an, I can’t find it.”

Xiao Chiye allowed Shen Zechuan’s fingers to do as they pleased. He tilted his head slightly, catching a waft of Shen Zechuan’s scent.

Seizing the moment, Shen Zechuan pressed his cheek to him and nuzzled against him. The satiety brimming in the corners of his eyes took hold of Xiao Chiye’s heart, clenching it.

As he perspired, Xiao Chiye laughed out loud—a brief, harsh sound. He set his palm on the small of Shen Zechuan’s back, pulling him so close that Shen Zechuan was practically pressed against him in his embrace. There was no distance between them as they kissed, neck to neck. But while Shen Zechuan was kissing him, Xiao Chiye was biting him.

As Shen Zechuan was pinned down onto the bedding, he swiftly extended his arm and placed his injured left hand onto the nape of Xiao Chiye’s neck. The bedding sunk down under their combined weight. Shen Zechuan’s inner garment was in disarray, and as Xiao Chiye knelt with his head lowered to look at him, a fan fell out.

Shen Zechuan picked the fan up. He had only just grasped it in hand when he saw the letter fall out too.

Xiao Chiye made to pick up the letter, but the sharp-eyed Shen Zechuan deftly used the folding fan to push the letter aside to the edge of the bed. Immediately after, he flipped the folding fan over and propped it against Xiao Chiye’s chin, then lifted his head and planted a kiss on Xiao Chiye’s lips.

Xiao Chiye did not appear to notice his actions, absorbed as he was in the kiss to the point he was roused and poised for action.

Both of them had not done it in quite a while, so now that they had finally just met, Xiao Chiye went along with Shen Zechuan’s teasing. As though he had reached the end of his patience, Xiao Chiye fondled Shen Zechuan until Shen Zechuan was flushed red all over. Waves of passion crashed into Shen Zechuan to the point that he trembled uncontrollably. Shen Zechuan had learned well, no longer the picture of inexperience like he had been back in Qudu.

Shen Zechuan narrowed his eyes, using the last bit of his reason to remind himself to find a way to toss the letter under the bed later... Before he could finish putting together his plan, he was flipped over by Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye held onto Shen Zechuan's waist, admiring the contours of his back as they formed an absolutely beautiful curve.

Shen Zechuan's sweat-soaked inner garment had turned translucent. From the back, it appeared to offer an unobstructed view of the scenic scene underneath, yet it also seemed to be shrouded under a veil of fog—distant and unattainable.

Shen Zechuan looked back, wetting the corners of his lips.

Xiao Chiye went on the offensive to seize his territory—this all belonged to him. The scorching heat. The damp sweat. The moans. The expressions in his eyes. The shivers. Even the scent that Shen Zechuan emitted along with the rocking movements. All of this belonged to him. They were all his—Xiao Chiye's.

Whenever Xiao Chiye's thoughts strayed down this path, a limitless well of exhilaration would surge up inside him. Shen Zechuan knew him too well, and every sultry look he gave him was a knife to the chest. Xiao Chiye exerted himself physically; the more he cherished this man, the more terrifyingly rough he became.

He wanted to caress him to pieces.

Xiao Chiye nibbled on Shen Zechuan's right ear, holding the jade earring between his lips.

Shen Zechuan could not endure such a position; it was buried so deep that his sweat and tears flowed in never-ending torrents.

But there was nowhere for him to escape to; Shen Zechuan's waist and ankles felt as though they had been restrained with a chain. He felt a little strained, and a little pained, yet this pain sent tingles of electricity up his entire body, rendering it limp and numb. It made him forget all of his nightmares. There was only Xiao Chiye, Xiao Chiye, Xiao Chiye—Shen Zechuan shivered, all drenched in sweat. Just as he was about to lose control and let himself go, he murmured, "... Ce'an."

Xiao Chiye was clearly not done, yet Shen Zechuan's soft, lazy call made him come.

Half of Shen Zechuan's body had already sprawled over. He buried his head between his arms and gasped incessantly for breath. He was still trembling slightly. The bedding under his knees was already a wet expanse.

It was in this position that Xiao Chiye bent over and covered Shen Zechuan with his chest. He had yet to withdraw, and as he pressed down on him, he advanced deeper instead of retreating, causing Shen Zechuan to let

out a muffled moan. Xiao Chiye offhandedly brushed aside the messy pillows and enveloped him in this way. “Hug you for a good night’s sleep.”

Shen Zechuan’s earlobes had been bitten red, and the exhaled breath of hot air made it numb and sore. He lifted his cheek from his arms, his eyes red and wet as he mouthed to Xiao Chiye: *Too mean.*

Xiao Chiye kissed him, and he remained motionless. There was a soft wet, watery sound, and only then did both of their ravenousness alleviate some. Shen Zechuan was bearing Xiao Chiye’s weight, and yet he felt incomparably relaxed, as if Xiao Chiye’s presence was his impenetrable shield.

Xiao Chiye caressed him. He understood him all too well. He could tell just how much weight Shen Zechuan had lost just by holding him in his arms. He nudged away the hair by Shen Zechuan’s ear with the tip of his nose and said in hushed tones, “Did things go smoothly in Chazhou? You’ve lost so much weight.”

Shen Zechuan thought for a moment and shook his head.

Xiao Chiye probed, “What happened with Luo Mu? Did he give you the attitude?”

Shen Zechuan pursed his lips tightly and continued to shake his head.

Xiao Chiye exhaled warm air and teased him. “Did the bandits in Chazhou create trouble? I’ll redeploy the Imperial Army over for you.”

Shen Zechuan half-narrowed his eyes. “From missing you.”

Xiao Chiye had yet to answer him.

But Shen Zechuan continued, “It’s rather cold to sleep alone on an empty bed.”

Xiao Chiye embraced him from behind, grasping both of Shen Zechuan’s arms tightly. He started to say something, but then caught a glimpse of white out of the corners of his eyes. He pulled over the left hand Shen Zechuan had been hiding under the blanket and abruptly turned it over, where he saw the gauze wrapped around it. His eyes shifted to Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan did not look at him and buried his head into the beddings.

“Shen Lanzhou.” Xiao Chiye pulled Shen Zechuan’s face back by the chin and enunciated each word, “You. Sure. Know. How. To. Hide. Huh?!”



The next morning, Qiao Tianya headed out of the city early on and led Lang Tao Xue Jin, who had been left outside the city in the cold for the entire night, back. When he arrived at the courtyard, he saw Meng striding around playing by itself under the eaves. He blew a whistle at Meng and asked in a soft voice, "Where's your Master?"

Meng paid no attention to him, not even with a tilt of its head as it went about its own way. It turned back and continued striding as though it had an endless stream of concerns weighing on its mind.

Qiao Tianya saw that the bamboo blinds in the principal room had been lifted, but there was no one in attendance standing under the eaves. It was bright and spacious inside the principal room. Shen Zechuan sat behind the desk with a book in hand covering his face, revealing only a pair of eyes looking across at Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye put up one of his long legs and leaned back in his chair with a hand propped up as he rotated his thumb ring. Although he did not look back, he had already heard Qiao Tianya's footsteps, so he said, "Come in."

Noting something amiss with the atmosphere, Qiao Tianya bent over to enter at the same time that he asked with a smile, "The weather is pretty good today. How about having lunch in the courtyard?"

Xiao Chiye did not answer.

Shen Zechuan shifted his gaze and motioned for Qiao Tianya to continue.

Xiao Chiye said, "You, shut up."

Qiao Tianya, who was standing at the back, sensibly shut his mouth and revealed a *can't-help-you-there* expression. He felt that he really shouldn't be standing here.

Xiao Chiye rotated past the crack on his thumb ring and caressed it with his finger. He still had a matter on his mind. "Go call Ding Tao over first."

Ding Tao was standing at the courtyard entrance when he saw Qiao Tianya coming out of the principal room. The latter stood under the eaves and beckoned to him, but Ding Tao felt a little reluctant to go. He placed his hands at his back and rubbed at the mud left between his fingers, then shuffled over at snail's pace to the bottom of the steps. Inexplicably feeling a little afraid, he craned his neck and said in a small voice, "I'm here."

Xiao Chiye said, "Get your ass in here now."

Ding Tao jumped up the steps, then slowed down as he cautiously made his way in. He saw Qiao Tianya standing by the side pretending to be a

wooden stake, then saw Shen Zechuan looking down at a book, and he felt sure that he was going to get a beating today.

Xiao Chiye turned sideways and asked, "Where did the frogs in the pond come from?"

With his hands behind his back, Ding Tao lowered his head and answered, "Caught them from outside..."

Xiao Chiye said, "It must have been hard catching them from beyond the city and bringing them back home, wasn't it? That's quite some distance."

Ding Tao braced himself and said, "Not, not too bad..."

Xiao Chiye sneered, "Rebelling when no one's at home, aren't you? Before I left, I told someone to clean up the pond, and you turned around and threw frogs into it."

Ding Tao had caught them for fun. He initially planned to put them in his own courtyard, but their courtyard had no pond, and Shen Zechuan wasn't home half a month earlier, so he and Li Xiong had tossed them into the pond after catching a bunch. But in just a couple of days, he had forgotten all about them. Who would have known that the Master would return right then!

Ding Tao stole a glance at Shen Zechuan just as he was done thinking about it.

Xiao Chiye said, "Who are you looking at?"

Ding Tao instantly withdrew his gaze and lowered his head like a timid quail to listen to the lecture.

"Go." Xiao Chiye continued. "Get rid of all of them before the hour of *you*<sup>1</sup> today. If I hear the frogs croaking again tonight, I'll get someone to fish them up, bring them to your room and make you sleep with them for company."

How would Ding Tao dare to raise any objections? He nodded his head vigorously, then leaped up and dashed out of the room onto the hallway shouting, "Daxiong—" He was only just done yelling when he belatedly covered his mouth and whispered in a particularly small voice, "Come catch the frogs!"

Shen Zechuan changed his posture and held the book steady.

Xiao Chiye looked at him, although he spoke to Qiao Tianya, "What happened during the trip to Chazhou? Your Master's recount isn't clear. You tell me."



Qiao Tianya scratched his head. He was now starting to envy Fei Sheng, who was still in Chazhou. He had a good sleep last night, but he had been neglecting his appearance lately; he did not even have the time to shave as he stood in the morning light and spilled it all out in a concise and comprehensive manner.

Qiao Tianya did not even hide Shen Zechuan's illness. If Xiao Chiye had not returned, then his lack of mention was because of Shen Zechuan's instruction. However, now that Xiao Chiye was back, Qiao Tianya took the opportunity to give Xiao Chiye a reminder.

Once Qiao Tianya was done, he did not wait for their instruction before he added on, "The discussion of the affairs over in the Zhou's residence last night isn't done yet. Since Master is not heading out today, then I'll set off now."

With that, he made his way out from the bamboo blinds, fleeing even faster than anyone else.

Shen Zechuan did not sleep for long last night, and now he was feeling sleepy reading the book. His gaze shifted over to Xiao Chiye's face. When he saw Xiao Chiye looking at him, he blinked, as if he had only just noticed it, putting on a pretty convincing act.

Xiao Chiye said nothing.

Shen Zechuan loosened his grip and revealed his face. "A-Ye, I'm so hungry."

Xiao Chiye folded up that opened letter and stuffed it back in the same way it was before.

Shen Zechuan probingly stretched his leg out and stepped on the tip of Xiao Chiye's shoe. He set the book aside on the table and bent over, the tip of his foot nudging along Xiao Chiye's calf.

Xiao Chiye stared at him and said callously from a small distance, "You've knifed me in the heart so bad it's been torn to shreds. It's too late now. Shen Lanzhou, I'm dead."



#### **NOTE:**

The next chapter 144 is up in advance for readers who have purchased the web novel or physical copies of QJJ. ↓↓↓ Please read the whole section below first ↓↓↓

First things first, regular updates will remain the same @ the current schedule.

But readers who have bought the novel will get chapters in advance (no fixed schedule/limit; depends on how fast we go and how long the chapters are really).

We want to actively encourage readers to buy the novel to support the author whenever possible, so please do so if you can!

# QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 144 : ORANGE JASMINE

Translated with: Jia<3



Xiao Chiye, having rushed his way back on his horse at top speed, rested for a night, although he had to get on his horse and head back after the hour of *zi*<sup>1</sup> tonight. He ran on a tight schedule, and he had gone to great efforts to painstakingly save up these two days of free time. He had been on the move for eight or nine days in a row in order not to delay the transportation of supplies to the site of battle. And he had done it all just to see Shen Zechuan.

But who would have thought that he would end up so angry?

Xiao Chiye held up Meng and removed the anklet on Meng's leg before putting it back on, causing Meng to flap its wings and throw a tantrum. Xiao Chiye threw a tantrum too. He was vexed, feeling angrier the more he thought about it.

Ji Gang returned from his stroll with his birdcage in hand. He was taken aback to see Xiao Chiye, but after a moment of hesitation, he entered all the same. Xiao Chiye paid his respects to the *shifu*. Due to Xiao Chiye's height, Ji Gang had to raise his head to look at him.

"The war in the north is in a critical situation." Ji Gang handed over the birdcage and said, "Your *shifu* must have been having a tough time fighting battles."

Xiao Chiye hung up the birdcage and said, "It has been tough on him. *Shifu* often thinks of you and mentions you from time to time."

Ji Gang placed his hands behind his back and said, "I've never fought a battle, so I can't be of help there. You rushed back in such a hurry; is there an important matter you have to attend to?"

Xiao Chiye thought *not yet*, although the reply from his mouth was, "The Beiyuan Hunting Grounds have been given to me, and the Imperial Army intends to remain stationed there. I came back to ask Lanzhou about the progress. Once it's almost time, I'll arrange for someone to come over."

Ji Gang knew that these were all matters they spoke of in detail and at length, so he nodded and did not probe further.

It was rare for Xiao Chiye to come across Ji Gang, so he seized the opportunity to say, “Did Lanzhou fall ill on the way to Chazhou? *Shifu*, he’s a picky eater. With you to keep an eye on him back at home, he would still pick a little of each dish to eat a little. Even when he falls ill, he is willing to take his medicine. But once he’s out on business, everyone around him listens to him, and without anyone to keep watch on him, he’d dare to pick and choose his food.”

Ji Gang was reminded of this as soon as he heard Xiao Chiye, “Oh, right! I was going to give him a piece of my mind yesterday!”

“He steered you away from the topic.” Xiao Chiye finally stopped tormenting Meng and lifted his arm to let it go. “He has a guilty conscience. No doubt he wouldn’t dare to mention it to you.”

Ji Gang nodded, but then, sensing something odd, he asked, “Why would he have a guilty conscience? Is Chuan-er hiding something else from me?”

“Yeah.” Xiao Chiye said with a slight furrow of his brows. “There is a large gash on his left hand. The return journey was long, and they didn’t change the dressing meticulously enough on the way back. When I saw it last night, the wound on his palm was almost festering from all the sweating.”

The color drained from Ji Gang’s face. He hurriedly followed up with a question, “Where’s he?”

“Sleeping.” Xiao Chiye paused for a moment before continuing. “He slept late last night, and he was pretty exhausted too. He was all worn out when he woke up this morning. *Shifu* will have to keep an eye on him in the future, lest he doesn’t take his health seriously. I’m far away in Libei, and plenty of what I know depends on what he shares with me in his letters. If he has the intention to keep it from me, then I would be kept completely in the dark.”

Ji Gang straightened up. “I have to watch him change his dressing.” Then, he thought the better of it and sighed. “He wasn’t quite nursed back to health back then when we were staying at the temple. The physicians we called for were all useless men who could not come to a diagnosis. His body is weaker than others. The longer time elapses, the more it has to be taken care of. You know it too. When he entered the capital, he was first tortured in the imperial prison followed by a flogging, and then there was your kick... That was one brutal kick! If not for my old acquaintances in the

Imperial Bodyguards coming to his aid on the sly, Chuan-er would've been long dead. His health was in a terrible state at that time and to hide it from the others, he took medicine. Now I'm worrying day and night, precisely because I'm afraid."

Xiao Chiye kept silent for a moment, then suddenly lifted the hem of his robe and fell to his knees. He set both palms squarely on the ground and kowtowed formally to Ji Gang.

Ji Gang was promptly stunned. "What are you doing?"

Xiao Chiye maintained his position and spoke with his head bowed to the ground. "Six years ago, when I rode my horse across Zhongbo, the man I hated the most was Shen Wei. I held him in contempt for abandoning the city and fleeing, and I also feared the Empress Dowager's support for her puppet, and so I kicked Lanzhou in Qudu. *Shifu* is right. My kick back then had been brutal. I'd done it with the intent to take his life."

Ji Gang choked, momentarily tongue-tied. Afraid that Shen Zechuan could hear him from inside the room, he turned his head away and let loose a heavy-hearted sigh.

Xiao Chiye paused for a moment, then continued, "It's all my fault that Lanzhou is in such ill health today. The physicians in Zhongbo are incapable; I've already gone and invited Venerable Yideng over. When the war subsides after autumn, my *shifu* will come and take his pulse too. Even if Lanzhou is utterly difficult to care for, I still want to do it. But I'm currently stationed far away in Libei, and the deliveries of provisions for the military cannot be delayed; If I cannot see him, I don't feel at peace. Incidents like what happened in Chazhou cannot keep happening, but I have neither family nor close friends in Zhongbo, and can only ask this of *shifu*. *Shifu*, Lanzhou abruptly came face-to-face with adversity in his youth, and he likes to keep things to himself. Even when he's in pain or sorrow, he keeps mum about it. But he treats you as his father. As long as you're by his side, he will take your feelings into consideration and show more regard for his own health. I don't have any other request; all I ask is for you to scold him a little more, so that he will know the errors of his ways and feel pain—the next time he does something like this, *shifu*, lash out at me, Xiao Ce'an!"

Ji Gang stood rooted to the spot, stunned and stupefied, feeling as if there was something not quite right with those words, yet at that point in time he could not quite put his finger on what exactly was wrong with it. He

looked towards the window, where he heard a light clink of a teacup from the other end of the bamboo blinds, just one sound, and then all was quiet again.



The frogs in the pond had been entirely removed, and the courtyard was very peaceful after dinnertime.

Xiao Chiye went to have a shower after his meal. Lang Tao Xue Jin and Meng had already been fed. Shen Zechuan stood under the eaves and scooped up a handful of the newly planted orange jasmine. There was no one else in the courtyard, but there was a small table with snacks under the eaves, bathed in the evening glow of the sunset. Shen Zechuan sat down and gazed out into the distance at the setting sun, lost in his thoughts.

Xiao Chiye walked out, damp from his shower, and crouched down behind Shen Zechuan as he dried his hair. Shen Zechuan grasped the orange jasmine and turned his head back. Xiao Chiye lowered his head and kissed Shen Zechuan. The setting sun was a hue of reddish-orange, and the world, silent and still; even the wind was tactful enough to leave this portion of the courtyard to just the two of them.

Shen Zechuan suddenly turned around and pounced on Xiao Chiye. Partially leaning back against the door frame, Xiao Chiye hugged Shen Zechuan tightly and pressed the tip of his nose against Shen Zechuan's cheek, saying in a fierce tone, "You're pressing against my injury."

Shen Zechuan threw the pieces of orange jasmine into Xiao Chiye's pocket, "Let me touch it."

Xiao Chiye did not let him. He grabbed hold of both of Shen Zechuan's wrists and pulled him towards himself. He was strong and fit, and so it did not strain him the slightest to bear Shen Zechuan's weight. Even the way he sat was carefree and unrestrained. Both of them cuddled together, from dusk to night.

Actually, Xiao Chiye had been very unhappy for the past half-month.

The Shasan camp that the Imperial Army had taken back had been given to Guo Weili, and when Guo Weili came to take over, he bumped into Gu Jin. Both of them found the other an eyesore, and friction was also increasing between the soldiers under their commands. Xiao Chiye swallowed this grievance and took over Wu Ziyu's position in the Bianbo camp, but escorting the transportation of supplies was far more difficult than he had imagined. He was bossed around by the commanding generals

of the respective military camps at the site of battle, and even after retreating to Dajing, he still had to submit a full and detailed report to Xiao Jiming regardless of its significance. After leaving the military tents, he had to socialize with the merchants from Luoxia Pass and Huaizhou, often drinking through the night. Then he would have to ride off to another camp, even before the sky had turned bright.

But he had no intention of telling Shen Zechuan any of these.

Xiao Chiye thought of the folk songs of the Hongyan Mountains; he did not know how to sing them and could only hum its melody playfully. Shen Zechuan had his eyes closed as he slept amidst the delicate scent, his head resting against Xiao Chiye, and his hands clutching at the front of Xiao Chiye's robe. Xiao Chiye held him in his embrace, humming until it was about time before he picked him up and carried him back into their room.

Shen Zechuan did not loosen his grip, so Xiao Chiye bent over and blew lightly at his palms, then crouched down and watched for a short while before saying, "I'm still angry."

Shen Zechuan partially opened his eyes and poked at Xiao Chiye's cheeks, whispering, "Don't be."

"All you do is lie to me, you..." Xiao Chiye was momentarily at a loss for words. "Is *er-gongzi* this easy to deceive? You sure are remarkable to be bullying a pure and innocent young master."

Shen Zechuan rolled over to lie on his stomach and faced Xiao Chiye, head to head.

Damn, this gaze.

Xiao Chiye could only swallow his indignation. He pinched Shen Zechuan's cheeks and spoke in a raspy voice, "Go on, keep acting cute with me. It's futile, Shen Lanzhou. If you give yourself another stab the next time, I'll die immediately in Libei. I won't exist anymore, do you hear me?"

Shen Zechuan nodded, all well-behaved.

Xiao Chiye leaned closer and bumped his forehead against Shen Zechuan's. "I have to go."

Shen Zechuan did not let go. "When will you be back next?"

Xiao Chiye had no answer for that. He stroked Shen Zechuan's cheeks with the pads of his fingers. "Soon. There are still plenty of matters to attend to, but things should get easier once autumn arrives."

It was already the hour of *zi*. Shen Zechuan released his grip and gazed at Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye had never felt standing up to be this difficult. He swiftly put on his arm guard and let down the bed curtain. Finally, he lowered his hand and brushed across the tip of Shen Zechuan's nose with a finger. "Sleep well, Lanzhou."

Lang Tao Xue Jin left the city under cover of the night, with Meng following Xiao Chiye along as it soared the skies and headed north.

Chen Yang had already come to meet up with him mid-journey. Xiao Chiye could only sleep for a couple of hours upon reaching the Bianbo camp, after which he had to head north to the battlegrounds immediately. At the very exact moment Xiao Chiye left Cizhou, a donkey trotted into the territory of Zhongbo.

This donkey was carrying a man bent over its back. It was impossible to tell if this person was dead or alive. A couple of hungry meowing sounds rang out from within the opening of his sleeve. The man opened his eyes with great difficulty, looked at the pitch-dark road ahead of him, and closed them again.



# QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 145 : BEGGAR

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



Several days later, the garrison troops of Cizhou escorting and transporting the grain wagons arrived in Chazhou. Fei Sheng returned to the residence to give Shen Zechuan a full report of the happenings in Chazhou. At the same time, he handed over his records of the prices of goods in the two prefectures of Huaizhou and Fanzhou. Not only that, he had even gotten to the bottom of Lei Changming's and Lei Jingzhe's backgrounds.

Lei Changming was a native of Chazhou who had his beginnings as an armed escort; this was all open and common knowledge of his background. Fei Sheng, who had made inquiries all over Chazhou with the help from the shops in Juexi, learned that Lei Changming had engaged in the flesh trade during the reign of Yongyi, as divulged by the elderly people in Chazhou. Back then, both prefectures of Dunzhou and Duanzhou saw a burgeoning rise in the numbers of the entertainment quarters across their territories, leading to the proliferation of famous courtesans like Shen Zechuan's mother, Bai Cha. Subsequently, Lei Changming scoured the lands of Dengzhou, hoodwinking innocent and naïve women and reselling them to Dunzhou and Duanzhou as prostitutes. Afterward, Shen Wei ordered for the brothels along the banks of the Chashi River to close down, thereby causing the businesses in Duanzhou to fall into drastic decline. Lei Changming had no connections in Duanzhou and could only look for another way out.

Lei Changming, who had until then been trying to get by, wanted to resume his old trade. He hence capitalized on the reputation of the Zhu Clan and went around making connections with the officials in Zhongbo. In his process of associating with these officials, he found out that these people dreaded the time after spring every year when the Chief Surveillance Bureau would make field trips to conduct inspections and audits. As the Imperial Censors had the right to impeach, the appraisals of the officials involved would undoubtedly be affected. This was an important affair pertaining to their own promotions and transfers, and as such, they did not dare to act rashly and visit the brothels for pleasure.

Lei Changming thus hit upon an idea. He set up a "Mingshu Hall" in Fanzhou, which was a poetry club-cum-teahouse on the surface. In

actuality, however, he had the decent women he sourced put up there as secret prostitutes to bribe the various officials. However, this business did not last long either, ruined at the hands of Shen Wei.

At this point in the record, Fei Sheng had specifically made a note at the side.

Shen Wei had spies and informers everywhere in the various prefectures. Ever since he married Bai Cha, he had been rather heavy-handed in his attempts to crush the brothel trade in the various prefectures. Lei Changming's Mingshu Hall had not been established for even a year when it was wiped out at lightning speed by Shen Wei. Abducting and trafficking women of decent origins was punishable by law. To escape responsibility for the crimes, Lei Changming instructed his subordinate to take his place, while he hurried over to the prefecture of Dunzhou where he offered Shen Wei a large sum of cold, hard silver ingots before he managed to extricate himself.

After this incident, Lei Changming reverted to his ways of idling around doing nothing. His wife and son had passed away early, but he did not take a concubine at that point in time. He had a penchant for grooming children ever since he abducted and sold women a long time back. But he was too brutal towards them, and none of those children ever survived. At the end of the reign of Yongyi, Lei Changming took on the Yan clan of Hezhou's job to provide armed escort as a means of livelihood. Subsequently, he got into the Yan clan's good graces. It was from then on he really started to enjoy a meteoric rise.

There was no mention of a jade bead or earring in this record. Shen Zechuan closed the book and contemplated it for a moment. "It's strange. Children who can wear earrings are either wealthy or noble. Even if Lei Changming dared to abduct and traffic those of decent backgrounds in Zhongbo, he would not dare to lay a hand on the noble clans' heirs from the Eight Cities of Qudu."

"Master has guessed it right. I heard about this from my inquiries too, but I can't very well include it in the report without evidence, so I have to report this to you in person." Fei Sheng stood beside the table and turned his head back to look at Li Xiong, who was in the courtyard. "I spoke to that lad too, and I more or less have an idea. During the reign of Yongyi, Lei Changming saved the young master of the Yan clan, Yan Heru. That child did indeed wear an earring. He was a good-looking child too, said to

be fair and exquisite, and he was the apple of the Yan clan's eye. Lei Changming took Young Master Yan back. Well, as Master has seen in person, this man was a beast, and he actually harbored indecent thoughts towards that Young Master Yan."

Shen Zechuan snapped his folding fan shut.

Fei Sheng continued, "But he didn't dare to. It just so happened at that time that Shao from the Ministry of War was imprisoned, and the male descendants of the Shao clan were all sentenced to execution. In order to preserve their bloodline, the old matriarch of the Shao clan had the last remaining grandson of lawful birth disguised as a girl. This lawful grandson of the Shao clan was escorted into exile in Zhongbo, where he happened to fall into the hands of Lei Changming."

When Fei Sheng reached this point, Qiao Tianya, who had a book on his face, suddenly sat up. "The Shao clan? The Shao clan from the Ministry of War during the reign of Yongyi? The Ministry of War Vice Minister, Shao Chengbi!"

Fei Sheng clapped his hands. "Right. That's the one. You know him?"

Qiao Tianya stood up in a flash, momentarily stupefied for quite a while before he answered, "Of course I know him... Master, I've told you before that I'm the son of Qiao from the Ministry of War. Shao Chengbi and my father were bosom friends. Not only that, Shao Chengbi was an official that the Grand Mentor single-handedly promoted. It was just that he wasn't good at socializing, so he hardly interacted with the Grand Mentor. Later on, he married the elder sister of the current Minister of War, Chen Zhen. It was because of this that he had a narrow escape when everyone in the Eastern Palace was being hunted down, and that was also how he was spared from being exterminated by the Empress Dowager."

Fei Sheng nodded. "That's what happened. But Shao Chengbi did not make friendly overtures towards the Hua and Pan factions. To remove him, Hua Siqian abused the power of his own authority at the end of the reign of Yongyi and had Ji Lei command the Imperial Bodyguards to frame him as one of the participants of the Eastern Palace's rebellion case, causing all his family possessions and properties to be confiscated and sealed off."

Shen Zechuan then understood. Lei Changming did not dare to lay his hands on Yan Heru, so he used the lawful grandson of the Shao clan as a substitute instead.

Fei Sheng continued, "The lawful grandson of the Shao clan was older than Yan Heru, but even so, he was merely nine years old at that time, and he was a grandchild of lawful birth doted on and pampered by all in the Shao clan. Before Old Matriarch Shao met her end, she pleaded with all her old acquaintances before she could have him swapped over and sent out of Qudu. But who would have thought that he would be ravaged by Lei Changming when he arrived in Zhongbo? Lei Changming was extremely brutal. The first reason was that he always liked to drink wine before doing the deed, and so his restraint was impaired, and he did not hold himself back. The second reason was that he wanted to stamp out the root of future troubles. Drag the child out and bury him once the child was dead, and this matter would be considered over and done with. Cai Yu was the one who asked around and found out about it. My guess is that it's also because of this matter that Lei Changming had a falling out with the Yan clan later."

This was the first assignment Fei Sheng was handling for Shen Zechuan, so he naturally had to do a beautiful job of it. Fei Sheng then continued to give his detailed report on Luo Mu of Chazhou. In the process of listening, Shen Zechuan eyed Qiao Tianya.

Qiao Tianya's mind was preoccupied.

After Fei Sheng took his leave, he took the opportunity to chat with Qiao Tianya in between the changing of shifts.

"There's no need to ask me." Fei Sheng rubbed his hands together, washing the space between his fingers clean. "Any news I have regarding the lawful grandson of the Shao clan came from the bandits in Chazhou. You know this too; he's nowhere as important as Yan Heru, so who would remember his existence back then? Eight or nine out of ten of the people who fell into Lei Changming's hands ended up dead, and even if they didn't..." Fei Sheng sighed, feeling complicated, "There's no way they can continue living."

Qiao Tianya faked a relaxed demeanor and merely said, "Did I even ask you? I didn't plan on asking."

"Fei Sheng looked at him in disdain and used his fingers to gesture at the distance between them. "You know, in all probability, the reason you waltzed over here was to ask about the matter. It has been so many years since this incident. If you really can't get over things, pretend he's still alive."

“There is no ‘pretend’.” Qiao Tianya took a few steps down the stairs and raised his arms to pillow them at the back of his head, squinting his eyes slightly as he faced the sunlight. He spoke with an air of nonchalance, “If he’s dead, he’s dead. It’s so much more pleasantly cool to lie six feet under.”



In just a few days, it’d be the end of the seventh month, where wagons of silver returned as wagons of grain left Cizhou. Autumn was just around the corner, and Zhou Gui was worried that the grains in Huaizhou would be bought up by the other places. Now that they had money, Zhou Gui began discussion with his advisors on the issue; this business with Huaizhou needed to be settled as soon as possible.

Shen Zechuan headed to the study for the discussion, and after listening, he only asked one question, “What does Mister Chengfeng think?”

Kong Ling hesitated for a moment. “As I’ve said to His Excellency last night, going to Huaizhou right now is too hasty. I do not approve.”

Zhou Gui, who was sitting in the less honorary seat next to Shen Zechuan, nodded as he spoke. “Chengfeng did indeed say that when we were discussing the details last night. However, Vice Commander, some parts of Juexi were struck by natural disasters this year, and the Provincial Administration Commissioner, Jiang Qingshan, has also been transferred away. The areas with grain shortage will no doubt have to buy it from other prefectures. Huaizhou is close to Qudu, and the autumn harvest is on the horizon. I’m worried that Juexi will ink a deal with them before we do.”

Zhou Gui’s worries were not without reason. The granaries that Cizhou had emptied out to conduct this trade were meant to be kept for emergency use, so it wasn’t reassuring to be holding on to all these silvers in hand with no grains in their reserves.

During the past few days, Shen Zechuan had been planning out a trip to Huaizhou, but he was hesitant not for just this one reason, but also because Qudu’s transfer papers for Jiang Qingshan had still not been issued. Regardless of whether this person was sent back to Juexi or reassigned somewhere else, he would inevitably affect the trade of grains in Cizhou. If Jiang Qingshan was deployed to Huaizhou, then their business deal with Huaizhou – if negotiated now – was likely to end up voided.

Shen Zechuan was in a quandary. “The concerns of Mister and Your Excellency are not without reason. I’ve also been pondering over the issue regarding Huaizhou for the last few days. According to our earliest proposed plans, it would naturally be better to get it done as soon as possible. But as things stand now, figuring out how to avoid Qudu’s scrutiny is a concern too.”

Kong Ling said from the side, “Moreover, we have to borrow the tracks from Libei for the passage of our money wagons, and this matter still needs to be discussed with the Hereditary Prince. But in all probability, the Hereditary Prince will not stop us. We are borrowing the bridle paths of the Libei Armored Cavalry and converting these silvers into grains to replenish their supplies. At present, Libei will naturally be happy to agree. I’m only worried about one thing, and that is, how do we get past Luoxia Pass? The Luoxia Pass Garrison Troops still fall directly under the jurisdiction and control of Qudu, and they lack neither grain nor money. Libei can still pull some strings with them, but what about Cizhou?”

Given Shen Zechuan’s relationship with Xiao Chiye, he could also ask for a favor with Luoxia Pass on account of their friendly ties when it really boiled down to it. But this was built on the basis that Xiao Fangxu and Xiao Jiming were willing to acknowledge Shen Zechuan. Otherwise, relying on Xiao Chiye alone... well, apologies, the Second Young Master at present doesn’t really have that much of a prestige yet.

By bringing this matter up, Kong Ling was also tactfully conveying the fact that they were not *that* close to Libei. They had to settle the accounts due if they wanted to borrow the tracks for their own use, and it would not be that easy either if they wanted to borrow troops in the future. At first, they all thought that Xiao Chiye was going back to succeed his father and elder brother and carve out a distinguished career for himself, but based on the way things looked now, Xiao Chiye was even lower in rank than the commanding generals at the site of battle. It was not that generals in charge of supplies were not important, but there was simply no comparison when it came to reputation and prestige.

They discussed in the study until dusk, but still failed to reach a conclusion.

When Shen Zechuan returned to his residence, he saw Ding Tao and Li Xiong waiting to receive him at the entrance.

Ding Tao did not return to Libei, and he was not included in any of the duty shifts either, so he spent the whole day practicing shadow boxing at Ji Gang's side with Li Xiong. They had nothing to do in the afternoon after they were done with training in the morning, and thus both of them ran wild all over the place, playing to their hearts' content for the entirety of the seventh month. Ding Tao was no longer upset now. He had forgotten all about Chen Yang and Gu Jin. There was also no one to nag at him when he ate sweets at night. It was only when he got a toothache that Qiao Tianya would lecture him.

"Young Master, there are quite a number of beggars in the city today." Ding Tao followed Shen Zechuan and said, "They are all starving to the point that they're sallow and emaciated. They said they came from the city of Dancheng. His Excellency Yu went out in the morning to buy an entire bamboo steamer basket worth of steamed buns, and they even fought with one another over those buns."

Shen Zechuan paused in his tracks. Seeing as the sky was still bright, he said to Qiao Tianya, "Let's go take a look."

Cizhou had barely started reorganizing its census registry. If refugees entered, they would all have to head to the prefectural *yamen* to report their names and places of origin. This was to prevent bandits from sneaking into the city. This matter was already being taken care of. The reason Shen Zechuan especially came down to take a look was because Ding Tao had brought up Dancheng.

When they arrived, Yu Xiaozai was giving out steamed buns. Fei Sheng and Qiao Tianya stepped forward to help, and Yu Xiaozai repeatedly thanked them.

"Youjing." Shen Zechuan spoke gently, "Bring them to the prefectural *yamen*, and there will be people giving out steamed buns and porridge. There is no need for you to bear the expense."

Yu Xiaozai had come to Cizhou on foot with little money on him. Now that he lost his official position and was unwilling to work for Zhou Gui as an aide, he stayed in Shen Zechuan's residence and let Shen Zechuan support him. But he was very thrifty and often provided literary services to the others. It was only during this period of time he managed to save up a couple of taels, and now they had all been exchanged for steamed buns.

Yu Xiaozai said, "There are only so many rations the *yamen* can distribute daily. Most of those who come late are the old, weak, sick, and

widowed. It's rather pitiful for them to go hungry. In any case, money is but mere worldly possession."

Shen Zechuan was also getting suspicious after seeing such a great number of refugees. The city of Dancheng was one of the eight cities of Qudu. They did not encounter a natural disaster this year, and they even provided supplies to Han Jin's Eight Great Training Divisions. The Imperial Army even had a feast there when they passed by the city, so how could there be so many refugees all of a sudden?

Qiao Tianya was stuffing steamed buns into the hands of the refugees one at a time when he suddenly heard a commotion behind him.

Shen Zechuan shifted his gaze over and saw several ruffians causing a disturbance as they tried to pull away someone else's donkey. Fei Sheng saw Shen Zechuan's expressionless face and promptly bundled up the steamed buns and waved his hand to get the Imperial Bodyguards to go over and pull them apart. He yelled, "What are you people doing there making such a din?!"

One of the ruffians had seen the Imperial Bodyguards at work before. As he was dragged away, with both legs trailing on the ground, he said in a panic, "My good sir, it's not us who are causing a commotion! These few people first said they wanted to sell the donkey, but they wouldn't give it to me after I paid up. Tell me, is this not a scam?!"

On hearing that, Fei Sheng turned his head and spoke down at the men. "Don't you people ever check who is in charge here before coming over to swindle and defraud others? Hurry and give the donkey to him!"

The few disheveled and unkempt men timidly tugged the rope and stuffed it into Fei Sheng's hands. The donkey brayed from the tugs. A hand that had been squeezed back behind them slapped at the ground haphazardly and muttered ambiguously, "That's my donkey..."

Fei Sheng had sharp hearing, but he did not want to complicate the issue, so he pretended not to have heard it. The ruffians stomped on the hand so hard that it clenched into a fist from the pain and pounded on the ground. But an unidentified person at the back pulled him away until that hand abruptly vanished from sight.

Fei Sheng handed the donkey over. Feeling a slight weight on his shoe, he lowered his head for a look. It was a kitten so smeared with dirt that it was all gray and dusty. Fei Sheng bent over to pick it up. "Taozi, here's a little playmate—"



Before Fei Sheng could finish his words, that hand showed up once again, revealing only the tips of its fingers as it dug into the ground until it was all bloodied mud between the crevices of its fingers.

“My... My cat!”

This person crawled over, his forehead scraping against the ground. The ruffian behind saw Fei Sheng turning over and hurriedly dragged the person back by the ankles to hide him.

Fei Sheng realized that this person’s legs were in bad shape and wondered if they had been broken when this person had taken a beating.



**NOTE:**

The next two chapters 146 & 147 are up in advance for readers who have purchased the web novel or physical copies of QJJ. We want to actively encourage readers to buy the novel to support the author whenever possible, so please do so if you can!

The book costs only on 2849 (USD\$4.84) on the mobile app or 4763 (USD\$8.10) on the web version!\*

\*My suggestion would be to top up via paypal on the website, then buy the book on the JJWXC mobile app instead!

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 146 : YUANZHUO

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



Shen Zechuan suddenly said, “Ding Tao.”

Ding Tao kept his little book away and leaped over the obstruction to grab the arm of one of them. “What are you people hiding? Move away for the Young Master to take a look.”

Fei Sheng noted their shifty eyes and hemming and hawing, so he bellowed, “What? Is this donkey not yours?”

A sharp-eyed Ding Tao yelled, “Young Master, there’s a man below!”

The surrounding Imperial Bodyguards stepped forth and encircled them. Most of these people were local ruffians from the city of Dancheng, and they could not help but cower in fear when they saw the hostile expressions of the Imperial Bodyguards, what’s more when these Imperial Bodyguards were also all armed with blades. So before Fei Sheng could give his order, they all dispersed in an uproar, revealing the man on the ground.

Yu Xiaozai lifted the hem of his robe and moved in closer for a look. He bent over and exclaimed in shock, “Why is there so much blood? Quick, help him up quickly and call for a physician!”

Fei Sheng squatted down to check on the man. “These legs are a goner. Someone broke them.”

This man refused to look up, instead propping himself up for a moment to say in a hoarse voice, “... The cat is mine.”

Embarrassed, Fei Sheng picked the cat up and put it before the man, explaining, “I thought it was a stray cat. Is this donkey yours too? You’re not from Dancheng, are you?”

The man did not answer. He coughed at the ground. As he covered his lips, Fei Sheng caught a glimpse of the handkerchief in his palm. This handkerchief was exquisite. Even though it was dirty, its quality and material were not commonplace. These fingers were long and slender, without any calluses on them; it was not the hand belonging to someone used to manual labor or menial work.

In an instant, Fei Sheng changed his attitude and said, "Let me help you up. You can no longer walk on these legs of yours, and you are so badly ill. The most important thing at present is to have a physician take a look as soon as possible."

The man suddenly clenched his fists, and his coughing intensified. The handkerchief he used to cover his lips was stained with blood. He was clearly in a terrible state, yet his etiquette was impeccable as he lowered his eyes and said, "I wouldn't dare to trouble you. Thanks for asking."

Yu Xiaozai saw the *zhaowen* bag<sup>1</sup> hanging around the man's waist and realized that this man was a scholar. He could not help but feel more deeply concerned as he turned his head back to say to Shen Zechuan, "Vice Commander, he doesn't seem to be a wicked person to me. Why don't we —"

"Vice Commander?" The man's tone suddenly changed. "Vice Commander Shen, Shen Zechuan?"

The surrounding Imperial Bodyguards promptly held on to their blades. Shen Zechuan raised a hand as a gesture for them to hold it and asked, "Are we old acquaintances?"

The man felt a tidal surge of emotions. He wanted to say something, but he ended up coughing out blood. His Adam's apple bobbed, and his coughing grew even more intense as his pale, trembling fingers bent and dug into the ground, gouging out tracks while he mumbled over and over again, "Shen Zechuan, it's you!"

This voice gave Qiao Tianya a sense of *déjà vu*. He turned around.

Shen Zechuan slowly crouched down and looked directly at the man. The man moved away the handkerchief covering his lips and propped himself up on the ground with his arms. His eyes seemed to have been set ablaze, filled with the madness of someone who was staking it all on a cast of the dice. He lifted his head. Just as everyone thought he would wail and go hysterical, he let out a very soft laugh. This laugh was like the ripple of spring waters, fleeting and ephemeral, before it quickly plunged into a bottomless abyss of raging inferno, where the fire burned everything clean along with his unbending pride and free spirit, turning an immortal free from worldly cares into a pile of filthy ashes.

Qiao Tianya recognized him now.

A veil of misty rain descended upon past memories of a pair of like-minded confidantes playing the zither under the willows amidst the lush

scenery of spring. That upright, one-of-a-kind young master in green had also ended up with his legs broken by another. Just like that, the unpolished jade that Hai Liangyi and the Yao clan had cherished and treasured for half a lifetime had been so easily besmeared with mud.

Qiao Songyue suddenly felt at a loss. He intuitively felt that he should not continue staring at Yao Wenyu like this, but he once again saw himself in him. They both lived in the Moon Palace.<sup>2</sup> Qiao Songyue had descended, and a dashing, fan-holding young master of a prominent clan had turned into a blade-wielding, down-and-out Qiao Tianya. He thought their chance encounter was transient, but he never expected that they would be fellow sufferers commiserating with each other the next time they met again half a year later.

The word “commiserate” was truly overwhelmingly agonizing.

Qiao Tianya hastily averted his gaze, unwilling to look any further.



It was already late at night, and the lights inside the house were not very bright. The physician’s apprentice came out with the prescription in hand. Fei Sheng took it and handed it over to his subordinate to fill the prescription of medicinal herbs. The few of them were standing in the corridor. Ding Tao was surprisingly well-behaved as he held that cat in his arms.

Fei Sheng forced a smile and said to Qiao Tianya, “Who would have expected it to be him? This...”

What was there for him to say?

Stories of the “Unpolished Jade Yuanzhuo” Yao Wenyu had been widely circulating for many years in Qudu, and in all of them, he was hailed as a “banished immortal”<sup>3</sup>—a wayward genius living among men. Even Fei Sheng, who had never associated with the literati, had heard much of this name. Who would have thought that the free and unfettered wanderer of the rumors would end up in such a state? He was even more downtrodden than Yu Xiaozai when the latter first came.

Yu Xiaozai had already cried once, and now he was facing the wall, overwhelmed with grief as he choked with sobs, “... How... how can they let the Grand Secretary down?!”

Fei Sheng consoled in a dry voice, “The way of the world is unpredictable. Youjing, please don’t be too upset.”

Qiao Tianya leaned against a pillar in the corridor, hidden under the shadows. He did not say a word.

They had not stood for long when Kong Ling saw the physician out and beckoned to them. Qiao Tianya fell a few steps behind and bowed his head down to ask the physician a few questions. The physician answered him truthfully, and Qiao Tianya fell silent for a few moments, then turned aside to let someone send the physician away.

The bamboo blinds that had been let down in the room kept out some of the candlelight. The interior had been partitioned off. Shen Zechuan sat outside the partitioned area and said something to Zhou Gui in hushed tones. On seeing them enter, he only said, "Fei Sheng, you will be on night watch. Ding Tao, go back to your courtyard and sleep. Youjing, there's no need to worry. The kitchen is decocting the medicine as we speak."

Yu Xiaozai turned aside to take his seat. After a moment of silence, he spoke, "Young Master Yao..."

Kong Ling was a perceptive and empathetic man; he knew it was inadvisable to discuss it in detail here. Bemoaning Yao Wenyu's fate or showing Yao Wenyu pity were, to Yao Wenyu, tantamount to torture at this point; it was no different from death by dismemberment. So he rose to his feet and led Yu Xiaozai. "It's late tonight. Youjing, Young Master Yao has only just arrived; let him rest for a night. It's not too late for us to come visit him again tomorrow."

With that, he turned back to bow to Shen Zechuan and said to Zhou Gui, "We still have to discuss matters in the study later. Your Excellency, please come with me too."

Yu Xiaozai, having received a gentle reminder from Kong Ling, followed suit and rose to his feet to bid farewell too. Before he left, he cast a glance at the inner room and saw the shadows of trees intersecting with the flickering shadows of the candlelight. The man within was silent. Yu Xiaozai thought of Hai Liangyi once more. His eyes involuntarily reddened. Holding back a long sigh, he hurriedly strode across the threshold of the door.

The night was bleak, and the veil of moonlight cast upon the flowers and plants in the courtyard made them appear sickly and listless. The few wind chimes hanging under the eaves swayed with the wind, dancing to the tinkling tune of metal against metal. Yao Wenyu lay on the couch, his

consciousness scattering to the beats of the wind chimes. In his trance, he had returned to Qudu.

Misty rain pervaded Qudu.

Yao Wenyu donned mourning attire and sent off Hai Liangyi to Mount Bodhi. This mountain was once the burial site of his paternal grandfather, and now, it was the burial site for his teacher. He stood in that drizzle, unable to take in the scenery, unable to recognize the way that could take him back.

The Yao clan had produced national scholars of great talents. They were full of vim in the successive reigns of Dazhou, and they were also the mainstay of the divisive noble clans. But during Emperor Guangcheng's reign, Old Master Yao revolutionized the clan's traditions and renounced the prejudices between family status. He reached out to the common descendants of humble origins who were denied opportunities due to a lack of connections to the powerful and influential. From then on, the Imperial College flourished. The Yao clan began exploring a different path, but this path came to a premature end in the hands of the Empress Dowager, Hua Hewei, and Hua Siqian. By the time it came to Yao Wenyu's father's generation, the Yao clan was already on the decline. Although the Yao clan still had some influence and prestige left, it was no longer on par with what it once was during the time Old Master Yao had been alive. The most fatal of all was that the Yao clan was faced with a dearth of descendants in this generation—they only had one Yao Wenyu. The rest were all descendants from the collateral branch of the clan, and there was not even one among them who had come out top in the imperial examinations in spring.

In recent years, the eight clans had all undergone a change in heads and members. The Yao clan was no longer able to command the same level of respect from the others. Most of the juniors in their clan who still served as officials were in idle positions with practically no obligations; none were third-grade ministers in esteemed positions like those from the Wei clan. Although Yao Wenyu was a student under Hai Liangyi and was friends with many of the literati, he had no scholarly honor or official position to his name; he had not married Commandery Princess Zhaoyue of the Fei clan either. Other than the reputation he had for his talent, he had nothing at all, and in the end, even his reputed fame had forsaken him. He was like the falling leaves on this mountain, reduced to nothing but mud. Worthless.

Qiao Tianya lifted the bamboo blinds and turned sideways to step aside. Shen Zechuan entered the room and sat on the chair that the physician had previously sat on to take pulses. As the candlelight flickered, Shen Zechuan spoke, "You've been poisoned by someone, it's inadvisable for you to stay out in public. If you don't mind, you can stay at my home. My teacher and yours are considered colleagues, and you are old friends with Ce'an. There's no need to stand on ceremony."

Yao Wenyu's freshly washed face was a picture of calm as he continued to listen to the wind chimes beneath the eaves. After half a moment, he answered. "There's no need to be so tactful. The reason I came to Cizhou was to seek refuge and throw in my lot with the Vice Commander."

Shen Zechuan rested his folding fan on his knee and said, "I'm now living under another's roof making a living and trying to get by. I only dare to be called brothers with you, not master and servant."

"The revival of Cizhou was in no small part due to the efforts of the Vice Commander." The heavy trauma inflicted upon this body one after another was meant to make him die. Yao Wenyu started coughing again. He was but one scholar. It would prove to be hard to eradicate his illnesses now that they had taken root in his body. He was now heavily ill, much weaker and frail compared to half a year ago. He clutched his handkerchief, covering his mouth for a moment before continuing. "I heard about the Vice Commander's deeds on my journey here, and I'm of the opinion that the Vice Commander wasn't trying to obtain the six prefectures of Zhongbo, but Qudu. Once the trade routes between Cizhou, Chazhou, and Huaizhou are established, it will be able to provide direct access to the mutual trade market in Libei to the northeast, and keep the grain routes of Qidong in check towards the southeast. The military forces of Dazhou on both ends using the routes will have to pass through the Vice Commander's scrutiny. The way they fight and the timing of their battles in the future will all lie in the hands of the Vice Commander."

Shen Zechuan brushed open his folding fan with his fingertips and set it on the handle of the chair. He did not respond.

"Furthermore, the geographical position of this trade route is special; if the Vice Commander thereby establishes a trade route town, Qudu's east, south, and north sides will all be as good as secured. The Eight Great Training Divisions have limited military strength, so it'd prove impossible for Qudu to break through the Vice Commander's siege on all three sides if

they don't have assistance from Qidong in the future." Yao Wenyu cast a sidelong glance at Shen Zechuan. "The Vice Commander is a visionary man with great foresight, strategizing ahead for years down the road."

Shen Zechuan stared at Yao Wenyu.

If not for the fact that this person was in such dire straits, even Shen Zechuan himself wanted to kill him, what's more the others. Shen Zechuan had multiple explanations regarding the intent for the trade routes between the prefectures of Cizhou, Chazhou, and Huaizhou, but it was what Yao Wenyu said that was his real motive—By causing Qudu to lose its direct military route with Libei, not only could Chazhou contain Hezhou, it could also obstruct Qidong's provision supply routes. Shen Zechuan wanted to encircle Qudu.

"But Qi Zhuyin might not be willing to give the Vice Commander time." Yao Wenyu could not hold back his coughs, covering his lips with a handkerchief again and again. "She is watching each and every one of your moves from behind in Qidong; she'll see through it, eventually. If the Vice Commander is successful with this move, it's naturally all's well that ends well, but if it falls through, you'll be caught in an assault by both Qudu and Qidong. When the time comes, you will be attacked from the front and rear. Even if Libei was willing to deploy troops to help, they cannot resist the Biansha Cavalry and fight the garrison troops of Qidong simultaneously. The lack of military forces is presently the most fatal chink in the Vice Commander's armor. That is why the Vice Commander is linking up Cizhou and Chazhou, re-organizing the census registers, and taking in refugees—it's all for the sake of quickly establishing an army under your command."

Shen Zechuan snapped his fan shut and said with a smile, "Yao Yuanzhuo's reputation is truly well-deserved. But with your level of intelligence, how did you end up wandering the streets of Zhongbo? If you want to build a career, the climate in Qudu is perfect right now. Regardless of whether it's the Empress Dowager or the Grand Secretariat, they are all better able to pay the price you deserve than I can afford, Shen Zechuan."

Yao Wenyu made to sit up, so Qiao Tianya stepped forward to help him up and put a pillow behind his back for support. He did not look at Qiao Tianya; it was as though he did not recognize him. With his long fingers holding on to the handkerchief, he turned his head aside and coughed into the handkerchief. The muffled sound of coughing persisted for quite some



time. He stared at the shadows on the wall and answered in a hoarse voice, “Xue Yanqing, in his support of the heir apparent to the throne in Qudu, coerced the Grand Secretariat and Her Majesty the Empress Dowager and schemed to lead the Imperial College into pushing for reforms. However, it’s my belief that Dazhou is already beyond cure; rather than restore Qudu to its former glory, why not demolish it and rebuild it from scratch? Should Dazhou lose its deer, all under heaven will chase after it.<sup>4</sup> Even a commoner of humble origins like Lei Changming has had the desire to reign supreme. When Qudu’s reforms are put into action, people in all other places will begin to rise in rebellion. Disputes among the heroes are inevitable. The Li clan’s emperor is already too powerless to turn the tide around..”

Yao Wenyu turned back and looked attentively at Shen Zechuan amidst the dimming light. Complex emotion swam amidst the reignited fire in his eyes as he enunciated each word. “Anyone in the world can sit on the throne. The Li clan can. So why not you, Shen Zechuan?”

Shen Zechuan held up his folding fan and replied coldly, “My aspiration lies not in this.”

“You can’t fool me.” Yao Wenyu spoke under his breath. “You’re on this path right now.”

“I can jolly well support someone else to the throne.” Shen Zechuan smiled. “There is more than one person with the surname ‘Li’ in this world.”

“Six years ago, when the troops of Zhongbo suffered a defeat, you lost everything. And six years later, when Qudu suffered another defeat, you lost it all once again. When the next six years come around...” Yao Wenyu’s lowered eyes were distant and detached, “... will you still be willing to place your life and destiny in the hands of another? You are completely unsuited to be a mere subject of the state. Being subjected to the control of others has already become a lifelong indignity of yours.”

There was an abrupt shift in the atmosphere within the room. Shen Zechuan grasped his folding fan with his fingers. Although he was quiet, he still looked as if he could kill without qualms in the next moment. It was impossible to read what was in those expressive eyes of his. The wind chimes outside the window tinkled, and bleak shadows of rustling trees fell upon the edge of his robes, on which he trod beneath his feet.

Shen Zechuan abruptly smiled. “If Mister is willing to play for my team, then all matters in the future regardless of its significance can be

discussed. Qiao Tianya, serve the tea.”

Yao Wenyu accepted the tea and stirred the foam aside, but he did not drink it immediately. His wrist was of the same color as the teacup, but it was piteously thin and frail. He gazed at the floating tea leaves and said, self-deprecatingly, “You can skip the ‘Mister’. I lost to Xue Xiuzhuo in Qudu, got both of my legs broken, and was this close to losing my life. Didn’t you ask me why I came here?”

Yao Wenyu was silent for a while.

“Because I want to finish this game of chess with Xue Xiuzhuo, win or lose, live or die.”



#### NOTE:

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#### Footnotes

1. 招文袋 a small bag hung at the waist for keeping documents or money.
2. 广寒宫 *Guanghan* Palace, or Moon Palace; a mythical palace in the moon. Legend goes that it is inhabited by the goddess of the moon, Chang’e, the Jade Rabbit, and the woodcutter Wu Gang.
3. 谪仙 literally, an immortal who has been banished from heaven to live on earth; an epithet for exceptional individuals such as the Tang poet Li Bai (who also wrote the poem, Qiang Jin jiu). i.e., a wayward genius
4. The original quote is “Qin lost his deer, and all under heaven chased after it” 「秦失其鹿，天下共逐之」 from Records of the Grand Historian • Biography of Marquis Huaiyin 《史记·淮阴侯列传》. Deer is a metaphor for the throne. It’s an illustration of the rise of numerous rivaling warlords contesting for supremacy to capture the prize, the empire lost by the Qin Dynasty. So Yao Wenyu is saying that if Dazhou lost its legitimacy on the throne/the empire, then all the heroes in the world are free to make a grab for it.



## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 147: STEPMOTHER

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



Shen Zechuan had already gotten up before dawn the next day. The courtyard was a little chilly, so he put on a pure-white wide-sleeved outer robe and stood at the desk to look over Yao Wenyu's prescription.

"His body has been weakened by poison." Qiao Tianya held onto the teapot and brewed a cup of tea for Shen Zechuan. "It's by no means an easy feat for him to have managed to preserve his life."

Shen Zechuan held the teacup with both hands and said, "Given Xue Xiuzhuo's style, he definitely went all out with the intent to kill." His brows furrowed for a moment. "... Is there no hope for his legs?"

Qiao Tianya set the teapot down and put the lid on as he replied, "No."

Shen Zechuan could not bring himself to continue drinking his tea, so he returned the teacup with the undrunk tea back onto the table. "What about his body? Now that he's staying here, there's no need to be stingy with the medicine; give him whatever the physician prescribes.

Additionally, get a couple of meticulously attentive people to take care of him. We mustn't be too poor of a host."

Qiao Tianya fell silent for a few moments.

And so Shen Zechuan understood that Yao Wenyu's body was a goner too. While they were conversing last night, Yao Wenyu had repeatedly been coughing out blood. He paused for a moment. "Is he awake? I'll go pay him a visit."

When Shen Zechuan arrived, he saw the maidservants all waiting in attendance under the eaves, silent as cicadas in cold weather. He put on his usual expression and lifted the bamboo blinds to enter. The lamps were not lit inside the room, giving off an unwarranted vibe of cheerlessness. It was quiet and still within. Shen Zechuan could only catch a vague glimpse of Yao Wenyu's lonely back view.

As if sensing him, Yao Wenyu turned his head back partially and said through the hanging door curtain, "Vice Commander, please come in."

It was only then Shen Zechuan lifted the curtain and bowed his head to enter. Qiao Tianya stood in the outer chamber on his own initiative, leaning

against the wall as he listened to the chirps of the birds in the covered walkway.

“Autumn is about to fall in Cizhou, and the matter of Huaizhou has been on the Vice Commander’s mind lately.” Yao Wenyu was impeccably dressed. Although he was severely ill, he was still unwilling to present himself before the others all sloppily dressed. It was just that his legs were not in a good state, making it difficult for him to move around. Even though he tried his best to hide it, the bruises on his hands were still conspicuous.

Shen Zechuan did not seem to have seen it. He said, “This matter is indeed worrying. It’s inappropriate to go too early or too late. I’ve discussed it over with His Excellency Zhou for days, and we still have yet to reach a conclusion.”

Yao Wenyu gave a slight nod of his head. “There are two difficulties when it comes to the matter of Huaizhou. The first is Jiang Qingshan, and the second is Luoxia Pass’s checkpoint. If these two difficulties aren’t resolved, then it’ll be hard for the trade routes between Cizhou, Chazhou, and Huaizhou to come to fruition. But if you ask me, neither of these two issues is a tough one.”

Shen Zechuan listened with rapt attention.

Yao Wenyu looked at the new window screens made of gauze. The birds were chirping noisily outside. He coughed a few times. “When Xue Xiuzhuo held the post of Chief Supervising Secretary at the Office of Scrutiny for Revenue, he made the acquaintance of Jiang Qingshan. Both men collaborate for many years working as one. They not only made up for the deficit in Juexi’s tax money, but also turned the thirteen cities of Juexi into Dazhou’s granaries. It’s only when Jiang Qingshan assumes personal command of Juexi that he can ensure the integrity of Juexi’s governmental affairs, as well as prevent another major case like the Libei’s military provision case during the start of spring this year from happening again. In other words, Jiang Qingshan cannot leave Juexi. Xue Xiuzhuo will definitely transfer him back to Juexi and allow him to continue serving as the Provincial Administration Commissioner of Juexi, so the Vice Commander’s worry that he would be assigned north to Huaizhou is unfounded.”

Xue Xiuzhuo, having remained in the position of Chief Supervising Secretary at the Office of Scrutiny for Revenue for many years, had made plenty of field trips down to the local areas where he was hands-on with his

duties. He could be said to be very well-acquainted with the political situations of the various regions. That was why he could conduct an audit into Hua Siqian's accounts together with Hai Liangyi. But likewise, while Yao Wenyu had never served in the government, he was always wandering out there in the world all year round, and so he also had an overview of the political situation in the various areas, having observed them from the sidelines. Both of their identity and status were totally poles apart. Yet, they were more intimately aware of the commoners' circumstances than those like Kong Qiu and Cen Yu, who had always resided in Qudu.

"As for Luoxia Pass." Yao Wenyu withdrew his gaze. "Libei has already broken free of Qudu's control. Luoxia Pass is the predecessor of the Libei Armored Cavalry, and the garrison troops stationed there are all old subordinates of the Prince of Libei, Xiao Fangxu. They have long been at odds with Qudu despite their seemingly united appearance. As far as the current situation is concerned, Zhongbo's revival will only prove to be advantageous to Libei. Luoxia Pass will only be too eager to lend a helping hand; they would never obstruct the way willfully."

As Yao Wenyu spoke, he started coughing again. Shen Zechuan spontaneously handed him a cup of tea. Yao Wenyu thanked him and continued, "The matter with Huaizhou is practically a done deal. All it takes is for Mister Chengfeng and His Excellency Yu to make a trip there. My belief is that the most crucial matter on hand for the Vice Commander is not in the north, but internally in Zhongbo. The two prefectures of Dunzhou and Duanzhou to the east can be discussed later, but Fanzhou must be taken down and secured with great haste."



The discussion went on until noon, when Fei Sheng came to deliver the medicine. It was only then Shen Zechuan stepped out. He looked around at the maidservants at the entrance. Finally, he said to Qiao Tianya, "There has been nothing much going on of late. Let Fei Sheng and Ding Tao tag along with me. You remain here and take care of Yuanzhuo."

Fei Sheng initially thought that this task would fall to him, as Qiao Tianya was in charge of the guards and was an indispensable trusted subordinate of Shen Zechuan. He never expected Shen Zechuan to leave Qiao Tianya for Yao Wenyu this easily. But looking at it from another angle, this just illustrated how important Yao Wenyu was. With Qiao Tianya here, no one would dare to treat Yao Wenyu shabbily.

As for Shen Zechuan himself, there was another layer of consideration.

Yao Wenyu was a prideful and aloof man. Although his legs were broken, he was still a distinguished young master of Qudu. He would not allow himself to present a sorry sight before the others. He did not call for anyone to serve him this morning because he was unwilling to let anyone see him in his injured state. It was not suitable for Fei Sheng to take care of him, because Fei Sheng's penchant for flattery and fawning would be self-defeating and make things awkward for all involved. In contrast, Qiao Tianya's circumstances and lot in life were similar to Yao Wenyu's. There were many areas that only Qiao Tianya could understand and relate to best.

Qiao Tianya made a sound of acknowledgment and stayed.



As matters regarding Huaizhou still had to be discussed in detail with Zhou Gui, Shen Zechuan spent the next few days in Zhou Gui's study. The advisors in Cizhou all wanted to catch a glimpse of Yao Wenyu in person, given his long-standing and well-acclaimed reputation, but Shen Zechuan declined all of their visiting cards on the grounds that the man himself had still yet to recover from his illness.

After Xiao Chiye received the letter, he turned back to call for Wu Ziyu and got him to find a military craftsman to head to Cizhou to craft a custom four-wheeled vehicle for Yao Wenyu.

Wu Ziyu had been with Xiao Chiye for a month, and his troops got along best with the Imperial Army, gradually bonding over a shared hatred for a common enemy. Since the soldiers from the combat battalions looked down on them, they would not suck up to said soldiers just to end up snubbed either. Each time the army provisions were delivered to the camps, someone would check them, and once the supplies were confirmed to be in good order, they would head back the same way to Bianbo camp, where they would then stand guard so as to avoid conflicts with the other camps.

"What kind of four-wheeled vehicle?" A bare-chested Wu Ziyu followed behind him. "Is it for our military sieges, transporting supplies, or..."

Tantai Hu looked back and jokingly punched Wu Ziyu as he scolded with a laugh, "Are you the one going, or is the military craftsman the one going? It's the Master's orders, so just make it happen!"

Wu Ziyu answered, "I've got to at least get the details clear, so that I can prepare the materials before heading out."

The military craftsmen of Libei were extremely skilled, with excellent workmanship, and the materials they used were all produced in the Hongyan Mountains; they did not care for items made in Zhongbo.

“For moving about.” It was only then Xiao Chiye dismounted the horse. He was filthy all over. They had just come from the battlegrounds and had been on the road for six days; everyone was exhausted.

Wu Ziyu turned back to command someone to carry out the task. Chen Yang and the rest followed Xiao Chiye into the tent. The tables and chairs that were originally in the tent had been removed, replaced with a newly constructed military sand table in the spot that had been vacated.

“Gu Jin.” Xiao Chiye quickly removed his outer robe and tossed it to Chen Yang. With both arms propping against the edge of the military sand table, he said, “Report.”

Gu Jin pulled off his helmet, his face drenched in sweat. He pointed to the position of the Tudalong Banner. “When we transported the provisions over this time, I led the cavalry and made a special trip around the Tudalong Banner. As Master expected, Huhelu has been redeployed to the southeast battlefield to make way for someone else; the person stationed there now is someone called Hasen.<sup>1</sup> According to Wu Ziyu’s information, this Hasen is Amu’er’s son in the Hanshe Tribe. During the beginning of spring this year, the Biansha Cavalry ambushed the Shasan camp, and Hasen, as Amu’er’s vanguard, engaged in a round of battle with Zhao Hui. The Three Great Training Divisions of Liuyang suffered a casualty of eight hundred men at that time.”

Chen Yang pulled over the chair,<sup>2</sup> and Xiao Chiye sat down. He said, “That’s a heavy casualty.”

“That’s right.” Gu Jin brushed aside a couple strands of damp hair and continued. “This man is cunning and ruthless, but not reckless. When the Hereditary Prince was badly injured and encircled on all sides by Amu’er, Zhao Hui rushed over to provide reinforcement, only to end up getting entrapped by Hasen in the grassfields. The entire squad was thrown into complete disarray.”

“This person is educated.” Wu Ziyu, having just returned, slipped on a coat as he spoke up from the back. “To use our language, Hasen is essentially Amu’er’s lawful son. While Amu’er has over ten sons, he can only remember a few of them, and of those few, Hasen’s mother is the most respectable and distinguished; she’s the flower of the Hanshe Tribe.



Amu'er's ability to establish control over the Hanshe Tribe is in large part due to her. The status of the son depends on the status of his mother, and Hasen was the son who was, by virtue of his mother's status, raised at Amu'er's side and personally taught by Amu'er himself. In the future, he will inherit Amu'er's title of 'Great Hero'. Allegedly, and I mean allegedly, he's well-versed in the art of war; even Huhelu is afraid of him."

"Why didn't you say so earlier?" Tantai Hu stroked the scar on his face., "If I'd known of his prowess sooner, I would've stayed in Tudalong Banner and not returned."

"Then you'd just be serving your head up on a platter." Wu Ziyu stood still by the military sand table. "His fighting style... is actually a little similar to the Viceroy."

"Then he's ill-suited to be stationed for garrison duty." Xiao Chiye set his thumb ring straight. "And he likes to provoke others, right?"

The various generals did not respond, instead musing over how the Second Young Master was pretty self-aware.

Gu Jin gave a light cough before he continued, "Hasen wasn't the Biansha commanding general fighting against us Libei before this year. He was mainly stationed in the southeast of Dazhou in the previous years, and he was the commanding general who fought the most intensely against Qidong. Coincidentally, Hasen was also the one who heavily injured Qi Shiyu and almost took his head off back then."

So it was him!

Tantai Hu gasped. "Then I've heard of this man too. The person who fought with him back then was Commander-in-Chief Qi! When Qi Shiyu was entrapped at the eastern side of the Biansha linked camps and couldn't break out of the encirclement, his sons from the Qi clan did not dare to act impulsively and deploy troops for a rescue mission. Commander-in-Chief Qi went to the Chijun, Bianjun, and Cejun Commanderies one after another to ask for reinforcements. However, Cejun vehemently refused to do so, and it was the Lu clan of Bianjun who stepped forward to solicit assistance from Suotian Pass. It was only then that the Commander-in-Chief could gather military forces from the three parties to venture forth into the enemy's territory and carry out the rescue mission."

This battle was Qi Zhuyin's rise to fame. She took advantage of the wind direction and burned down ten *li*<sup>3</sup> worth of the Biansha linked camps' army provisions, and for this reason, she came to be known as the "Wind

Guiding the Scorching Plains”, Qi Zhuyin. But this battle was not an easy one. In truth, the legend that followed had omitted a part of the story—Qi Zhuyin had been chased by Hasen for thousands of *li* after she had rescued Qi Shiyu; the Qidong garrison troops had returned treading over roads paved in blood.

Xiao Chiye’s eyes brightened slightly. “Got it. In that case, I know him too.”

This was Lu Guangbai’s archenemy.

“Zhao Hui had already led the Three Great Training Divisions of Liuyang up north to the Tudalong Banner three days ago to take over Guo Weili’s post and fight against Hasen.” Xiao Chiye turned his thumb ring around. “This means that we no longer have any reinforcements backing us at this moment. The two major camps Libei left in the southeast are Guo Weili and us. Even at the slowest speed possible, news that we have fought back Huhelu should have already reached Amu’er ears by now. This is a good opportunity. If he hasn’t changed his original plan, then the Biansha Cavalry will still launch a sudden assault on the Shasan Camp once more before the middle of the eighth month, at the very latest. So get it together and kick Guo Weili’s ass as hard as you can to keep him awake.”

“Uh.” Wu Ziyu popped out and said, “Guo Weili won’t fall asleep. He’ll get all excited, and that’s where the problem lies. Viceroy, this person is prone to getting ahead of himself, and he’s easily provoked into action. If he gets tricked away from camp and ends up slaughtered, then what are we a bunch of soldiers in charge of the transportation of military supplies going to do?”

The remaining three men turned their heads in unison and spoke in a chorus, “We fight.”

Wu Ziyu wiped the spittle off his face and said, “We don’t have the authority to, going by the current military order. Also, I’m not trying to put a damper on everyone’s spirits, but it was partially by sheer luck that we could win the battle at the Shasan Camp. Huhelu is another Guo Weili. He first took the Viceroy’s bait before being defeated by the element of surprise. But now that the Biansha men know the exact extent of our military strength, Amu’er will not repeat the same mistake twice. Their next assault will be a full-on attack like the kind on the battlefields. It will be a real siege war they will be fighting, and we no longer have the advantage.”

“That is why,” Xiao Chiye was brief and to the point. “At the same time that you kick Guo Weili, tighten the collar around his neck and keep the leash on him. Even if he dies, he has to be strangled to death.”

No one was willing to deal with Guo Weili. They nearly came to blows during the handover of the Shasan Camp. Chen Yang and Tantai Hu still remembered the incident with Gu Jin. Guo Weili did not give a damn about Xiao Chiye at all. In fact, maintaining a status quo like this was very dangerous. It would be an uphill task to accomplish anything if the generals were not of one mind. Even if Xiao Chiye had superhuman powers, it would be meaningless in the face of a mighty force with thousands of soldiers and horses. What’s more, the enemy forces were not fools; the old vulture in personal command was smart as hell.

Xiao Chiye tilted his head up a little and stared at the top of the tent as he said to himself,

So damn annoying.

Chen Yang, who had been quiet all this while, flipped open the book and said with a solemn expression, “And now I’ll convey a piece of message from Cizhou sent by the Young Master. Young Master said—”

Xiao Chiye abruptly shifted his gaze over. “I’ll read it myself.”

“The marriage alliance between Hua and Qi will take place in three days...” Chen Yang paused for a moment, then continued to read Shen Lanzhou’s original words without emotion, “It’s a joyous event for the Commander-in-Chief Qi to have gained a stepmother.<sup>4</sup> What shall we send as a gift?”

Xiao Chiye’s smile was perfunctory. “Send her our congratulations.”



#### Footnotes

1. Again, for foreign names in this novel, we decided to go with pinyin for the time being due to unfamiliarity with the language involved and to avoid mistranslations with the actual names in its original language. If we do get official subtitles someday, we will replace them in the translation (the same goes for titles). Until then, please bear with us.



- 2.
3. specifically 交椅, an ancient folding chair
4. 里 *li*, an ancient measure of length, 1 *li* = approx. 500m
5. 小娘 *xiaoniang* is a term for one's father's concubine. In Qi Zhuyin's case, it'd be closer to a stepmother, since Hua Xiangyi is marrying into the family as the second wife and not a concubine.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 148 : VICTORY & DEFEAT

Translated with: Jia<3



At the third quarter of the hour of yin, Qiao Tianya lifted the curtain open.

Yao Wenyu was talking in his sleep. The pain in his legs had made him sweat even in his sleep. The bedding was not that thickly padded, and as it was not yet the rainy season in Cizhou, the windows were open, with the bamboo blinds swaying in the wind. Yao Wenyu lay in the embrace of the wind, as if pillowing upon the rain of spring.

Several months ago, the storm of the Imperial College struck the imperial court officials of humble origins right in the face. Kong Qiu and Cen Yu were the first to bear the brunt of it. Even Yao Wenyu was not spared either. After the storm blew over, Yao Wenyu received shelter and protection from Kong Qiu and hardly appeared publicly in Qudu; instead, he accompanied Hai Liangyi on Mount Bodhi every day, until the day his horse carriage was ambushed.

That day, Yao Wenyu met Xue Xiuzhuo.



Xue Xiuzhuo and Yao Wenyu were fellow students. Long before Hai Liangyi, they had both studied alongside one another in Mister Changzong's school. Hai Liangyi had been partial to Yao Wenyu initially because of Old Master Yao. At that time, Xue Xiuzhuo had already sent three visiting cards to Hai Liangyi in the hope of being accepted as the latter's student, but all his attempts were rebuffed by Hai Liangyi.

Yao Wenyu often heard Xi Hongxuan talk about Xue Xiuzhuo, because Xue Xiuzhuo lived in straitened circumstances during his early years in the Xue's Residence. After the death of his father, the respective cliques within the Xue clan fought tooth and nail with one another over their inheritance of fields and mansions, stirring up such a ruckus that everyone in Qudu came to know about it, and it was for this that the noble clans held them in contempt. The lawful son, Xue Xiuyi, was a pretentious man feigning to be a man of letters; he knew nothing about antiques, yet he was constantly hoodwinked into spending tremendous amounts of silver for them all day

long. In just a few years, the Xue clan's wealth had been squandered away clean. The collateral branches of the Xue clan gradually drifted away from the main branch, hardly bothering to continue sponging off them. Xue Xiuyi spent all day fooling around. He wanted to join the Hanlin Academy, so he had a great number of gifts sent to Hua Siqian, who was then concurrently holding the posts of Hanlin Chancellor and Grand Secretariat's Grand Secretary; it was all a desperate attempt at sucking up that only resulted in him getting snubbed. Even Marquis Helian and the Fei clan viewed him with disdain.

Everyone had thought that it was the end of the Xue clan, yet it was at this moment that Xue Xiuzhuo made his breakthrough. His initiation into the Hanlin Academy was legitimate, done through proper channels by passing the examinations. Hai Liangyi was the one who critically reviewed the works back then, and Xue Xiuzhuo's essays on contemporary politics were outstanding. It was not by chance that his name appeared on the list of those who passed. Yao Wenyu had read all of Xue Xiuzhuo's essays on contemporary politics. The Xue Xiuzhuo who had been freshly minted into the Hanlin Academy was brimming with drive and energy. One could even see Qi Huilian's shadow in him. He repeatedly submitted memorials to the emperor to speak on the re-surveyance of fields in the local areas, which was what Qi Huilian had left unfinished back then. Take the eight cities of Qudu as an example: the noble clans gobbled up the commoners' farms and fields without reporting it to the authorities, thereby canceling out the land tax of ten thousand hectares of fields. This was something that could not be discerned from audits when the Ministry of Revenue was under the control of Wei Huaigu and the rest.

However, Xue Xiuzhuo did not meet someone like the crown prince of the eastern palace who could protect him. His memorials offended not only Hua Siqian, but also the various imperial court officials from the noble clans of that time. He even offended Pan Rugui. All these people were later inextricably tied to the case of the Zhongbo troops' defeat. They had long formed an alliance between themselves during the end of the reign of Yongyi. Even the seemingly marginalized Marquis Helian and the Fei clan had made moves to encroach on the commoners' fields in Dancheng. Xue Xiuzhuo was like a baby rabbit caught in a siege, stirring up a storm on the imperial court. The denunciation came hard and fast. Hua Siqian used Xue Xiuzhuo as an excuse to strike against Hai Liangyi – who had promoted

Xue Xiuzhuo – as well as the officials from humble backgrounds that Hai Liangyi represented.

Those days were difficult. Even Yao Wenyu, who was out there roaming the country, could hear snippets of rumors. Officials who were demoted back then included Kong Qiu, and minor, low-grade officials like Liang Cuishan also inadvertently got caught up in the crossfire. Hai Liangyi managed to dodge Hua Siqian's blows and withdrew from his position as the last of the Deputy Grand Secretary of the Grand Secretariat, thereafter minimizing his participation in the imperial court discussions. Those from humble origins once again entered a stage of hibernation. Xue Xiuzhuo's future was limited, and he was publicly censured by Hua Siqian. He had only just joined the imperial court, and his seat in the Hanlin Academy had not even been fully secured before he was demoted to the position of a mere writer for the revision of state history.

However, it was not fear behind Hai Liangyi's retreat and concession back then. Rather, it was the beginning of the humble officials' preparations to fight back. Hai Liangyi had long been concerned about the predicament of the state treasury. Instead of raising difficult questions from within Qudu, they began to investigate from the local areas' account books. The person Hai Liangyi chose at that time was Xue Xiuzhuo, and it was all at the behest of Hai Liangyi that Xue Xiuzhuo would go on to be the Chief Supervising Secretary at the Office of Scrutiny for Revenue. Xue Xiuzhuo did not let Hai Liangyi down either. After going through that round of denunciations, he had become a lot more prudent and seasoned.

Xue Xiuzhuo remained as the Chief Supervising Secretary at the Office of Scrutiny for Revenue for an entire eight years. He ought to have been promoted a long time ago, according to his appraisals during this period. However, Hai Liangyi held him back and had him placed at the bottom to temper and hone himself. Yao Wenyu felt that this man was truly born to be an official, because he understood Hai Liangyi's intent all too well. Not only was there not a word of complaint from him, he even did a pretty good job. He knew the local political situation in Juexi and the Eight Great Cities of Qudu by heart. The fact that Juexi was able to restore its granaries to abundance had the most to do with Jiang Qingshan, but similarly, Xue Xiuzhuo's contribution could not be dismissed either.

Jiang Qingshan did not hold Yao Wenyu in high esteem, or even read Yao Wenyu's essays, because they were the practical doers rather than the

idealistic talkers. To officials like them, Yao Wenyu was not as important as Xue Xiuzhuo was, even if Yao Wenyu was truly a genius.

Xiao Chiye once said that Xue Xiuzhuo was more like Hai Liangyi's student than Yao Wenyu. This was because Xue Xiuzhuo fulfilled the wishes of Hai Liangyi and the officials of humble backgrounds. His shocking memorial at the Nanlin Hunting Grounds forced Hua Siqian into rebelling, saving years of painstaking work and effort by the officials of humble origins from going to waste. Emperor Xiande passed away from illness, the Empress Dowager was forced into a retreat, and the Hua and Pan factions subsequently fell apart. They welcomed a new, young and healthy emperor.

But alas, it was not meant to be. Li Jianheng was not cut out to be an emperor.

Yao Wenyu bore no ill feelings towards Xue Xiuzhuo before Hai Liangyi's death. In Yao Wenyu's eyes, he was a person in a delicate position. He seemed to have abandoned the noble clans, and yet he could still garner the full support of Xi Hongxuan and the others. It was like he was standing on a certain line, where the forces on both sides were all pawns, including himself.



It was raining when Yao Wenyu met Xue Xiuzhuo on Mount Bodhi. They went to a thatched pavilion and settled down to play a game of chess. There was not a single conversation between them during the game, not even an exchange of glances. The game lasted for several hours, eventually ending in a draw.

Xue Xiuzhuo opened up his umbrella before departure. He looked back and asked Yao Wenyu, "Are you going for the imperial examinations in spring next year?"

Yao Wenyu kept away the chess pieces one at a time and said, "Since there's you, Xue Yanqing, on the imperial court, what need is there for me, Yao Yuanzhuo?"

Both of them – one standing and one sitting – listened as the rain and wind outside the pavilion intensified. The wind sent Yao Wenyu's sleeved robe fluttering. He held the chess box with one hand, looking like an immortal sitting at leisure as he dropped the jade pieces into their box; it was as if he would ride the wind and depart the very next instant. As Yao Wenyu spoke, a speck of mud splattered onto his green clothes along with



the wind and rain, wetting that fluttering sleeved robe, consequently reducing him to a mere mortal.

Xue Xiuzhuo looked at that speck of mud and said, "When Teacher was seriously ill, Kong Qiu once paid him a visit. You gave him counsel in the main hall, but the one being plotted against was Han Cheng." He shifted his gaze away from the mud to Yao Wenyu's face, as if looking at him in the eyes anew. "It was at that moment I realized: that's all there is to Yao Wenyu."

The chess piece between Yao Wenyu's fingers slid into the chess box. He said, "You're right. That's all there is to Yao Wenyu."

"A year ago, Teacher thought that opportunity had come knocking. With Emperor Tianchen's trust, those from humble origins could show what they were made of, but that was all wishful thinking on his part in the end." Xue Xiuzhuo said calmly. "The fight between both factions has been going on for several years, yet the issues that have been resolved are few and far between. Twenty years ago, Qi Huilian proposed surveying the local farm fields to inhibit the noble clans from seizing it for themselves, as well as to restore the regular intake of the local taxes. To date, this has still yet to be implemented. What has Teacher's Dazhou held up by the moderates even amounted to?"

Yao Wenyu said, "In the third year of Xiande, Juexi was hit with a natural disaster. The state treasury was severely lacking in money, and Hua Siqian was unwilling to provide aid relief to the thirteen cities of Juexi, which left tens of thousands of commoners destitute and homeless. Jiang Qingshan alone opened up the granaries and risked his head to take on a huge debt. If not for the full assistance of the moderates led by Teacher in Qudu to audit the accounts to coerce Hua Siqian, the grains in Zhongbo would have all fallen into the pockets of the noble clans. Saving one person is not considered an achievement, and neither is saving ten of thousands of people. In your opinion then, what has to be saved for it to be considered an accomplishment?"

"If it was the moderates who saved tens of thousands of people in Juexi, then similarly, it's those same moderates who created the tragedy of Zhongbo. In this world, a physician saves one man, but it's the imperial court official who saves the masses." Xue Xiuzhuo clenched his fists and turned around. "How many years has it been? Yet Teacher still treated the conflict between the two factions as if it was his own duty. Look at Kong

Qiu, and look at the current students of the Imperial College. Are the noble clans the only ones who are drawing a line between those of different family statuses? It had been so easy to incite and stir up the storm in the imperial college, and yet Kong Qiu still has not realized that those of humble origins under his leadership hold the same prejudices against the officials from the noble clans. The moderates' gradual monopoly of the imperial college has long run counter to your grandfather's original intention to revive the Imperial College."

"You devised a plan to murder Emperor Tianchen and intensified the conflict between factions to put the Grand Secretariat in a perilous situation. You instigated Han Cheng to encircle Xiao Chiye to kill him and forced Libei into rebelling, allowing the Empress Dowager to consolidate Qidong's military power. You urged the Empress Dowager to exercise the power of the Son of Heaven, then aided the emperor's daughter up the throne. You plan every single step meticulously, taking everyone into account in your plan." Yao Wenyu rose to his feet slowly, and the black and white chess pieces tumbled to the ground as he moved. "You forced Teacher to his death."

The sound of rain intensified, melding together with the shattering sound of the chess pieces, so jarring it could cut one into a bloody pulp of flesh.

The heavy rain pelted against half of Xue Xiuzhuo's arm, wetting it. He looked face to face with Yao Wenyu without the slightest flicker of wavering in his eyes. They were fellow students from the same school and of the same teacher. They were educated by the same tutor, guided by the same mentor. They addressed the same topics in the imperial examinations. Yet, they had both become polar opposites.

"One day, I will die." Xue Xiuzhuo said in a raspy voice. "Regardless of whether I will be forsaken and deserted by all, or bring ruin and infamy upon myself, I will walk along this path to the very end."

"You stop at nothing to kill others and yourself." Yao Wenyu released his grip on the chess piece. "You won't be able to save all of the so-called masses in the world."

"The restoration of Dazhou is nigh, this very moment." Xue Xiuzhuo pressed in a step closer. "The old-school noble clans have been purged; the leaders of those from humble backgrounds have all suffered a setback; and the calamity that is the eunuch clique no longer exists. With the Grand

Secretariat, Empress Dowager, and Heir Apparent to the throne held in check, the rising talents in the imperial court will surge forth in great numbers. Dazhou is about to have fresh blood coursing through its veins. Yao Wenyu, I die without fear, and I will not begrudge it even if I were to go down in history in infamy and end up condemned by posterity. I've long merged into one with the fire ignited by Teacher. I do it for myself."

Having said that, Xue Xiuzhuo opened up his umbrella once again and turned around to step into the rain.

"You win for a time."

Yao Wenyu remained where he was standing and raised his voice.

"You win one game. But this isn't a victory at all. Variables are endless with the world in chaos; you can't take everyone into account. Xue Xiuzhuo —!"

The rain fell in torrents, venting it all in the world. The green bamboo at Hai Liangyi's burial mound broke off in response, and muddy water flowed down the slope, like a face covering itself as it wailed bitterly.

"It's a draw today. The victor has yet to be determined." Xue Xiuzhuo stopped in his tracks. He did not look back. "But since there's Xue Yanqing in the world, what need is there to keep a Yao Yuanzhuo around? You and I do not share the same path. After tonight, there is no need for us to see each other again."

"This game isn't finished yet." Yao Wenyu said. "There is no such thing as a draw by my hand."

Xue Xiuzhuo seemed to have smiled. He looked back for the last time and gazed fixedly at Yao Wenyu for a long time. A curtain of rain separated them. They seemed to have been separated by a deep chasm from birth, like the shadows cast of Heaven and Earth—they would never ever become fellow travelers. The words "Xue Yanqing" had always been obscured by Yao Yuanzhuo. From the legitimacy of their lineage to Hai Liangyi's choice, Xue Xiuzhuo had never once won. Yet, at this very moment, he was the picture of condescending pity.

You've lost.

The horse carriage raced along the mountain road, surrounded by the barking of dogs everywhere. The pursuers spurred their horses on in hot pursuit of the carriage. Yao Wenyu's coachman was dead. Unable to control the direction of the horse carriage, Yao Wenyu could only let the carriage flee hastily and haphazardly through the mountains. Stray arrows came

whizzing from behind and stabbed into the carriage. Several of them nailed to the ground beside the horse. Startled, the horse completely broke free from its reins.

Someone had already leaped onto the back of the carriage. He aggressively pierced through the carriage's wall with a broadsword and ripped open the curtain to stab inside. There was no one else on Mount Bodhi; Yao Wenyu's death sentence was already set in stone. Xue Xiuzhuo had never thought of letting him walk out of there alive from the moment he went up the mountain.

The horse carriage overturned and fell into a ditch, damaging its walls in the process, and Yao Wenyu felt like his internal organs had gone tumbling with it. The horse fell so hard it was in pain. Yao Wenyu released the reins, and it got back up with difficulty. The growls of the dogs at the back were too vicious, and the horse continued to flee with one leg limping. Yao Wenyu did not have a saddle, and among the jolts and bumps, he was nearly swiped off the horse by the branches. However, this horse had only galloped for a mere moment where an arrow shot it in another leg.

The pursuit of the killers had already reached the foot of Mount Bodhi. The person taking the lead was worried that they would miss the perfect timing and delay matters should Yao Wenyu's escape attempt continue. Hence, he used a rope to restrain Yao Wenyu's ankles and dragged him along the mountain path towards their own horse carriage. The rain had subsided some while this had been happening, and the sky had still yet to darken. They had to do a clean job without leaving any traces, so they first used the scabbards of their blades to break both of Yao Wenyu's legs, then dragged him over to stuff him into their horse carriage.

It was at this moment that there suddenly came the sound of galloping horses' hooves from the mountain road. Realizing that this did not bode well, the leader of the pursuing troops yanked the carriage curtains down and shouted with urgency, "Put your blades away!"

The party that had arrived was an ostentatious display of extravagance; the escorts on both sides of the horse carriage were all men from the Eight Great Training Divisions who filled up the already very narrow bridle path. The leader of the pursuing troops signaled for the carriage driver to pull aside the horse carriage, and all of them stood subserviently in a row to make way for the other party.

Yao Wenyu's mouth was gagged. His entire body spasmed as it throbbed with excruciating pain, but his mind was still clear. As he dripped with sweat, he knocked his forehead against the wooden plank of the carriage.

When the leader of the pursuing troops heard sounds coming from the carriage, he signaled his subordinates with his eyes. One of them promptly whipped the horse several times and bellowed at it to cover up the sounds made by Yao Wenyu.

But the company did not leave. The curtains from the carriage crammed in the middle lifted to reveal the Commandery Princess Zhaoyue dressed in the fashion of a married woman.<sup>1</sup> She furrowed her brows slightly and said, "Don't make a racket; there's a young child in the carriage."

Yao Wenyu recognized the Commandery Princess Zhaoyue's voice. A vague sound escaped from his throat, and he slammed his forehead hard until it was bloody red.

Commandery Princess Zhaoyue suddenly spoke up. "Is there someone in the carriage? Tell your master to see me."

Having recognized her, the leader paid his obeisance to her and gave an excuse, "It's my master's mistress. She's making a huge racket and threatening suicide, so it isn't advisable to let her out lest she offend the Commandery Princess. Commandery Princess, please go on ahead."

Commandery Princess Zhaoyue arched her willow-like brows. "This is where the Secretariat Elder was laid to rest. What nonsense are you spouting?! Men, lift the curtains of the carriage!"

The leader immediately whipped out his authority token, which bore the copper seal of the garrison troops. He said, "We're on official business with official warrants in hand, acting under the orders of the Ministry of Justice. Commandery Princess, how can you, a person without official authority, meddle in affairs of the court as you please? Even if the Marquis Helian is here in person today, he wouldn't be allowed to lift the curtain by force!"

Ever since marrying into the Pan clan, the Commandery Princess Zhaoyue had been living in Dancheng. After Hai Liangyi's death, she followed her husband to the capital. She had originally arranged to visit the Yao clan today, but who knew that the married couple would arrive only to learn that Yao Wenyu had yet to return from his trip into the mountains. She was familiar with Yao Wenyu's character—he would definitely not miss an

appointment without reason, and so she had her carriage driven over to take a look. She was already of the firm belief that this group of people before her was up to no good.

The leader of the group figured that there was nothing the Commandery Princess Zhaoyue could do. No one from the Fei clan of today was an influential minister serving in the imperial court, so the Marquis Helian would not go around offending people rashly. With this thought in mind, he sneered, “If the Commandery Princess isn’t moving, then we’ll be taking our leave first.”

However, before he could move, he saw the guards from the Eight Great Training Divisions hold down the hilts of their blades in unison.

An exquisite, slender finger from within the carriage gently lifted the curtain to partially reveal a temple with a flower on it. The narrow-sleeved palace-wear of a court lady trailed down to the floor of the carriage, exposing the tips of satin shoes of exquisite quality, while eastern pearls<sup>2</sup> hung down at the edge of her collar. Her voice was soft and gentle. “If the Commandery Princess doesn’t have the right, how about me?”

The leader of the group was still frozen in place when he heard a guard bellow, “Third Missy Hua is onboard. Get on your knees now!!”

In Qudu, besides the apple of the Empress Dowager’s eye, who else would still dare to take on the address of Third Missy Hua?

Cold sweat dripped profusely from the man as he immediately kneeled and kowtowed. “I deserve a thousand deaths for obstructing the Third Missy!”



#### Author’s Notes:

This chapter was initially meant to be written from the POV of Qudu. I won’t be looking at the comments for the time being; I decided to just go along with my original rhythm. There’s no need to worry; the plot is all within the scope of my control, all the plot holes that ought to be filled won’t be forgotten, and those characters who have so far appeared as a silhouette will also take the stage in turn. There are some areas where I cannot leap out of the story to provide an explanation; that would be the failure of the narrative and my failure as an author. Whatever should be present in the story will be there. I won’t be repeating it again.

Thank you for reading.

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#### Footnotes

1. A married woman was typically dressed differently from a single maiden. For example, married women in ancient China wore their hair in an updo instead of letting it down.
2. 东珠 literally eastern pearl; the rulers of the Qing Dynasty regarded the eastern pearls as treasures and used them to inlay their crown and clothing with it to represent authority and honor.

# QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 149 : HUA THE THIRD

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



It was dark in Qudu. Lanterns had been raised on both sides of the streets. Hua Xiangyi's horse carriage returned to the city and made a beeline for the Pan's residence. Giving instructions to those in attendance at the sides, she simply said she wanted to have a girl-to-girl late-night chat with Zhaoyue, and so sent someone to the palace to convey the message that she would be back later.

Commandery Princess Zhaoyue's path to marriage had been fraught with difficulties. Marquis Helian initially had his heart set on Yao Wenyu, and later Xiao Chiye when the Empress Dowager had taken matters into her own hands. But in the end, neither of them worked out. Marquis Helian found it rather humiliating. He felt that Commandery Princess Zhaoyue was no longer young. What's more, she was the lawful daughter of the Fei clan born of the principal wife. It was inadvisable to drag the matter any further, and it just so happened that Han Cheng came calling on them at that time, so he had the Commandery Princess Zhaoyue betrothed to a lad from the Han clan. But this marriage did not come to fruition, because the Marquis Junior, Fei Shi, was a loafer, and he was very well aware that the lad from the Han clan was one too; in fact, that lad was even worse than that Han Jin. Fei Shi held him in contempt, finding him unworthy and undeserving of his elder sister, so he brought some men over to create a big ruckus, forcibly ripping this marriage plan to shreds.

Marquis Helian could not control his son. Left without a choice, he pondered over several options, oscillating between them before deciding on Pan Yi, the second son of a concubine from the Pan clan. He was Pan Lin's younger brother. Both clans knew each other inside out, and they were both similarly part of the Eight Great Clans. Fei Shi carefully observed this potential elder brother-in-law for a period, and only then did Commandery Princess Zhaoyue finally marry.

Pan Yi was a scholarly and refined man who originally held the post of Director of the Bureau of Waterways and Irrigation under the Ministry of Works. Later, Pan Xiangjie safely made it through the public ditches case,



and Pan Lin took over Wei Huaigu's post in the Ministry of Revenue. Subsequently, Pan Yi was promoted too. He was transferred back to the Pan clan's hometown of Dancheng to serve as the Commandant of Dancheng. This person was fond of reading, and he had a deep respect for Yao Wenyu's talents and learning. That was why he had accompanied his wife when the latter went to pay Yao Wenyu a visit.

Pan Yi was originally waiting at home when Pan Lin just so happened to get off court session. Both brothers were talking in the front hall when they heard someone come calling from behind.

Pan Lin was now in charge of the Ministry of Revenue. As plenty had happened in Qudu after spring, the appointment document from the imperial court had yet to be issued, so he still carried the title of Vice Minister. He was taken aback after hearing the servant's report and questioned, "The Third Missy wants to see me?"

Hua Xiangyi had yet to be married, and she was the apple of the Empress Dowager's eye. The guards accompanying her in and out of the palace could not be underestimated. It was tough for males who were outsiders to get a glimpse of her appearance. Even if Pan Xiangjie wanted to see her, he had to be summoned. Pan Lin did not know what was going on, and he did not dare to dally either, so he hastily got up with Pan Yi and hurried over.

The moment Pan Yi entered the courtyard, he saw his wife standing under the eaves weeping. There was also a physician inside the room. Pan Lin was shocked, thinking that Hua Xiangyi had been injured, so he hurried over to ask, "Younger sister-in-law, what's happened?"

Commandery Princess Zhaoyue cried so hard both of her eyes were red. She clutched her handkerchief, but before she could say a word, she was racking with sobs once again. She covered her face and turned away, and Pan Yi rushed over to protect her, asking as he pulled her along, "My dear, what's going on?!"

Hua Xiangyi said from within the room, "The Vice Minister and the Commandant are both elder brothers<sup>1</sup> of mine, so there's no need to observe the formalities so scrupulously. Please come in to talk."

Pan Lin felt relieved when he heard Hua Xiangyi's gentle voice, which did not sound like she was injured. He exchanged glances with Pan Yi and hesitated for a moment, then went ahead to lift the curtain and enter. There was a screen set up in the room, and Hua Xiangyi was sitting in the seat of

honor. Both men knelt and greeted in unison, "These humble subjects pay their respects to the Third Missy."

Hua Xiangyi said, "Brothers, please rise."

Through the beaded curtain at his side, Pan Lin saw a physician inside, so he asked, "Who is injured?"

After a moment of silence, Hua Xiangyi answered, "Truth be told, the man lying inside is none other than the Grand Secretary's beloved pupil, Yao Wenyu."

Pan Yi promptly exclaimed in delight, "It's Yuanzhuo!" But his expression changed abruptly the moment the words left his mouth. Anxious, he asked, "Oh, no! Did he get hurt on Mount Bodhi? I heard the bridle path on Mouth Bodhi has been in a state of disrepair for many years and is accident-prone on rainy days."

Commandery Princess stood at the side and wiped her tears. "How is Elder Cousin Brother injured because of the bridle path? He was hijacked and robbed!" Sorrow overwhelmed her at this point. "Those legs... What is he going to do in the future?"

Many thoughts flashed through Pan Lin's mind in an instant. He was presently at the critical juncture of a promotion. Once the appointment document to promote him to Minister of Revenue had been issued, he would only have to wait a few years for the inspections' appraisals to catch up and cancel out the impeachments he had received during the public ditches case, and his future would be a bright one paved with unlimited possibilities. Yao Wenyu's identity was special, and there was a political undercurrent surging through the imperial court at present. Pan Lin initially had no wish to be a part of it, lest he was deemed to be a member or supporter of one of the factions. However, he respected Hai Liangyi.

Pan Lin paused for only a moment before he said, "Mount Bodhi is on the outskirts of the city, and there are patrol squads inside and outside of Qudu. Yuanzhuo's meeting with a mishap is by no means a trivial matter. Third Missy, please tell me the details first."

He did not evade the issue nor begged off the matter, so Hua Xiangyi knew she had been right to find him. Pan Lin had a bad temper, and the only friend he had to have fun with together was Fei Shi. The one he could not deign to deal with the most was Xue Xiuyi. Back then, after the public ditches case, Xiao Chiye had hosted a banquet after being conferred a noble title, and Pan Lin had gone at his invitation. Humiliated in every way

possible by Xue Xiuyi during the feast, Pan Lin had made a vow that even if he were “to starve to death in the future, he would never sit at the same table as the Xue clan”. From then on, he did not interact or socialize any further with the Xue clan. Xue Xiuzhuo was now at the height of power in Qudu because of his support to the Heir Apparent to the throne, and even so, Pan Lin had never paid him a visit. Xiao Chiye helped the Pan clan out of their predicament back then, saving Pan Xiangjie from being put to death by Wei Huaigu during the public ditches case, and the Qudu public ditches blueprint that Pan Lin had repaid him with later went on to become the key that helped Qiao Tianya and the rest escape from Qudu.

Later, Xiao Chiye was trapped in an encirclement by Han Cheng, who meant to kill him. He bore the charge of plotting to murder Emperor Tianchen, and despite that, Pan Lin did not hurry over himself to draw a clear line between them. His father, Pan Xiangjie, was a fence-sitter who swayed wherever the wind blew, but he, Pan Lin, could stand up to being called “upright”.

Hua Xiangyi gave him an account of their encounter with Yao Wenyu in a hushed tone. Eventually, she said, “Would the Vice Minister be willing to hear a few words from me?”

Pan Lin answered, “This humble subject is all ears.”

Hua Xiangyi looked slightly out of the corner of her eye at that beaded curtain. A moment later, she said, “The storm brewing in Qudu is currently unstoppable. The trouble Yuanzhuo came face to face with today is by no means a coincidence. The Vice Minister knows better than me about the affairs of the imperial court. The Grand Secretary’s remonstrance by death will be a matter of regret for Dazhou through the ages. Yuanzhuo is not only the Grand Secretary’s beloved pupil but also the Yao clan’s beloved son. His reputation is now in tatters because of the imperial college incident, but his talents and learning still remain, and his moral integrity still exists. His resolution and ambition will be all the stronger after going through this tribulation, and there is no reason he can’t make a comeback in the future and lead the literati of the world to recreate the glory of the Imperial College.”

Pan Lin said nothing.

After a long silence, Hua Xiangyi continued, “Yuanzhuo must leave Qudu as soon as possible after tonight. I’m about to marry far away to Qidong, and it’d be inconvenient for me to come and go freely. Although I

have an imperial palace rank, I can't openly send him out of the capital with great fanfare."

At this point, Hua Xiangyi rose to her feet and slowly kneeled to bow to Pan Lin across the screen.

Pan Lin's face turned pale. He strode a step forward and said, "This won't do! Third Missy, please rise quickly!"

Hua Xiangyi kowtowed and said, "Yuanzhuo is blessed to have been successively taught by wise teachers in this life. I've read all of his essays. The Heir Apparent to the throne has just been established, and the Hanlin Academy is now an empty shell. The tripartite balance of power with Auntie at the lead cannot last for long, and Kong Qiu can barely fend for himself. I may be a girl, but I know that outstanding men of talents are hard to find." She paused for a moment, then solemnly continued, "Chengzhi, please."

She addressed Pan Lin by his courtesy name, saying it from the bottom of her heart.

Pan Lin could not help but look ashamed to see the extent that Hua Xiangyi was willing to go to save Yao Wenyu. He hurriedly said, "Third Missy, please get up! I value Yuanzhuo's talents. This is what we ought to do, to begin with. Tomorrow morning, Yuanzhuo will follow my younger sister-in-law out of Qudu and rest up in Dancheng first. After he recovers from his injuries, he can decide what to do on his own." Hai Liangyi came to his mind at this point. He continued, "Although the Grand Secretary and some of us do not see eye to eye in politics, I still hold him in esteem. How gallant is it for a civil minister to remonstrate with his death! I ought to lend a helping hand, even if for the Grand Secretary."

Hua Xiangyi continued, "The other party must already know about Yuanzhuo's escape from death today. To be on the safe side, I'd like to ask the Vice Minister to think of a way to pull the wool over their eyes."

Pan Lin answered, "I already have an idea in mind."

"It's already getting late now; I can't stay any longer." Hua Xiangyi stood up and let the maidservant support her as she went over to the side of the beaded curtains. She looked at Yao Wenyu inside, his face white as a sheet. In the end, she said nothing and took her leave.

Two hours after Hua Xiangyi's departure, a corpse wrapped in a straw mat was sent out through the backdoors of the Pan's Residence. Those in the outer courtyard inquiring about it did not know the details. All they

heard was that it was a beggar the Commandery Princess Zhaoyue brought back from outside who had died of sickness in the middle of the night. The pursuing troops who had been crouching in wait for many hours followed all the way to the burial grounds to examine the corpse. The leader found out that the body fit Yao Wenyu's physique to a tee; even the wounds from his broken legs were identical. The only thing was that the face of the corpse was disfigured; however, the bite marks on his lips were similar.

Not daring to dally, the man withdrew with his men back to the residence to make his report.



The next day, Commandery Princess Zhaoyue and Pan Yi departed for Dancheng. She had just given birth to a child, and there were so many nannies and maidservants accompanying her that just the carriage alone numbered in the dozens. Pan Lin went to attend morning court. As he stood at the foot of the stairs to wait, he saw Kong Qiu and Cen Yu standing in front. Worried that there were people in the imperial court watching, he did not go forward.

Nowadays, the Heir Apparent to the throne rose at the hour of yin and attended classes at the hour of mao. The participants in the classics colloquium put together by the Grand Secretariat were all carefully hand-picked scholars and academicians from the Hanlin Academy, and the morning classes could not be finished before midday. Meanwhile, the Empress Dowager was still the one holding court behind the screen.<sup>2</sup> Li Jianting merely switched from attending classes in the Xue's residence to attending classes in the palace. As long as the Grand Secretariat did not pass the vote, she would have to continue to be a student. The Ministry of Rites had long been making preparations for the enthronement, but the grand ceremony now seemed light-years away with Kong Qiu and the rest suppressing it.

Xue Xiuzhuo was still teaching Li Jianting. Li Jianting did not have the authority to participate in government and political affairs, although she had the right to attend court and listen in. She slept very little every day. After morning classes, she would take a short nap, then it would be the Grand Secretariat council led by Kong Qiu and Xue Xiuzhuo in the afternoon. All matters of the Six Ministries, regardless of significance, had to be reported by the Grand Secretariat. Li Jianting rarely spoke up as they stood and deliberated over those matters, but her attitude was respectful and prudent.

Whether it was morning classes or the councils, she would always arrive before the ministers and stand deferentially under the eaves of Mingli Hall to await them.

Kong Qiu and Cen Yu initially disliked Li Jianting, but even they had to concede that Li Jianting's attitude was sincere enough. Her desire to learn was far more evident than Li Jianheng's.

Pan Lin prepared to board the carriage after he left the court. Just as he was about to lower the curtains, he saw Xue Xiuzhuo walking out of the palace gates with another person. Both men's eyes met for an instant. Pan Lin nodded calmly and managed with some effort to bow partially to him. Only then did he let down the curtain of the carriage.



Qiao Tianya shut the window, making a slight noise.

Yao Wenyu woke up. It was as if he had just stepped out from the shaking carriage; the stifling heat was everywhere. He turned his eyes and saw Qiao Tianya.

Qiao Tianya said, "It's now the third quarter of the hour of yin; you can sleep for a little longer."

Yao Wenyu said expressionlessly, "Having awoken from a dream, I'm none too keen to return to it."

Qiao Tianya poured tea and took a sip, then raised his cup at Yao Wenyu. "Want a drink?"

After a moment of silence, Yao Wenyu said, "Tea is tasteless. Change it to wine."

"You have yet to recover from your injuries. It's inadvisable for you to drink wine." As Qiao Tianya spoke, he took down the wine at the side of his waist, shook it a few times, and twisted it open to drink it himself. "I'll drink it for you. You can watch."

After Qiao Tianya was done drinking, Yao Wenyu said, "Excellent wine."

The bangs on Qiao Tianya's forehead slipped down and covered his eyes. His stubble, which had grown out recently, had yet to be shaved clean. On hearing Yao Wenyu, he stroked it a couple of times and said, "Wine that costs a few strings of copper coins can't really be considered excellent. If you get better, I'm willing to spend tens of taels of silver to let you taste real, excellent wine."

The corner of Yao Wenyu's lips shifted slightly.

Qiao Tianya leaned against the table and looked at him. “The military craftsman from Libei will arrive in a few days. I can go out with you to appreciate the autumn scenery of Cizhou.”

Yao Wenyu’s smile faded. He looked out of the window; there was the tinkling sound of the wind chimes under the eaves again. He was quiet for a very long time before he said, “May I trouble you to ask the Vice Commander to prepare a generous gift on my behalf for the grand wedding between Hua and Qi tomorrow. Third Missy Hua saved my life. Please thank her on my behalf too. Don’t tell her anything else. Just say I’m fine.”

Qiao Tianya answered in the affirmative.

Yao Wenyu’s gaze relaxed. He said, “Let’s play the zither.”

When Shen Zechuan got up, he heard the faint sound of the seven-stringed zither<sup>3</sup> from the courtyard.

Fei Sheng teased, “This Qiao Tianya is truly a deep one with hidden talents.”

Shen Zechuan tilted his head and said, “The Qiao clan fell into decline, and all the delicate sensibilities he possessed as a young master vanished along with it. The most difficult time was during his exile, when he had to fight for food with stray dogs and take care of his elder sister-in-law at the same time. All that he has left today is that seven-stringed zither of his. He cleans and caresses it every day, and he cherishes it very much, so much that he never plays it for others—this is his pride.”

Fei Sheng had seen that seven-stringed zither before. Not even Ding Tao dared to touch it. He did not understand this bit of pride, but he did not speak up to vilify it. He had worked together with Qiao Tianya for many years. Although he had been wanting to take Qiao Tianya’s place all this while from Qudu to Cizhou, he was still nevertheless willing to acknowledge Qiao Tianya’s capabilities.



Author’s Words:

So what’s up with that poison?

You’ll find out in a couple of chapters.

Thank you for reading.

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## Footnotes

1. Specifically 兄长 *xiongzhang*, a respectful form of address for an elder brother or a male friend
2. 垂帘听政 literally to hold court behind a screen or curtain. A practice in ancient China, where the Empress or Empress dowager was allowed to preside over the imperial court without actually being seen by her subjects since women were prohibited from politics. This would usually be done by a child emperor's mother, who would serve as regent and rule in place of the emperor



- 3.
4. Specifically 古琴 Guqin is a plucked seven-string Chinese musical instrument of the zither family.



## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 150 : TREACHEROUS MINISTER

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



Due to the recent death of Emperor Tianchen, it was customary for the marriage between Hua and Qi to be postponed. However, Xiao Chiye rebelled his way out of Qudu, and Qudu had favors to ask of Qidong, so the Empress Dowager and Grand Secretariat mulled over the matter numerous times before eventually deciding to marry Hua Xiangyi off in the seventh month.

The Empress Dowager went all out this time, and the dowry she prepared for Hua Xiangyi spanned more than ten *li*. Arrangements made by the Ministry of Rites were all done in accordance with the wedding protocols for a princess. The ceremonial guards of honor sending her off were personally led by Han Cheng himself, and there were countless wet nurses and maidservants following along in her retinue.

Hua Xiangyi boarded the horse carriage. Just as it was about to depart, the Empress Dowager took two steps after it and almost called out to her. But she had to be mindful of her image and uphold her dignity after all, so she could only hold on to Matron Liuxiang's arm and muttered softly as the eastern pearls by her ears swayed. "My little darling..."

The ceremonial guards of honor left Qudu and headed for Qidong along Chuancheng's public roads, during which they would pass by Chazhou. Han Cheng was initially worried that the bandits from Chazhou would rob them, so he specially brought along men from the Eight Great Training Divisions, but the journey was unexpectedly uneventful; Luo Mu even sent over his congratulatory gifts when they passed by. They continued to travel south, where Qi Zhuyin was already waiting for them within Qidong's borders.

"Speaking of this Qi Zhuyin," Han Cheng's horse stuck close to the carriage as he spoke to Hua Xiangyi with the carriage curtain between them. "Third Missy hasn't met her before, right?"

A soft sound of affirmation rose from within.

Han Cheng loved flaunting his seniority. On hearing her, he perked up and said, "Let this old subject share some domestic trivialities with the Third Missy. Although Qi Zhuyin is a girl, she is not easy to get along with."

The Third Missy typically resides in the inner palace, so you must have not known how ferocious she looks every year she enters the capital. The Ministry of Revenue was in a tight spot during the reign of Xiande, and yet she dared to command her soldiers to obstruct His Excellency Wei's sedan for the military salaries for the Qidong troops. But the Ministry of Revenue genuinely could not afford to pay up, and left without a choice, she associated herself with the ruffians who were also loan sharks in Qudu and hung out with them in the streets.

Hua Xiangyi had only seen Qi Zhuyin through a screen before. In that Feast of A Hundred Officials where all the civil ministers and military generals were men, Qi Zhuyin was a special case. She did not stand out much during her early years in Qidong. Before Qi Shiyu handed over his commander seal, everyone was speculating about which of her brothers would take over. After the expedition to rescue Qi Shiyu, Qi Zhuyin was first denied entry to the capital. The imperial court dragged the matters on for several months on the grounds that her 'military achievements were still pending investigation'. Then, there was the Yulong Terrace fiasco when the day of her conferment drew closer. Even with the backing of the Empress Dowager, Qi Zhuyin merely took over Qi Shiyu's commander seal and did not inherit Qi Shiyu's title. In other words, every battle that Qi Zhuyin fought today only built up prestige for Qidong and not for herself. If she did not get married in this life, she would continue to be considered a 'daughter of Qi' even after retiring from the front lines, with no title to her name. Conversely, her brothers would be set for life as long as they beget sons soonest possible.

Han Cheng was still talking, but Hua Xiangyi seemed to have fallen asleep inside the carriage. Han Cheng gradually felt bored and stopped talking in awkward embarrassment.

The ceremonial guards of honor traveled until the hour of you when a streak of red suddenly emerged on the horizon. Horses' hoofs thundered in unison amidst the billowing waves of heat, revealing the light cavalry that stretched far into the distance, all dressed in red robes. The military flag of Qidong fluttered in the wind, like a dragon soaring straight for them, while a storm of yellow sand surged forth and slapped Han Cheng's entire face full of dust.

Qi Wei took the lead and dismounted his horse, brandishing the flag as he bellowed, "WEL—COME—!"

The light cavalry behind him got off their horses and simultaneously went down on one knee, their armors clanging resoundingly as they raised their arms and shouted in chorus, “We extend our respectful welcome to Madam!”

These two thunderous roars left the palace maids from Qudu so shaken that their hearts went pounding; even Han Cheng almost clutched at his chest. Beating away the dust, he knitted his brows and asked, “Where’s the Commander...”

The sound of horse hooves circled over towards them, then that red figure was already right before the horse carriage. Before Han Cheng could stop her, Qi Zhuyin lifted the curtain with the sheath of her blade and tilted her head to peer inside.

Hua Xiangyi had yet to have her head covered with a veil, and there was a golden jade phoenix coronet perched on her head as she looked at Qi Zhuyin in shock, her chest pounding hard. She did not have a clue what Qi Zhuyin was trying to do.

“Yo.” Qi Zhuyin greeted her. “Stepmother.”<sup>1</sup>

Shocked, Han Cheng hurriedly stepped forward to close the carriage curtain. He could not help but rebuke, “We have yet to arrive in Cangjun Commandery, so how can the Commander-in-chief simply lift the Third Missy’s curtain?!”

“Just taking a look.” Rebuffed, Qi Zhuyin retracted her hand and said, “How many times have you taken a break during the journey? According to the estimated time, you should have arrived yesterday.”

Han Cheng followed after Qi Zhuyin’s horse and answered, “It’s a long journey, and it’s hard to guarantee that nothing will happen if we are in too much of a hurry. I thought the Commander-in-Chief would be waiting to receive us at the southern side of Chazhou, but in the end, we didn’t see you even after all that waiting.”

“I’m only just hurried back from Bianjun, so I don’t have much time to spare.” As Qi Zhuyin spoke, she looked back and asked Han Cheng, “Why are you getting off your horse?”

Han Cheng looked around the place. “It’s already the hour of you now; it should be here...”

Qi Zhuyin pointed to the east with her horse whip and said, “Continue on your way for a little further, and you’ll be able to reach Cejun

Commandery at the hour of hai. There's a bridle path in Cejun, and the road to Cangjun Commandery will be a tad smoother. Get on your horse."

Han Cheng had been on the go for an entire day, and he was exhausted at this point. He still wanted to say something, but Qi Zhuyin had already spurred her horse on and left. Qi Wei mounted his horse from his end and led his light cavalry to surround the ceremonial procession, then said to Han Cheng politely, "Commander, let's go."

Even if Han Cheng was a bigwig in Qudu, he had no authority over the affairs of the Ministry of War and Ministry of Revenue. The Imperial Bodyguards could throw their weight around in Qudu and other places, but to Qi Zhuyin, they were of no threat. She was the Commander-in-Chief of Qidong's Five Commanderies' troops. Qidong was her territory. Han Cheng had no say here, what's more when the Empress Dowager herself even had to rely on the Qidong Garrison Troops now.

Han Cheng bore a grudge deep down, but he could not let it show on his expression yet. All he could do was smile at Qi Wei and get on his horse to continue with the journey.

Hua Xiangyi returned to her senses, her heart still palpitating from the fleeting glimpse of the stunning sight earlier. The curtain of the carriage swayed, and she tilted her head slightly to look through the gap, where she saw the back view of Qi Zhuyin as she rode her horse ahead.

Qi Zhuyin was tall and slender. She must have made a special effort to dress up today. She had to ride a horse, so she did not have her hair up in a high bun as was common in Qudu, but she still looked very chic. There were no hair accessories like hairpins, double-edged fine-toothed comb, or exquisite pearls in her hair, making her appear all the more neat and tidy.

She was a pretty one.

Hua Xiangyi still wanted to continue sizing her up, but then she saw her look back abruptly.



Xiao Chiye said to send his congratulations, but he still had someone prepare a gift. Xiao Jiming also had to prepare a gift on his end. Their relationship with Qidong was not all that bad. Even if it was a little delicate at the moment, the friendship was still there, especially with Qi Zhuyin.

The wedding between Hua and Qi was a declaration of the temporary victory of the Empress Dowager in the tussle for power in Qudu. The Grand Secretariat could only first stabilize the Heir Apparent to the throne before

they had the latitude to continue with the contention for dominance. It was at this moment Xue Xiuzhuo made a wise decision. He submitted a memorial to negotiate with the Grand Secretariat and had Jiang Qingshan released back to Juexi, thereby securing the granaries in Qudu.

Yao Wenyu sat in the wheelchair and let Qiao Tianya push him outdoors. The weather in Cizhou had been rather bad lately. Autumn rain was on its way, and the scenery in the outskirts of the city was even more bleak and desolate. Yao Wenyu had been out of the sun for many days, and right this moment, he seemed to have become a jade laid bare out there for all to see.

“It’s just as you expected.” Shen Zechuan looked at the vast expanse of autumn leaves and the solemnly quiet lands as he stood at Yao Wenyu’s side. “He really transferred Jiang Qingshan back to Juexi.”

“I originally thought Jiang Qingshan ought to have gone to Huaizhou even if it was to suppress Cizhou.” In a rare moment today, Zhou Gui was wearing a body-fitting outfit,<sup>2</sup> having also ridden his way here on horseback. He wiped his sweat and said, “Luoxia Pass is close to the city of Quancheng, and Quancheng is the native hometown of the Xue clan. It’s only to be expected for him to be worried. I didn’t think he would really be willing to send Jiang Qingshan back to Juexi.”

Holding the cat in his sleeve, Yao Wenyu said, “It’s because of the geographical location of Luoxia Pass and the city of Quancheng. It’s inevitable that both of you would have such concerns. Going by the present situation, putting Jiang Qingshan in Huaizhou would be the most advantageous to Xue Xiuzhuo and the Xue clan.”

The soles of Shen Zechuan’s boots trod across the fallen leaves. He stood still and lost himself in his thoughts.

If Jiang Qingshan was transferred to the prefecture of Huaizhou, he would, firstly, be able to challenge Cizhou and obstruct the trade route between Cizhou, Chazhou, and Huaizhou from taking shape; secondly, he would be able to ensure that Quancheng would be safe and sound, as well as join forces with Quancheng to put pressure on Luoxia Pass, and subsequently, Libei. These were all matters that Shen Zechuan could think of himself, and naturally, so could Xue Xiuzhuo. Yet, he still forsook the safety of Quancheng and chose Juexi, just like Yao Wenyu predicted.

“Xue Xiuzhuo had Jiang Qingshan released back.” Shen Zechuan’s expression was grave. “And this is what makes him tough to deal with.”

This maneuver not only meant that Xue Xiuzhuo would restrict Libei's and Zhongbo's development through the grains, but also that he did not give a damn about the personal gains and losses of the Xue clan. In other words, he harbored no selfish desires, which made him completely different from Hua Siqian, Wei Huaigu, and the others. What he sought was not benefits for one party.

"Jiang Qingshan takes a hard approach on policies, and his local governance is effective. There are rumors in Qudu that he will not tolerate a thorn in his side, but in truth, it's quite the opposite." Yao Wenyu flexed his fingers and stroked the cat. "Juexi has thirteen cities, with two prefectures and two harbors; it's now a veritable granary of Dazhou. The Xi clan's business is by far its largest in Juexi, and even the waterways of the Hua clan in Dicheng have to go through it. If the Vice Commander has been to Juexi before, you'd understand that Juexi's prosperity did not happen by coincidence. Jiang Qingshan is an extraordinarily broad-minded man who uses people regardless of their family status and social standing. He would never make excuses to decline in the face of major matters, but he also knows not to go too far when dealing with minor issues. He never lets go of all that he ought to have a firm grip on, and he never regrets all that he should relax his hold on. With such a Provincial Administration Commissioner, it's not surprising for Juexi to swiftly get back on its feet after the natural disaster in the reign of Xiande. Jiang Qingshan is such a person. He cited Xue Xiuzhuo as his bosom friend in life, precisely because they shared the same political views and ambitions."

On hearing this, Zhou Gui nodded. "I've long heard of the political achievements of these two people. When the Grand Secretary promoted Xue Xiuzhuo to the Court of Judicial Review back then, no one in the imperial court opposed."

"The Vice Commander has also read Xue Xiuzhuo's essays on contemporary politics before." Yao Wenyu said. "Does the Vice Commander still remember the Grand Mentor's wish?"

Shen Zechuan knew it by heart, because he inherited Qi Huilian's knowledge and understood best what Qi Huilian wanted to do back then. After a moment of silence, he said, "To unify the management of Dazhou's household registries; to survey all the fertile farmlands in the world; to consolidate the miscellaneous local taxes; and to restore the cash flow of the state treasury."

Yao Wenyu looked at the mountains in the distance and said, “These are what Xue Xiuzhuo wants to accomplish. He and Teacher are both striving for the same thing if you look at it on this point alone. Teacher has the support of Kong Qiu, Cen Yu, and the various officials of humble backgrounds, while Xue Xiuzhuo has the support of the industrious and practical action-takers with Jiang Qingshan at the lead. He’s not alone.”

But could the current Dazhou really do it?

It took Qi Huilian many years to implement the registration of households into the census registry<sup>3</sup> in the local areas. Why was the Eastern Palace framed for rebellion? Because the next on the list was the surveyance of farmlands. The misappropriation of the commoners’ fields in the Eight Cities of Qudu was rather severe. Once the policy was implemented, the noble clans not only had to return the commoners’ fields and receive their sentence according to the law, they also had to bear the land and field taxes themselves. Killing the Crown Prince would prevent the policy from being implemented. Hai Liangyi taught Li Jianheng the way he did to treat the problem at its source. He hoped Li Jianheng would be able to maintain a tight hold over the Grand Secretariat and wield his authority to make changes and overhaul the system from top-down. For this, he was willing to charge valiantly forth in Li Jianheng’s place.

But Li Jianheng could not do it.

Xue Xiuzhuo realized this way earlier than Hai Liangyi did. He instantly abandoned Li Jianheng, no longer holding out any hope for this emperor, or even the Li clan. He needed a new emperor, one who could sit quietly on the throne. It had to be the case that this emperor would never interfere with the Grand Secretariat, nor sway left and right in the struggle between those from the noble clans and those of humble backgrounds. Even more so, he would not be partial towards the frontier with heavy military presence for the sake of so-called brotherhood. And so he found Li Jianting.

But a plan like this took too long. Qudu was changing every single moment. Shen Zechuan himself was a variable. In Qudu, he was at best an abandoned pawn on Xue Xiuzhuo’s chessboard, one who could be off-handedly discarded after dealing with Xi Hongxuan and Wei Huaigu, wiped out in that heavy downpour just like Xiao Chiye. Xue Xiuzhuo had no selfish desires, and this was what was so terrifying about him. Xue Xiuyi had repeatedly ridiculed, mocked, and even humiliated Xue Xiuzhuo, but

Xue Xiuzhuo did not kill off this lawful eldest brother of his, because, in his eyes, Xue Xiuyi was not important at all. Dead or alive, he made no difference, just like the dust at his feet.

He wanted to kill Qi Huilian, because Qi Huilian was the tutor of the emperor of Dazhou. He wanted to kill Yao Wenyu, because Yao Wenyu was a phenomenal talent. He gave these two men the chance to choose before, but in the end, both of them turned him down. Releasing a strategist, who could not be used for his own purpose, back into the wild was akin to gifting the world's famous sword to another. And it was only by killing them that he would be able to eliminate the roots of troubles down the road.



A solitary wild goose flew across the horizon. Frost and fog gradually materialized, and a hue of colors washed over the cold-blighted forest. It was getting more and more chilly by the day. Qiao Tianya casually covered Yao Wenyu with a thick coat; they were still in the forest.

Shen Zechuan tapped his folding fan against his palm, his gaze following Hongyan Mountains southward as he said, "When Xue Xiuzhuo was teaching the Heir Apparent to the throne, he likely did not think that Dazhou would have collapsed to such an extent in just a mere few years. There is no one in this world who can take every single thing into account and come up with a foolproof strategy. The military provisions incident that forced Lu Guangbai into rebelling is a variable. Qidong missed the opportunity to hunt down Ce'an because they lost Lu Guangbai, and Qudu went from besieging Xiao Chiye to releasing a tiger back to its mountain."<sup>4</sup>

The events that befell men were always unexpected, be it Lu Guangbai, Shen Zechuan, Xiao Chiye, Yao Wenyu, or even any of the other nameless faces out there. Heaven gave every person a different challenge, and in climbing back to their feet and surviving, those who had initially been trapped in their circumstances had all fought and broken free of their shackles. Turbulent times meant that the order of the world no longer existed; anyone could fight for a slice of the pie if they so wished. If there were those who clung on to the fragments already broken, then there would also be those who brandished their weapons to break through the impasse.

This was the era of treacherous ministers and traitors.

It was in the midst of the thick fog when the raindrops fell. Fei Sheng opened up an umbrella and held it over Shen Zechuan. They reined in their horses and made their way back. Autumn had finally come to Cizhou. The



wind sent the sleeves of Shen Zechuan's robes billowing, nearly blowing away his blue handkerchief. At the same time Shen Zechuan grasped onto the handkerchief, the falling leaves dancing all over the sky passed by him. Yellow, withered leaves spiraled up in the wind, where the rain pelted at them, sending them falling at Xiao Chiye's feet.

Gu Jin returned on horseback, waving a small flag as he shouted, "The bridle path ahead has collapsed. Master, we are trapped here!"

Xiao Chiye mounted his horse. Wu Ziyu spurred his horse on forward from behind and braved the rain to say, "Zhao Hui's troops haven't arrived, and the Tudalong Banner lies ten *li* away from here. Hasen's cavalry is nearby!"

"The grain wagons are too heavy." Tantai Hu wiped off the rainwater. "Unless we abandon the provisions and take a detour, we are bound to come across Hasen's cavalry tonight."

"There are insufficient supplies at the battlegrounds; if this batch of provisions falls into Hasen's hands, His Lordship is going to get hit hard." Chen Yang tugged at the reins, his face red from the cold. "We can stay here, but Master has to go."

Based on the military orders a few days ago, Xiao Chiye, on making a detour from Dajing to the north, had to go past the bridle path of the original Changzhu camp to first provide supplies for Zhao Hui, then head towards the battlegrounds to replenish Xiao Fangxu's stock. When they arrived at this spot, they should theoretically be received by Zhao Hui's Three Great Training Divisions of Liuyang, but Zhao Hui had not appeared. Meng was also unable to fly too far to carry out reconnaissance due to the rainstorm today. It was as though Xiao Chiye had been blindfolded.

The expression in Xiao Chiye's eyes was unbelievably calm as he gave free rein to the raindrops trickling across his cheeks and commanded in a grave tone over the noise, "Turn around. We're heading for the Tudalong Banner."



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Special Thanks: to [Yuka](#)! <3

Footnotes

1. 小娘 *xiaoniang* is a term for one's father's concubine. In Qi Zhuyin's case, it'd be closer to a stepmother, since Hua Xiangyi is marrying into the family as the second wife and not a concubine.



- 2.
3. 劲装 *Jin Zhuang* is a more body-fitting outfit (compared to the usual loose, flowing robes) with the sleeves secured to make movements easier and less restrictive. It's usually worn by martial arts practitioners to facilitate combat.
4. 黃冊 *Huangce* or yellow registers/yellow book served during the Ming Dynasty to provide basic data for taxation and recruitment based on the household's classification according to their occupation. It was mainly divided into three categories: civilian, military, and craftsman.
5. 放虎归山 i.e., set free a deadly enemy, thereby setting the stage for future disaster.

# QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 151 : ROUND-UP

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



The Tudalong Banner was located in the eastern mountain ranges of the Hongyan Mountains; it was to the northwest of the Shayi Camp, and leading directly east of was the Biansha Twelve Tribes. Before this year, it was not a place of contention for both sides, but with Libei's repeatedly retreating battlefront, this place became a strategic point above the battleground. Huhelu's squad broke through the checkpoints and watchtowers ahead, so Changzhu Camp could only confront them on the west side of the Tudalong Banner. Both sides often engage in slanging matches across the marshland of the Tudalong Banner.

Xiao Chiye took a detour from the Bianbo Camp, which just so happened to put him to the south of Changzhu Camp. But the collapse blocked off the bridle path leading right to Changzhu Camp, and the Tudalong Banner lay just to the right. Hasen's squad often wandered around this area. If Xiao Chiye refused to abandon the grains to extricate himself, then he could only come face to face with Hasen with the supplies in tow. However, the grain wagons were too heavy. Wu Ziyu's Armored Cavalry could not run on mud, and the Imperial Army did not have enough light cavalry to interfere. Under such circumstances, it was simply too dangerous to turn around and head for the Tudalong Banner.

Wu Ziyu wanted to refute, but Chen Yang and the rest had already turned their horses around. That was a kind of trust that could not be described with words alone. They unconditionally obeyed Xiao Chiye. Even if it was a critical moment of life and death right this moment, they could immediately carry it out, as long as it was Xiao Chiye's commands. Wu Ziyu, who stood among them, involuntarily shuddered.

It was now a quarter past the hour of shen, and the sky was overcast, having been affected by the rainstorm. Gu Jin was well-acquainted with this area, and the convoy squad entered Tudalong Banner. The grain wagons rolled heavily across the mudholes; just a little oversight, and they would sink in them. Everyone stilled their breathing and focused with rapt attention, not daring to be sloppy in the slightest.

Xiao Chiye wanted to conceal the grain wagons here.

No matter how brave the cavalry of Biansha was, they would not enter the Tudalong Banner rashly. The marshland was similarly a difficult place for them to navigate. Besides, rainy days affected not just Xiao Chiye, but Hasen as well. Meng's inability to do reconnaissance meant that the saker falcons were not able to either. Both sides could not get a clear look at the other party's movements through the rainstorm; they could only rely on their knowledge of the battlefield to make their moves against each other. But this kind of delicate balance could only be maintained in the rainstorm. Once the rain stopped, Xiao Chiye's current squad would not be able to withstand Hasen's assault.

"Wu Ziyu, stay to guard over the grain wagons." Xiao Chiye said rapidly. "Let the Armored Cavalry hang up the chains to surround the grain wagons."

The paths around the Tudalong Banner were all muddy, and the Armored Cavalry were too heavy on rainy days. It was easy for the horses' hooves to get bogged down in the mud, so staying behind to watch over the grain wagons was the most appropriate decision to make. The chains were something Xiao Fangxu had them equipped with. Hooked them on the armors, and they could turn the Armored Cavalry into the grain wagons' "armor". That way, even if Hasen could break through Xiao Chiye's guerrilla attack and enter the inner area of the Tudalong Banner, he would still be unable to break up the iron wall of the Armored Cavalry right at once.

Xiao Chiye remained in place and said to the Imperial Army, "Hasen is leading the Hanshe Tribe. Their speed is fast, and their strikes are powerful; we can't catch up to them or stop them. But the east side where they are located is overgrown with bushes, which makes it easy for us to hide. The saker falcon can't go ahead with their patrols on rainy days; this is an opportunity."

It was clear who was the stronger and weaker one between the enemy and them. Xiao Chiye could not let Hasen's squad remain intact; he would have no chance of winning if that was the case. He had the Imperial Army split up into small groups to feel their way out of the Tudalong Banner's marshland, set up ropes to trip the enemies' horses, then similarly break up and divert the unsuspecting Biansha Cavalry all over the Tudalong Banner.

As long as the Biansha Cavalry fell off their horses, they would lose their advantage.

“Gu Jin should bypass Hasen’s squad and rush over to the battlefield at top speed.” Xiao Chiye turned around and looked at Gu Jin. “Zhao Hui didn’t come, and that means the Three Great Training Divisions of Liuyang are unable to move at this moment. The war situation further north is likely to be more dire than we thought. We can only now ask the battleground for reinforcements.”

Gi Jin had been injured before in the Tudalong Banner. He knew the roads of the Tudalong Banner by heart. He promptly voiced an acknowledgment and led a row of lightly-equipped scouts on ahead.

“Laohu, head northeast. I’ll go to the east. Chen Yang, assume personal command here.” As Xiao Chiye spoke, he strode forward. “No matter what, we have to ensure the army provisions can be successfully delivered to the site of battle.”

Having followed Xiao Chiye bustle all over the place, Chen Yang knew best about the status of the various granaries’ reserves in Libei. If Xiao Chiye were defeated, then Chen Yang would have to release a falcon once the rain stopped to inform the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path to reallocate army provisions up north without further delay. As the convoy squad, their lives and deaths were nowhere near as important as the army provisions for the battlegrounds.

This place was close to Hongyan mountains; the rain would not be stopping any time soon. The Imperial Army who was lying low in the mudholes had to endure the bone-chilling cold. Their inner garment clung to their skin, having already been drenched through. All their limbs had to be soaked in the mud, and it took less than an hour for all their fingers and toes to be frozen.

The autumnal rains of Libei were like blades; August had barely begun, yet the temperature had already dropped so low it appeared snow might fall any moment.

The convoy squad had yet to change into outer coats to keep out the cold. Long before heading out, Xiao Chiye had already asked that they switch the water they carried on hand with “On Horseback”.<sup>1</sup> Strong wine could dispel the cold, and thus it was a pivotal item to have in this frontier of capricious wind and snow.

Xiao Chiye crouched in a mudhole and chugged down the wine, one mouthful at a time.

For the most part, the battle between Libei and Biansha would not drag past the eighth or ninth month, as a further delay meant the coming of snow, where the grasslands of both parties would be ravaged by raging snowstorms. During the long and harsh winter, groups of Libei's military craftsmen would spend this time tirelessly re-forging and repairing equipment for the Armored Cavalry. On the other end, Biansha would herd their flocks of sheep closer to the south. Everyone would spontaneously enter a period of truce without fail. It was only during the third year of the reign of Xiande that something unforeseen had happened. Then, the Hanshe Tribe headed south and breached the banks of Chashi River to relieve considerable pressure on the provisions for the Twelve Tribes of Biansha.

For some reason, in the past couple of days, Xiao Chiye had a premonition that there would be no truce this winter. Amu'er's combat style was too aggressive. If what Amu'er had done in early spring was to enter his enemy's territory to plunder food, then right now, Amu'er seemed more like he was full-on suppressing Libei with no intention of retreat. By transferring Hasen over here from Qidong, Amu'er was deploying and letting loose his most powerful troops on the battlefields of Libei, which were completely unlike the small-scaled battles and skirmishes they had engaged in during the last few years.

All of a sudden, the sound of horse hooves rose through the rain. Xiao Chiye hung back his flask and held up two fingers to signal for the Imperial Army behind him to get down. He crouched down, his face almost touching the mudhole, and used only his eyes to search the bushes in the rain. A troop of cavalymen appeared amidst the pouring rain, the hooves of their horses splashing muddy water all over as they galloped. Xiao Chiye silently observed them, and Langli Blade gradually slid out of its sheath as the distance between them shortened.

The sound of horse hooves intensified, while the sound of the Biansha Cavalry's whistle dispersed in the rain. Xiao Chiye had already felt a slight tremor with the palm he had pressed against the ground.

He did not move, and neither did the Imperial Army behind him.

The Biansha Cavalry was just right before them; just a couple steps more, and they would be trampling over the Imperial Army. But then, the horse in the lead suddenly neighed, its front hooves caught by the rope. The

horse's front knees protruded forward, and it fell straight down. A wave of mud instantly splashed over Xiao Chiye's face. He moved. At the same time the cavalryman fell down along with the horse, Langli Blade had already broken free of its sheath. Xiao Chiye cleaved down at the man. Fresh blood that spewed from the neck of the man gushed into the mudhole. The cavalrymen behind the man were caught off guard, and consequently, their formation was thrown into disarray.

Xiao Chiye did not give the other party the chance to regroup. The Imperial Army followed him closely as he killed his way into the Biansha Cavalry. A blend of mud and blood trickled onto Xiao Chiye's nape. The pungency of "On Horseback" flooded through his stomach, causing him to burn up all over.

This was like a head-on blow that swiftly sent the Biansha Cavalry gathering their wits about them. Both parties were small squads, fighting at close quarters and killing one another as the rainwater poured over them. But it was a quick battle. By the time the Biansha Cavalry pulled themselves together, the Imperial Army had soundlessly vanished into the torrential rain again.

The Biansha Cavalry's squads set up around the Tudalong Banner all received varying degrees of assaults from the Imperial Army. As soon as they tried to follow up with an attack, these batches of ruffian soldiers would shrink back in retreat. The Biansha Cavalry was forced to come to a halt beyond the marshland of the Tudalong Banner. Whenever they wanted to turn back and rejoin the others, the Imperial Army would sneak up on them and attack. After a few times, the Biansha Cavalry was beyond fed up. They could not use their speed to full advantage, and their charges were all over the place. They were just like headless flies being harassed by the Imperial Army, who shoved and kicked them. Pent-up rage simmered in them as they fought with ire and resentment.

Xiao Chiye was hidden under the torrential rain all this time. The Biansha Cavalry could not make out the exact hiding place of the Imperial Army at all. Without the heavy armors and horses of the Libei Armored Cavalry, the Imperial Army could disappear from the Biansha Cavalry's field of vision as long as they lie low on the ground, coming and going elusively like a shadow.

Very quickly, Xiao Chiye's wine was drunk down to the last drop. At the hour of xu, the sky grew completely dark. The Biansha Cavalry was still

trapped by the Imperial Army at the fringe of the Tudalong Banner, unable to advance or retreat. Chances of victory kept improving; it seemed as if Xiao Chiye had grasped the rhythm of the battle. He would not let it go to his head. It did not matter if the Biansha Cavalry showed weakness or resorted to intimidation, the rhythm remained firmly in his control. But time lapsed, and Xiao Chiye still had yet to catch sight of Hasen.

The chill was even more intense in the night, and it was incomparably pitch-dark all around. Xiao Chiye's boots were choked full of mud. Rainy days were wet and slippery. In order to prevent his blade from slipping off his hand, Xiao Chiye had it bound to the area between his thumb and index finger with a strip of cloth. At this point, the cloth was soaked through and utterly waterlogged. He squatted in place and tore away the old one to replace it with a new one.

Man's physical strength was limited. This kind of back-and-forth battle required both sides to be on high alert at all times. Nerves had to be stretched taut; they could not afford to make even the slightest oversight or negligence. But Xiao Chiye had to catch his breath too. He closed his eyes slightly and shook his head twice so that he would not go numb from the repetitive actions.

By tomorrow latest at the hour of chen, the reinforcements from the battlegrounds would have hurried their way over. Tonight was of crucial importance. But Heaven still favored Xiao Chiye. Even if the rain were to abate some, there would be no starlight and moonlight tonight. The night was still as the Imperial Army's disguise.

Xiao Chiye huffed out warm air and flexed his five fingers before tightening his grip on Langli Blade. But just as he rose to his feet again, the sound of disorderly footsteps rang out from the shrubbery. The person who brushed aside the leaves to reveal himself turned out to be Gu Jin.

Xiao Chiye promptly had an ill sense of foreboding.

Sure enough, he saw Gu Jin looking grim as he hastily kneeled on one knee and whispered, "Master, the roads to the site of battle are all blocked! Hasen's elite forces are right at the southeast, and they have cut off my access!"

Xiao Chiye's heart suddenly sank. It hit him almost instantly.

He had walked into a trap.

Every skilled commanding general knows the principle of imposing his will on the enemy but not allowing the enemy's will to be imposed on him.<sup>2</sup>



The reason Xiao Chiye had been scoring one victory after another from Qudu was that he was always taking the initiative. This allowed him to control the pulse and rhythm of the battlefield without fear of the enemy's numbers. But he had forgotten that Hasen was the same kind of commanding general as he was.

This rain was no coincidence.

It was a meticulously planned round-up.

From the time Xiao Chiye's squad headed north, Hasen had already laid down an encirclement trap to hunt and kill this wolf pup. At the same time Xiao Chiye was watching the Biansha Cavalry, he was also being observed by Hasen. Xiao Chiye thought he was taking the initiative, but he was, in fact, paralyzing himself. Right from the moment he decided to turn around and head for the Tudalong Banner, he had already fallen into the role of the passive player.

The sound of horses' hooves rose once more.



NOTICE:

New updated [Character Chart](#) from the QJJ Simplified CN Physical Copy! Check out the [Character Glossary](#)!

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Footnotes

1. 马上行 Wine from Libei. Background story in [chapter 102](#)
2. 致人而不致于人 From Sun Tzu's Art of War

# QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 152 : HASEN

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3

**Warning:** Horse Abuse :V



Raindrops rolled down the curved blade, dripping along its sharp edge.

The horse under Hasen was snorting hot puffs of air. Hasen had already been waiting for a long time in the rain. It was three-quarters past the hour of hai. The world had completely descended into darkness.

Hasen had a head full of red hair. He was not like the men of Dazhou, who typically tied their hair up in a bun; instead, he had it trimmed short, with a small pigtail tied at the back of his head.

After Huhelu's death, Bayin was transferred over to Hasen's side. He tugged at the reins as he followed behind Hasen and wrapped up his treasured military books before putting them back under his robe on his bosom. Cautiously, he asked, "How are you certain he will not escape?"

Hasen scratched at his rain-drenched hair, letting it pile up in a mess as he replied, "He was very bold when fighting Huhelu. To put it in the words of those from Dazhou, he is adept in the art of deception. I heard that he's the youngest son of the Prince of Libei, a wolf pup; as long as there's a chance to counterattack, he'll definitely not choose to flee."

Bayin said, "He's indeed very bold, and also very cautious."

"Compared to his elder brother, Xiao Chiye is an impulsive man." Hasen, having said to this point, was a little bashful. "Even though I'm no genius, I know the pride of a genius. No matter how he warns himself, he will still lose a little of his prudence after defeating our powerful Huhelu at the Shasan camp. His desire to win is too strong. Bayin, even I can feel it. Like my father, he won't allow himself to cower and retreat. This is his strength, but also his weakness."

Bayin quietly petted the horse. "Will we win?"

"We will definitely win." When he said this, his eyes were bright and his words powerful, "He can't beat me."

Hasen and Xiao Chiye had similar combat styles, with the way they fought their battles both wild and unrestrained. Both Qi Zhuyin and Lu Guangbai had been put through the wringer at his hands one after another, but he and Xiao Chiye were polar opposites in terms of their personalities.

He was introverted and even a little bashful; the beautiful maidens of the Biansha Twelve Tribes all had their eyes on him, yet just their gazes alone would make him go red in the face. He was Amu'er's favorite son, and this was not only due to the formidability of his mother's clan, but also because of his character.

Xiao Fangxu enjoyed nurturing little wolves in the wild. He even liked training his sons with hard knocks until they went howling in pain; but Amu'er was the exact opposite. Before Hasen had come of age, Amu'er never allowed Hasen to leave his side. Every battle that Hasen fought during his earlier years was all taught by Amu'er himself in person.

"You are also a genius." Bayin responded as an afterthought.

Hasen laughed out loud as he wiped his scimitar and shook his head. "Bayin, I'm not. I'm an ordinary man. I merely found my own path from battling against geniuses. To be honest, before heading north, I was worried about meeting Xiao Jiming here, because Xiao Jiming and Qi Zhuyin belong to the same category of commanders. They're better at defense than offense. Do you understand? Not in the typical sense of defense, but one that leaves you with nowhere to make your moves and unable to find any vulnerability to attack; they are thorny to deal with. But Xiao Chiye isn't the same. He's very..." Hasen struggled to think of a description. In the end, he laughed, "I can't put my finger on it, but he obviously has plenty of shortcomings, and he isn't even trying to hide them."

"Then he's arrogant." Bayin herded the horse over to Hasen's side. He raised his hand and lightly tapped Hasen's shoulder. "You are our new Great Hero, the eagle of the desert, and the future husband of Duo'erlan. It doesn't matter how humble you are; Hasen, in our eyes, you are a genius bestowed upon the Hanshe Tribe by the gods. You are not inferior to anyone else."

"Thank you." Hasen said, "My good friend, you should've come to my side earlier."

The both of them traded looks and exchanged smiles. All of a sudden, they heard a few urgent whistles resounding through the night. Hasen raised his head to the sky, and a raindrop landed between his brows; it was no longer pouring like it had during the day. He patted the horse, looking westward of the Tudalong Banner. "It's time for us to haul in the net."



Hasen's elite forces did not enter the battleground at all; the troops he had set before Xiao Chiye were all regular troops that were originally stationed east of the Tudalong Banner. Moreover, the troops he deployed to the eastern mountain range had a firm grip on Zhao Hui, preventing Zhao Hui from turning around and providing reinforcements. The path towards the battlefield was also obstructed; he had turned the Tudalong Banner into a sack-like trap to ensnare Xiao Chiye with.

Xiao Chiye had no way out. Hasen had long prepared for him an elite force that was all recharged and raring to go in the east. Even if Xiao Chiye opted to escape, Hasen would also chase him down closely on horseback, so that Xiao Chiye, with the exposed vulnerability on his back, would once again become the target of the hunt.

The sound of horse hooves rang out once again, this time accompanied by torches that pressed in from the east. The exhausted Imperial Army could only retreat. Although the rain had stopped, the chill had intensified. Even Tantai Hu had no choice but to huff warm air in his frozen hands.

Xiao Chiye walked in the mud, with the huffing and panting of the soldiers behind him. They had to retreat back to the marshland of the Tudalong Banner as soon as possible. But Hasen did not miss this opportunity. His elite forces had eaten their fill during the day, and now, they were lashing hard at their horses to spur them on, giving the Imperial Army no time to retreat at all. The Imperial Army that had been split into small groups hid themselves among the shrubbery and grassy fields, but Hasen's troops were meticulous in their scouting and left them with nowhere to conceal themselves.

Gu Jin, who had good hearing, very quickly discerned that the horses' hooves were coming this way.

Xiao Chiye raised an arm to wipe his cheek and looked back at the pitch-black night. Flames abruptly lit up the horizon. Hasen's cavalry was like the falcon encroaching upon the sky not far away, its two wings spread out as it charged forth in what seemed like a glide.

"Master." Gu Jin led his own horse out. "You should leave first!"

"Mount your horse and head north." Xiao Chiye remained where he was. "Pass on military information along the way and tell them to withdraw back to the marshland. Tell Tantai Hu not to persist in fighting and to retreat immediately."

The Biansha Cavalry was getting closer. Xiao Chiye could even hear the sounds of horses snorting hot air. Gu Jin remained in place and hesitated for a moment. Xiao Chiye said with calm and composure, "I have several hundred men here. It's not a problem to fight and retreat at the same time. I will make plans again once we retreat inside the marshland."

Gu Jin knew that Xiao Chiye would not change his command at his time, so he mounted his horse, whipped it into action, and charged into the night.



Hasen had already seen the figures. The cavalry whistled, as though they were encircling the wild beasts in the desert. They did not rely on military flags to convey messages. The whistle rapidly relayed from the center army to both flanks. Following right after, the cavalry on both flanks turned their horses around to assemble in the center, turning the falcon with its wings spread into a straight arrow whose target was Xiao Chiye!

In war, speed was everything.

Hasen knew the consequences of hesitation. When it came to Xiao Chiye, he had to fight a quick battle. Otherwise, if Xiao Chiye were to retreat to the marshland and get the opportunity to catch his breath, it could very well lead to the next surprise attack on them.

"That's him!" Bayin followed closely behind and pointed at Xiao Chiye as he hollered in Biansha language. "Xiao Chiye!"

Hasen pulled off his scimitar and bent low at the same time. He did not need Bayin to remind him; he had already recognized Xiao Chiye. Xiao Chiye's height and appearance were far too conspicuous. His expression as he pursed his lips and looked back was simply identical to Xiao Fangxu.

Xiao Chiye wrung the dripping wet strip of cloth and swiftly wrapped it tightly around the space between his thumb and index finger. He watched as the cavalry pressed in towards them, his attention all but sucked away but Hasen's red hair. He counted the distance quietly. Just as Hasen's horse was about to trip on the rope, Hasen suddenly turned sideways and lowered his arm to slice the rope that had been hidden among the grass with one blow.

The cavalry at the back dashed their way in without a hitch.

The galloping cavalymen brandished their scimitars, but Xiao Chiye did not move. In the blink of an eye, the hooves of the Biansha's horses sank into the camouflage horse pits, sending a number of men tumbling off their horses once more. The people in front fell to the ground, but Hasen,

who was at the back, seemed to have anticipated it. That one step he had taken a beat slower earlier had been meant to test the grounds.

Xiao Chiye raised his finger, and the Imperial Army jumped over the shrubs and broke into a dash.

Hasen's horse was snorting hot air as Hasen blew the whistle again. These hastily dug pits for trapping horses were not deep enough, and they were able to simply leap over to give chase right behind Xiao Chiye.

Hasen's target was clear, and that was Xiao Chiye. As long as he could kill Xiao Chiye, the scattered Imperial Army would be just a bunch of men without a leader. The grain wagons within the marshland of the Tudalong Banner would then naturally fall into their hands.

Xiao Chiye stepped through the mud. A horse had already caught up next to him. The Biansha Cavalryman on the horse barked at Xiao Chiye in Biansha language. Xiao Chiye leaped forward and crouched down on stable feet to dodge the scimitar coming towards him. Following right after, he sliced apart the Biansha Cavalryman's saddle. Threatened by the blade, the startled horse was thrown into disorientation. Xiao Chiye caught hold of the cavalryman's arm that had been wielding the blade, but instead of hacking it off, he yanked hard on it to flip himself up the horse. Unable to withstand the force of gravity, the cavalryman tumbled off the horse, sending up a spray of mud.

The horse of the Gouma Tribe, having had a change of masters, wretchedly flung its head from side to side and refused to run anymore. Behind him, Hasen was pressing in close towards him. Xiao Chiye clamped down hard on the belly of the horse and yanked the reins, forcing the horse to crash its way through at an angle.

Hasen had been too hurried in his pursuit of Xiao Chiye. Muddy water went splashing as both horses collided. Langli Blade went slicing through the air towards Hasen's chest with such ferocity that Hasen did not dare to be negligent and parried the blow with all his strength.

So heavy!

Hasen's arms sank, and the scimitar almost slipped out of his hand under Xiao Chiye's force. He immediately understood just how extraordinary Xiao Chiye's arm strength was, so he avoided the glint as Xiao Chiye hacked down on him, no longer meeting Xiao Chiye head-on with force.

The cavalymen who were successively catching up behind them clung close to their horses' backs. The horse beneath Xiao Chiye stirred restlessly as they reached out with their scimitars to sever his horse's front knees. The horse whinnied in pain, and its entire front body fell over into the mudhole.

Xiao Chiye rolled off his horse. He was already surrounded.

The Biansha Cavalrymen formed a circle around Xiao Chiye, and the fleeing Imperial Army swore and cursed out loud, "Bloody hell, the Viceroy fell off!"

The Imperial Army who had yet to spring into the Tudalong Banner promptly turned back, drew their blades, and lunged into the group of cavalymen. They followed suit, doing what was done earlier; as long as they could not hang onto the Biansha Cavalry and leap onto their horses, they would hack off the horses' legs and send the Biansha Cavalry tumbling off their horses. They kept what Xiao Chiye had said firmly in mind—the Biansha Cavalry was not skilled at standing on the ground and fighting at close quarters.

But that was directed at the troops that had been crossing swords with the Libei Armored Cavalry in the north.

Hasen had fought battles with Dazhou's best infantry in the south. The one who had clashed with him was Lu Guangbai, and Xiao Chiye's experience with cavalymen, to sum it up, had all come from Lu Guangbai. Hasen's elite forces were not the least bit afraid of landing on the ground at all. On the contrary, they were rather composed and unhurried when they faced up against the Imperial Army after dismounting. They did not even need any buffer time at all; they could fight the instant they got up after rolling to the ground.

Fuck!

The Imperial Army, who had never suffered a defeat before, cursed in unison.

These fuckers are even stronger than us!



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# QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 153 : DEFEAT

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



The Imperial Army was very much like Xiao Chiye, but they were more sly than him. This was a group of soldiers that gave the Libei Armored Cavalry complicated feelings. After the reign of Yongyi, their reputation waned, and they were reduced to being mere ornamental decorations in Qudu; even their original patrol duty had been snatched away by the Eight Great Training Divisions. In the decades that followed, all they did were odd jobs, and they even appear to be more than happy to simply muddle and idle their way through life. But then, they met Xiao Chiye, and it was as if they had been wiped clean of grime to finally shine in all their full glory in Qudu.

The Imperial Army was unlike the Libei Armored Cavalry and the Qidong Garrison Troops. They were able to overlook all the noise and focus all of their attention solely on Xiao Chiye. They could not hear a single one of the criticisms against Xiao Chiye. As long as Xiao Chiye waved his hand and signaled them, they would be willing to go through the most severe of trials and tribulations alongside him. This was a brew of loyalty blended with the code of brotherhood.

A prime example: right this moment. The enemy clearly outnumbered them, yet the Imperial Army felt no fear. They chopped off the horses' legs belonging to the Biansha Cavalry's vanguard so that a break opened up in Hansen's encirclement. However, the number of follow-up cavalry multiplied exponentially, and these men were all highly adaptable to boot. Without even needing Hasen to give his command, they had already figured out the Imperial Army's intentions.

The Imperial Army still wanted to hack off more legs, but the Biansha Cavalry dismounted from their horses before charging into the battlefield. They had no armors, and the furs they donned were light and cold-resistant, so it was with extreme agility that they moved. Unlike Huhelu's squad, each of them had a spare scimitar at the side of their horses, and pike daggers tightly secured on the outside of their thighs. In the event that their scimitars were damaged, they could still use the reserve scimitars, or swap over to the pike daggers to fight at close quarters.

They were taciturn, well-trained men.

Xiao Chiye was gasping for breath as he savagely swept his eyes over this elite force.

Hasen did not say a word. He did not need to engage in any form of communication with Xiao Chiye. He did not want to use Xiao Chiye to threaten Xiao Fangxu either, and he knew very well that leaving Xiao Chiye alive would mean no end to troubles in the future. Now was the moment to kill off Xiao Chiye.

Hasen locked eyes with Xiao Chiye. He gripped his scimitar with one hand and released the reins with the other hand, letting it fall gently into the mudhole. They were like certain beasts facing off against each other in confrontation, their abhorrence for the other mixed in with the stench of blood. Hasen kept moving, wading through the muddy water while observing Xiao Chiye.

Sporadic raindrops left in the night sky dripped onto the back of Xiao Chiye's hand as he gripped Langli Blade and followed Hasen with his eyes.

This was a strange kind of silence. Tumultuous sound of killing clearly abounded all around them, and yet Xiao Chiye found it quiet, so quiet that his hair was standing on end. He had to restrain, restrain, and restrain himself before he could suppress that murderous intent to kill bubbling up in his body.

Hasen was no longer moving. He seemed to have noticed Xiao Chiye's testiness. They both vied for the right to call the shots on this battlefield and attempted to influence its atmosphere. This made it clear that there was no way they could co-exist; what they wanted was absolute control over their own rhythm.

A water drop slid along the back of Xiao Chiye's slightly bulging hand. At the very instant it dripped off, Hasen burst into action. His red hair was like a flaming torch in the dark night, charging right before Xiao Chiye's eyes the very instant the mud splashed aside.

In the blink of an eye, Hasen's scimitar pressed in towards Xiao Chiye's throat. Xiao Chiye took a sudden step back, and the mud splashed out in a fan-like arc along with the movements of his legs and feet. He swung up Langli Blade in a half-circle, and both of them collided in mid-air. The impact forced Hasen's feet to slide back some, but he regained his footing and bounced back into action the next moment, even cleverly learning to dodge.

Langli Blade was a heavyweight executioner's blade,<sup>1</sup> and Xiao Chiye's arm strength was what it relied on. Every move Hasen made during the fight was executed with the intention to hack off Xiao Chiye's arm. Each time Xiao Chiye wielded his blade, he would strike at empty air. Even if he caught up with Hasen, Hasen would immediately turn his scimitar sideways and brush past it so that he would not have to shoulder Xiao Chiye's terrifying strength.

Assaulters were also sneaking up behind Xiao Chiye out of nowhere. He used and pushed his sight and hearing to full capacity, but his physical strength was like water already splashed; in less than an hour, Xiao Chiye felt his own movements slowing down a little. Hasen lunged once again, and at the same time, a strong gust of wind suddenly came assaulting him from behind. Xiao Chiye abruptly strode half a step to sidestep and dodge the scimitar behind his back, then backhandedly grasped the arm of the man behind him. Following right after, he spun around to kick Hasen over and break the arm of the man who sneaked up on him from behind. The scimitar on the other side cleaved down on Xiao Chiye's arm. A loud "THUD" rang out as the blow was blocked by the arm guard Shen Zechuan had gifted him.

A slurry of mud erupted like exploding artillery shells as the Biansha Cavalry simultaneously bore their scimitars down on Langli Blade. Xiao Chiye promptly lifted a fist with his left hand and punched one of them over. The pressure on Langli Blade promptly subsided some, and he lowered his body and made to lift the blade. With his scimitar cracked from the impact from Langli's Blade, Hasen abandoned it, pulled out the pike daggers from both sides of his legs, and sprang when he saw his chance—all of a sudden, one of the Imperial Army pounced and grabbed Hasen around his waist; he even used a wrestling technique, but failed to trip Hasen.

Hasen flipped over the pike dagger, slid it along that man's armor, and viciously stabbed it into the side of his neck. Blood spurt like a fountain of spring water. Hasen had yet to pull out the pike dagger, instead turning his head aside first to dodge Xiao Chiye's blade.

Men were dying on both sides. The Imperial Army did not expect Hasen's elite force to be this formidable, and likewise, this elite force did not expect the Imperial Army to be able to hang in there for so long.

The Biansha Cavalry at the periphery took out iron chains attached with small copper balls. These kinds of chains were similar in appearance to the chains used by the Libei Armored Cavalry, but much lighter. They pressed in, shrinking the encirclement area, and when Xiao Chiye's Langli Blade was pinned down once again, they flung countless chains towards Xiao Chiye. The copper balls caught on to Xiao Chiye's arms and legs. With Xiao Chiye now entangled in the iron chains, they dragged him over to the ground in one abrupt move.

Hasen's pike dagger shot right towards Xiao Chiye's face. Xiao Chiye practically used up all of his strength to drag his arms over to block the blow, causing the Biansha Cavalry of the other end who was pulling at the chains to stumble in unison.

Once again, the pike dagger slammed into the arm guard with a thud, but this piece of top-quality iron could not withstand this kind of repeated blows raining upon it one after another. Xiao Chiye felt the dogskin string snap; the arm guard was already dented.

Xiao Chiye attempted to break free of the chains, but there were simply too many for his arms to bear. He tilted his head to spit out the muddy sand in his mouth, watching as the scimitars of the cavalry went straight for his own throat. At this moment, Xiao Chiye saw the billowy black sky. The winds of Hongyan Mountains blew against his drenched hair, and he thought of Shen Zechuan in between ragged gasps.

Hasen's victory was initially already within grasp, but who would have expected Xiao Chiye to shoulder the combined force of all the tugging and pulling from those holding him down and raise both legs to kick over a blade-wielding cavalryman. The iron chains securing him suddenly went swinging. It was impossible to tell if it was sweat or muddy water trickling along his temples, but blue veins visibly protruded as Xiao Chiye executed a kip-up<sup>2</sup> and flipped himself up to his feet.

However, one person alone could not salvage the situation, much like one log could not prop up a collapsing building. During the time Xiao Chiye executed his move, the cavalry had yanked the chains taut; he had gotten on his feet for only a mere moment before he was once again dragged back to the ground.

Even if he was blessed with wings, escape was impossible tonight!

In the nick of time, the ground suddenly started to quake. Water droplets among the shrubbery and branches leaped about as the battle call of

a war horn reverberated through the boundless night.

Hasen looked out towards the south; as expected, he saw a person single-handedly charging over in a mad dash, and following close in his wake was a black tide that similarly steamrolled everything in its path under the crushing darkness of the night. The closer they got, the more aggressively the mudhole shook from that muffled thunder-like roar of horses' hooves—a testament to the heavy weight of steel armors.

Hasen immediately whistled. The cavalry flipped onto their horses in an orderly fashion and swiftly withdrew northward. Before he turned the horse around, Hasen regretfully glanced towards Xiao Chiye. He raised two fingers, tapped his temple, and leaned towards Xiao Chiye to bid him a polite farewell. Then he took his leave and sped away, leaving a scene of devastation behind in his wake.

The black-armored cavalry charged over to Xiao Chiye's side, circling around him once.

Xiao Fangxu removed his helmet and looked askance at Xiao Chiye. In a grave voice, he commanded those behind him, "Untie your Second Young Master. What an unsightly sight."

The expression in Xiao Chiye's eyes was scathingly cold and grave—it was the shame of having his first taste of defeat.



There were commanding generals of the five camps in the Shasan camp, all of whom reported to Xiao Fangxu. Based on ranking, Xiao Chiye's position was at the very bottom. However, he had been thoroughly defeated this time, and he cut such a sorry figure as he squatted outside of the tent and rinsed half his body with cold water that the commanding generals who came and went would all cast him a glance.

Xiao Chiye did not seem to feel the blade-inflicted wounds on his shoulders, chest, and back as the cold water scoured his body pale. Zuo Qianqiu lifted up the flap after the meeting in the tent had been dismissed, and as he looked at the sight of Xiao Chiye squatting at the side with his back to him, his reproach had all but turned into a twinge of bemusement. He called out, "Come in and drink a bowl of warm milk. Don't you fall sick on such a cold day."

Xiao Chiye mumbled an answer and rose to put away the water bucket before walking into the tent.

There was a fire going in the tent. Xiao Chiye's armor had been so badly damaged that it could no longer be used. Xiao Fangxu was currently examining the dented top-quality iron of the arm guard. Zuo Qianqiu instructed the military medic to dress Xiao Chiye's wounds, so Xiao Chiye sat bare-chested on the little stool and remained still.

After some time, Chen Yang, Gu Jin, Tantai Hu, and Wu Ziyu entered.

"Give your commanding general a report of the casualty count." Xiao Fangxu tossed the arm guard back onto the table, sat down, and said to Chen Yang.

Chen Yang quietly answered, "The Imperial Army lost three hundred men..."

"Louder," Xiao Fangxu looked at Chen Yang. "Why are you hanging your head looking all so dejected?"

Chen Yang raised his voice. "The Imperial Army lost three hundred men. Thirty-six men sustained severe injuries, and eight got away with light injuries."

The Imperial Army was Xiao Chiye's roots. He had to be responsible for all its casualties, fatal or otherwise. This army no longer held any possibility of further expansion, for it was unique and distinctive. The moment the entire force was decimated, even Xiao Chiye himself would not be able to rebuild it in Libei. This meant that as long as the Imperial Army suffered a defeat in a battle, it would face exponential losses. While three hundred people were nothing to the Qidong Garrison Troops or the Libei Armored Cavalry, it was considered heavy casualty to the Imperial Army.

Silence descended upon the tent. Tantai Hu snuck a couple of glances at Chen Yang and Gu Jin before finally plucking up his courage and speaking up, "Hasen caught us off guard, Master was also..."

"Now report the casualties of the Three Great Training Divisions of Liuyang to your commanding general." Xiao Fangxu ordered.

Chen Yang paused for a moment, "The Liuyang Southern Route Army lost eight hundred and ninety-two men, forty-five sustained heavy injuries, and two hundred and thirty-seven suffered light injuries."

"Zhao Hui was initially fighting on the northern route; this Southern Route Army was established at the last minute to rescue your Imperial Army. A total of two thousand men, while digging the collapsed bridle path, encountered a surprise attack by the cavalry that Hasen left stationed at the northern route. Practically half the men died." Xiao Fangxu continued, "If

you had just stayed where you were, you would've met with them in just under four hours, but you impulsively turned around and headed for the Tudalong Banner. How are you going to account for this loss to Zhao Hui?"

Xiao Chiye said nothing.

Xiao Fangxu continued, "You should remember that you're the commanding general in charge of the escort and transportation of military supplies, not the commanding general for combat. To think you'd forcibly assault Hasen's squad with a few hundred men... Did a donkey kick you in the head, Xiao Chiye?"

Zuo Qianqiu originally should not have spoken, but Xiao Chiye had just retreated from the battlefield, and as his *shifu*, it was inevitable for his heart to ache for him. Thus he said, "Hasen has been planning for it for a long time this time, and it just so happened that they'd chance upon a rainstorm. The situation was urgent then. A-Ye—"

"You never treated the Libei Armored Cavalry as your own duty at all. In your eyes, there's only the Imperial Army." With his hand on his knees, Xiao Fangxu suddenly turned stern. "The battle at Bianbo camp went to your head, letting you get carried away by your success. You regarded everyone as Huhelu. Your defeat today to Hasen is a lesson. What exactly do you have that'd possess you to fight with him head-on? Lift your head up!"

Wu Ziyu could no longer bear it and fell to his knees on the ground with a "thud". Once he kneeled, Tantai Hu cluelessly followed suit and kneeled. Then, "thud, thud", Chen Yang and Gu Jin kneeled too.

Xiao Fangxu swiftly looked towards them.

Wu Ziyu said in an extremely feeble voice, "Your Lordship... It's, it's not what you think... My legs have gone all wobbly."



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Footnotes



- 1.
2. 鬼头刀 literally ghost-headed blade. It's a kind of blade used for beheading people sentenced to death in old times.
- 3.
4. Specifically 鲤鱼打挺 carp kip-up, a martial arts move where one leaps from a supine position into a standing position.



## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 154 : MAN

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



After getting a scolding, Xiao Chiye still had to receive his punishment publicly in the military tent. He had been demoted, and now he could not even be considered a commanding general. So what if he was a talented genius? He still had to eat the humble pie after suffering a defeat. Never brag on the war zone about the battles once fought and the enemies once vanquished—all of these counted for nothing. Xiao Chiye killed Huhelu at the Shasan Camp, and this indeed was the subject of intense discussion in the army, but Xiao Fangxu did not reward him and instead made him a general in charge of military supplies. Others might not understand this move, but the old-school generals knew best that this meant Xiao Fangxu had the intent to entrust Xiao Chiye with heavy responsibilities.

Xiao Fangxu did not reward him because he wanted to shut up the mouths of those criticizing Xiao Chiye; he wanted to prove that he was far harsher and more exacting on his son than he was to others. Guo Weili rarely scored any wins in all his battles against Huhelu at the Tudalong Banner, but Xiao Fangxu promoted him and deployed him to the Shasan Camp to continue in his capacity as the commanding general. With such a stark contrast, the smart ones would all know to shut up, as this meant that Xiao Chiye's promotions in the future were all based on genuine and solid military achievements, and it would also leave Xiao Chiye room for defeat.

It was not that they could not afford to lose a battle on the battlefield. Xiao Jiming could, and so could Guo Weili and Zhao Hui, because they were all generals Libei was familiar with. Their defeats were pardonable and forgivable under the circumstances, and these were all what Xiao Chiye lacked. Once Xiao Chiye really came to stand in the forefront of the frontline, he could only win. He had to prove to the dispirited Libei Armored Cavalry that he was the best choice of candidate for Libei.



Xiao Chiye walked out of the military tent and put on his clothes. His waist and lower back were wrapped with gauze, and his right arm had sustained the worst injuries. For now, he would not be able to use the

Conqueror Bow, and he even had to exercise caution while wielding Langli Blade.

Xiao Chiye huffed out a few breaths of hot air and whistled for Lang Tao Xue Jin. Lang Tao Xue Jin had just been washed and had yet to be saddled. Xiao Chiye flipped atop it, patted it on the neck, and leaned over to whisper a few words to it. Lang Tao Xue Jin then turned on its hooves and obediently galloped away into the night.

“He’s still the same.” Zuo Qianqiu stood by the entrance of the tent and lamented, “Every time he’s feeling down, he likes to go riding.”

“He’s holding in his anger.” Xiao Fangxu lifted up the boiling tea. “It can be seen that his six years in Qudu weren’t for naught; if tonight’s events had happened in the past, he would’ve even dared to fling aside the tent flap and run off when I scolded him for the second time. No one can beat those old foxes of Qudu when it comes to tempering a person.”

“The blame for this battle really can’t be entirely pinned on him.” Zuo Qianqiu looked back. “Hasen set up such a trap in the Tudalong Banner; even if it had been either of us, we might not necessarily be able to escape unscathed either.”

“The possibility of ‘if’ is nil in war. It’s his battle, and the outcome, win or loss, ought to be his to bear.” Xiao Fangxu paused for a moment.

“There’s no doubt this battle is lost. That he dared to turn back to the marshlands of the Tudalong Banner to outflank and fight makes me really happy deep down.”

“Right?” Zuo Qianqiu laughed as he pointed at Xiao Fangxu. “It’s just like you to say one thing but mean another.”

Xiao Fangxu held the teacup. “But I can’t praise him.”

Zuo Qianqiu replied, “You never held back your praise for Jiming.”

“Those brothers are different.” Xiao Fangxu turned his face sideways to face him. “Jiming takes after his mother. After having a little brother, he often hears others speak of how A-Ye resembles his father, as if he’s snatching A-Ye’s place by being born a couple of years earlier. As such, I must praise Jiming often. A-Ye takes after me. What’s more, he’s the baby of the family. He has Jiming as an older brother shielding him, and that makes him a wild one who dares to play with whatever his heart desires. He almost broke his neck when he fell while taming his horse when he wasn’t even fourteen, and the moment the injury healed, he insisted on carrying on with taming the horse even if he had to sneak out to do it. That battle he

fought when he was fourteen was so beautifully executed that there wasn't a person who didn't praise him when he returned to Dajing. At that time, he didn't allow anyone to give him what he wanted; he had to obtain it on his own, even if he had to go without food and drink. A personality like his doesn't lack praises, but scoldings."

"Being a father is a skill; I can't be compared to you." Zuo Qianqiu's wife had died prematurely. After the battle of Tianfei Watchtower, he had wandered all over Dazhou and did not remarry, so he naturally had no children. He sat down and said, "But there has been no lack of talents from Biansha in recent years. Amu'er has a great son too. Hasen is neither arrogant nor rash, and he is decisive and straightforward in all the moves he makes."

"Amu'er has a good eye." Xiao Fangxu took a sip of the hot tea. "The rarest thing about Hasen is that he doesn't stick to one combat style, yet his character is rather steady."

"If Jiming were to be deployed back here," Zuo Qianqiu said, "he could more or less restrain him."

"That's right." Xiao Fangxu shifted his feet slightly. "Zhao Hui's combat style bears the closest resemblance to Jiming's after having learned from the latter while serving under him. But when Hasen previously fought against Qidong, the one he faced up against was Qi Zhuyin, who is of the same kind as Jiming—he's already accustomed to that kind of rhythm. Look at Zhao Hui. Although he was able to contain Hasen's onslaughts of attacks, he was also, at the same time, firmly nailed down in place by Hasen in the northern route."

Zuo Qianqiu started to laugh. "But when Hasen faced A-Ye, it was one formidable adversary against another. Even if their military strength were equally matched, I still think that the probability of both sides suffering losses is much higher."

"You're thinking too highly of him by saying both sides will suffer losses. He is currently no match for Hasen at all. Hasen has been on the battleground for even longer than Jiming, and experience is something that's far more fearsome than talent. The discrepancy between him and A-Ye is not insignificant." Xiao Fangxu stood up, flipping and turning a dagger between his fingers as he stared at the straw target across him. "The wolf pup can't win."

Zuo Qianqiu clasped his hands behind his back and said leisurely, "The general in charge of military supplies is a good post. Once he has a thorough grasp of its workings, he will know all of Libei's major and minor military routes, the strengths and weaknesses of the various camps, and even the personalities of the commanding generals like the back of his hand."

Xiao Fangxu threw the dagger hard and hit the bullseye. He turned his head and smiled smugly at Zuo Qianqiu. "I'm going to give Amu'er a gift and let him witness my prowess."



It was almost dawn when Xiao Chiye returned. He dismounted, and Chen Yang came forward to hand him a handkerchief. He wiped the sweat on his neck and saw Xiao Fangxu standing a short distance away, motioning for him to go over. He was not at all willing and thought of pretending not to have seen him.

So Xiao Fangxu hung one arm over the back of Xiao Chiye's neck, forcing Xiao Chiye to bend down, then used his other hand to vigorously tousle the top of Xiao Chiye's hair until it was all a mess.

"Where's my falcon?" With some difficulty, Xiao Chiye finally broke away and rubbed his neck. "Don't feed it raw meat."

"It's your falcon, so why are you asking me?" Xiao Fangxu took a few steps forward. Seeing him still unhappy, he turned around and made to kick him.

Xiao Chiye hurriedly leaped away and said, "I'm just asking!"

Xiao Fangxu ignored him and petted Lang Tao Xue Jin. "We had a new batch of horses from last year back at home. There's one that has just the opposite color as this one. White tinted with black. A real beauty."

"Oh." Xiao Chiye could tell his intent. "You want to give it to me?"

Xiao Fangxu looked askance at him. "You? Your elder sister-in-law is keeping it for your wife."

Xiao Chiye cast a glance at Hongyan Mountains behind him and said nothing.

"That arm guard is pretty good." Xiao Fangxu stepped on the wooden railing and hoisted himself up to sit on it. Seeing Xiao Chiye looking back, he followed suit and turned sideways to shoot a glance at Xiao Chiye's expression. "Where did you craft it? It's not Qidong's style."

“Of course it’s good.” Xiao Chiye turned his head back and said secretively, as if he had something to hide, “That’s my protective amulet.”

Xiao Fangxu uttered a perfunctory acknowledgment, then followed up right after with a question, “Where is she from? You couldn’t have taken her to Bianbo Camp, could you? It’s all stinky men there. How old is she?”

Xiao Chiye said, “Stinky man?”

Xiao Fangxu did not get it.

Xiao Chiye took several steps back.

Xiao Fangxu narrowed his eyes. “Don’t tell me you brought back a girl from the Hua clan?”

Xiao Chiye continued to retreat. On seeing his father’s lost and puzzled expression, he inexplicably laughed out loud, and while he was at it, he removed Langli Blade and tossed it to the side.

“Xiao Chiye.” Xiao Fangxu sensed something amiss. “You’d better tell me honestly.”

Xiao Chiye suddenly said in a loud voice, “Stinky man!”

“Huh?” Xiao Fangxu suspected he had misheard it and even cocked his ear to one side.

“I found myself a man!” Sunlight shone on Xiao Chiye’s face, dispelling the dark clouds of yesterday. This brat was truly a little rascal as he shouted provocatively, “The best-looking man in the whole of Dazhou is my wife!”

Having said that, he did not even wait for Xiao Fangxu’s reaction before he turned around and took to his heels.

Xiao Fangxu fell silent for a very long time. Chen Yang softly swallowed his saliva and saw Xiao Fangxu jump up abruptly. As Xiao Fangxu landed on the ground, he almost tripped over himself.

Chen Yang hurriedly called out, “Your Lord—”

“Xiao Chiye!” Xiao Fangxu let out an earth-shaking roar. He pushed himself off the ground with his hands to chase after him, but he could not catch up. In a fit of anger, he picked up a piece of horse dung and flung it at Xiao Chiye, cussing, “Get your ass back here and make yourself clear!”



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## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 155 : NEGOTIATIONS

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



Xiao Chiye received not only a scolding, but also a beating. But he had been thinking about this matter for a long time, and did not want to hide it from his family. He stood inside the military tent to accept his punishment of demotion. Before the commanding generals withdrew from the tent, they sneaked a glance at Xiao Fangxu, only to find His Lordship even angrier.

Zuo Qianqiu looked at the arm guard over and over again, then gave Xiao Fangxu a slight thumbs-up. “I really can’t tell from this.”

Xiao Fangxu stood at the other end with his back to them and said, “Would I not know what arm guard he uses? At most, it’s processed dogskin. He would simply presume on his thick skin and not put in any effort into this at all.”

Zuo Qianqiu was put in a spot too as he looked at Xiao Chiye and said hesitantly, “... Why didn’t you mention it to us when you were in Qudu? Tell *shifu* about him now, so that we can... mentally prepare ourselves a little.”

“Prepare, my ass.” Xiao Fangxu looked back. “He already had it all figured out and was just waiting for me to take the bait!”

“You’ll have to meet him sooner or later.” Xiao Chiye took the scolding with his hands behind his back. “What ought to be done has to be done. I still want to take him home this year to see Mother.”

“You sure have it all arranged, huh.” Xiao Fangxu’s words were loaded with sarcasm. “I might as well call you Father.”<sup>1</sup>

Xiao Chiye did not dare to continue this thread of conversation.

“Where’s he from?” Zuo Qianqiu set down the arm guard. “Qudu?”

Xiao Chiye answered honestly, “Zhongbo.”

So Zuo Qianqiu said to Xiao Fangxu. “That’s still not too bad; it’s close by.” He followed up with a question, “How old?”

Xiao Chiye answered, “Twenty-one. Pretty young.”

Zuo Qianqiu inexplicably found this prerequisite to be familiar, but he could not quite put his finger on it for the moment and merely continued, “The arm guard is quite well-done. Is he in this trade?”

Xiao Chiye replied, "... No."

Xiao Fangxu sneered, "Do you dare to repeat what you said outside earlier to your *shifu*?"

Xiao Chiye gave a slight cough.

Xiao Fangxu said, "I demoted you, and you stabbed me in the heart!"

Xiao Chiye found these words of his familiar. Not falling for it, he said, "I didn't. I wouldn't dare to."

Zuo Qianqiu was still wondering about what kind of person this man was, so he asked, "Then, what's his name? Is he from a clan we are familiar with?"

"Yes." Xiao Chiye paused for a moment, then answered, "Shen Zechuan."



Several days later, Kong Ling and Yu Xiaozai arrived at Luoxia Pass. Cizhou wanted to discuss long-term cooperation with Luoxia Pass, and both parties had more or less reached an agreement through their written correspondences. This time, they wanted direct passage through it so that they could arrive at Huaizhou before the end of the eighth month.

The eighth month had only just started when the original commander of Fanzhou's garrison troops revolted with the intent to proclaim himself king. He even deployed troops to seize Dengzhou first, wanting to use this opportunity to threaten Cizhou. In addition, he also sent a document to demand Cizhou transfer the grains they sold to Chazhou to them, calling it a "loan of grain".

Shen Zechuan, of course, ignored him and got Zhou Gui to draft up an official denunciation-cum-declaration of war and dispatched it to Chazhou with the intent to join forces and eradicate the bandits. With the exception of his own self, he slapped the label of "bandits" on all the armed groups in Zhongbo. This "King Yi" of Fanzhou naturally did not accept this, and both parties hurled verbal abuse at each other from afar. The advisors under their command traded letters to "send greetings to the other party's ancestors". At the same time, they also spared no effort to make the other party out as rebels, while describing themselves as being compelled to revolt for the sake of the people.

Shen Zechuan did not remain idle either. Time was precious at present. In between the exchange of abuses on both sides, he had the Cizhou's prefectural *yamen* start repairing the bridle paths and relay stations leading



to the various prefectures. This was no small project and could only be completed at the end of the year. Meanwhile, Cizhou's garrison troops continued to push ahead with their training; Cizhou was now expanding at full steam.

"Apart from what is needed for Huaizhou, the profits from the sales of grain this time are enough for the repairs of the bridle paths. But the grains distributed by the *yamen* will no doubt be reduced as well. I don't have the heart to turn away the increasing number of refugees as winter comes around." Zhou Gui presented a book to Shen Zechuan. "And with the weather getting colder, we are seeing a gradual uptick in refugees from Dancheng."

"Speaking of the refugees from Dancheng." Holding the book in hand, Shen Zechuan turned to look at Yao Wenyu, "Yuanzhuo comes from Dancheng and knows more about the current situation there better than we do. Why is the number of refugees increasing so much all of a sudden?"

On hearing him, Yao Wenyu, who had a coat draped over him, answered with a serious countenance, "After the previous emperor's death, Han Cheng wanted to convince the Empress Dowager to create more official positions for the descendants of the noble clans and use the state treasury to support these descendants on behalf of the noble clans. The list comprised over ten thousand people, but the Empress Dowager didn't consent. To preserve their strength, the noble clans with Han Cheng at the head became even more aggressive in seizing the commoners' crop fields. They fraudulently under-reported the acreage<sup>2</sup> of fields to the higher-ups, thereby hiding away vast expanses of fertile farmland and leaving the common people without land to grow crops; these commoners even had to pay poll tax per head in their families. As a result, the number of people who fled increased."

"According to the law, once their household registration is confirmed, those who leave illegally without relevant documentation from the local authorities will be drafted into the army, or worse, immediately executed." Shen Zechuan thought through it for a moment. "The most suitable way to escape arrest from the local authorities is to come to Zhongbo. But Cizhou's capacity is limited after all, and relying solely on the *yamen* to distribute grain is not a viable solution in the long run. We cannot afford to feed this many people."

And it wasn't just that. A portion of the refugees who had come to Cizhou had gotten hooked on getting free meals. They made excuses to decline registering themselves in the census registry, instead assuming the status of 'refugee' so that they could freeload and idle their lives away at the entrance of the *yamen*.

"I made a special point of asking the census officials; many of the people in this group are the young and strong who loiter around the streets and stir up trouble. Public order was good before the seventh month, but after the eighth month, theft became a common occurrence. When the *yamen* constables arrest and send them to prison, they become unreasonable and make a scene." Speaking to this point, Zhou Gui fretted with worries. "After they found out that they could still fill their tummies in jail, they became even more brazen. Alas!"

Shen Zechuan had already come to a decision on this matter. He said, "They dared to be this dauntless only because Cizhou is accommodating and magnanimous towards the refugees and has not set the relevant penalties in place; it is still treating them as local citizens of decent origins to deal with. But the times are different now. Today, I'd like to ask you gentlemen to draft a document to strictly forbid refugees from putting off registering themselves in the census registry. By the middle of the eighth month at the very latest, anyone who has not registered themselves at the *yamen* will be all driven out without exception. Not only that, Cizhou shall put up notices everywhere the day after and assign the relevant clerks down to explain. Make sure to clarify what is at stake if they break the law clearly to the illiterate commoners in the city. Starting from the day after tomorrow, any violators and offenders shall be dealt with severely. No mercy will be shown."

Shen Zechuan's methods had always been pretty mild ever since he had arrived in Cizhou, and he always looked to be an amicable and easygoing person to outsiders. He never flaunted his talents openly, even when it came to Chazhou's matters, but this time, with a change from his former style, he could be said to be swift and decisive.

Zhou Gui said hesitantly, "But will we lose the hearts and support of the people if we put up severe punishments in place? After all, it was only a few months ago that Cizhou started taking in the refugees with open arms."

"These are two separate matters." Yao Wenyu timed his words perfectly. "Cizhou accommodates the refugees out of compassion, but if it

were to lose its trust with the people because of this, then it'd be putting the cart before the horse. As the saying goes, to deal with external foes, we have to first resolve internal conflicts. Cizhou must first eradicate its internal threats as soon as possible; otherwise, it will prove to be a burden in the future."

"Fanzhou already has a 'King Yi' now." Shen Zechuan set down the book. "This King Yi wants to establish a small Zhongbo imperial court at the southeastern side of Cizhou, and he has assembled the military forces from the two prefectures of Fanzhou and Dengzhou and poised them for combat against Cizhou in an attempt to get us to be his granary. The situation will be even more chaotic after spring next year. We cannot yield and make any more concessions because of the words 'benevolence and righteousness'."

"Besides, this is also a good thing." Yao Wenyu said to Zhou Gui. "Repairing the bridle paths and relay stations need manpower, and the refugees just so happen to fill in the vacancies in Cizhou. With the *yamen* distributing grains to them based on the quantity of work, they have somewhere to use their strengths, and they also get to fill their tummies, so naturally, they won't go around stirring up trouble."

Zhou Gui nodded as well on hearing this. "Once the household registration is settled, the *yamen* will have an exact number of people in Cizhou. If we start with the surveyance of fields at the end of the eighth month, we will be able to finish the divisions of fields before the start of spring next year. As long as we don't encounter a natural disaster next year, Cizhou's granary will be able to maintain its abundance."

"This is the first year." Shen Zechuan was in a pretty good mood. "Chazhou will also be put on the agenda next year. Other than that, we should also prepare to open up a new bridle path on the Luoxia Pass and Huaizhou's route to the northwest."

Taken aback, Zhou Gui asked, "Are we not borrowing the bridle path from Libei?"

"That's right, but in the long run, we still have to remunerate Luoxia Pass accordingly." Shen Zechuan said, "Luoxia Pass is right above Quancheng; they are allies we need to befriend. Once it begins thriving along the trade route, the present routes will be insufficient for us. Not to mention that Beiyuan Hunting Grounds is going to become the Imperial Army's camp; it's essential to open up new bridle paths."

“Then there’s also the issue of army provisions for the various areas in early spring next year.” The weather was bad, and Yao Wenyu’s legs were hurting, but he looked no different from how he usually was. “Firstly, Qidong is the biggest threat to the south of Zhongbo. They had not managed to deploy troops to Zhongbo in time as they were affected by the late emperor’s assassination and Lu Guangbai’s desertion. But now that the marriage alliance between the Hua and Qi is already a done deal, chances are high that they might send troops up north to crush us if army provisions in early spring next year are sufficient. Secondly, now that Libei has broken free of Qudu’s control, the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path has been stripped of the rights to directly access the Juexi’s granaries. Libei shares a common lot with us, and Libei is the one to shoulder the responsibility of fighting back the Biansha Cavalry in the north, so the issue of army provisions has to be resolved before spring falls.”

The advisors were all discussing affairs in a partitioned-off area in the study, separated by a screen in the middle. As they were indoors all year round, many of them smoked pipes, and as time passed, smoke began to permeate the study, making it stuffy.

Shen Zechuan called out to Qiao Tianya, “Help Yuanzhuo out to take a breath of fresh air.”

Yao Wenyu bent over slightly in a bow to Shen Zechuan from the wheelchair he was seated in and let Qiao Tianya push him out. Shen Zechuan instructed Zhou Gui to open the windows and have the advisors in the partitioned area take a break too. The air in the room was too heavy and smoky, so Shen Zechuan headed out as well to take a breather in the chilly wind.

It was the rainy season in Cizhou of late. Sunny days were few and far between, and the weather was extremely cold. Worried that Shen Zechuan would fall ill again, Ji Gang was particularly cautious and watched him every day as he put on extra clothes and had Fei Sheng follow him around whenever he headed out.

The moment Fei Sheng saw Shen Zechuan step out, he walked over to hand him the cloak. Shen Zechuan draped it over himself and walked along the covered walkway for a moment. The flowers of the Chinese scholar trees in this courtyard had long withered, and the leaves on the branches had all fallen off, leaving bare trees set against the backdrop of gloomy skies. It was quite the picture of bleakness and desolation.

Thinking of a way to amuse him, Fei Sheng said, “Master, there’s also a copper crock in this Zhou’s residence that’s exactly a carbon copy of the one in our residence. There are a few brocade carps in it that got swatted around by that gluttonous cat of Mister.”

Shen Zechuan looked over and said, “The one in our residence is a housewarming gift from Madam Zhou.”

Shen Zechuan was a little chilly standing there, but he felt a lot more clear-headed. Noting that it was about time, he headed back under the eaves of the study. Qiao Tianya and Yao Wenyu had not yet returned, so he waited for a while longer. At that moment, Zhou Gui came over in a rush, gesturing for Shen Zechuan to head in.

By then, it was almost the hour of you, and after three more quarters<sup>3</sup> of discussion, it was time for dismissal. The advisors still had to work through the night to draft the new documents, and Shen Zechuan had to head to the study to review the details and discuss the finer aspects with everyone when he woke up the next morning at the hour of mao. It was a race against time to get the notice up before midday the day after tomorrow.

“Once winter comes around, the mutual market of Libei will also start bustling with activities.” Shen Zechuan stood by the door as he conversed with Zhou Gui. “Negotiate with the Yan clan if you can; if not, forget it. When the time comes, we can take a detour to Juexi from Huaizhou. Although it’s a long distance, we can think of a way to traverse the waterways owned by the Hua family of Dicheng. The army provisions also —”

Ding Tao entered from the courtyard entrance and leaped over the railings in a couple of steps. Shen Zechuan broke off their conversation and signaled for Ding Tao to speak first.

Ding Tao’s cheeks were slightly flushed as he excitedly exclaimed, “Young Master, the Hereditary Prince’s Consort is here!”



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#### **Footnotes**

1. Marriage arrangements in the past were typically arranged by the parents. Children typically don’t have a say.

2. 亩, *mu*, or Chinese acre, measure of land equal to 0.0667 hectares
3. 三刻 One quarter is about 15 minutes, so approximately 45 minutes.

# QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 156 : ELDEST SISTER-IN-LAW

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



The Hereditary Prince's Consort, Lu Yizhi, and Xiao Jiming were childhood sweethearts who went on to live in conjugal harmony after their marriage. She was a renowned figure in Libei for her virtues. When the Prince's Consort of Libei passed away from illness, Xiao Chiye was still an ignorant brat. As the saying goes, a virtuous elder sister-in-law is comparable to a mother, and that was precisely what Lu Yizhi was in Xiao Chiye's eyes. She was not only Lu Guangbai's younger sister, but also Qi Zhuyin's bosom friend.

The horse carriage stopped outside the city of Cizhou, accompanied by the Libei Armored Cavalry on both sides of the public road. Lu Yizhi sat within and listened to the incoming sound of footsteps beyond the curtain. Someone called out "Vice Commander".

Vice Commander.

Lu Yizhi gently clasped her hands and thought in delight.

That's him!

Zhou Gui stood outside the horse carriage and paid his obeisances from afar. "Greetings to Your Ladyship. It has been a long, tiring journey for Your Ladyship, so please head into the city quickly."

Lu Yizhi had never seen Zhou Gui, and naturally, she had never heard Zhou Gui's voice either. Since it was "Vice Commander" she heard earlier, she took Zhou Gui to be Shen Zechuan. The horse carriage drove towards the city gate, and as the wheels rolled over the gravel, she quietly lifted a corner of the window curtain and saw Zhou Gui's back.

Zhou Gui was standing with his back to her, so Lu Yizhi could not see him in the face and thought that this Shen Zechuan was rather different from the way Xiao Chiye described him in the letter. She soundlessly put down the curtain, but lifted it again after a moment for another look.

This time, Zhou Gui's face was revealed. He was much older than Xiao Jiming, of average stature, and had a thin and lean face with a handsome beard to match. Lu Yizhi was so startled that she was struck dumb.

Fortunately, she still had her wits about her and could still remember that Shen Zechuan was a good two years younger than Xiao Chiye.

Right at this time, she saw Zhou Gui bow over slightly to make way for a white figure. This white figure was tall and slender. Although he was standing sideways, she could vaguely catch a glimpse of his appearance. Lu Yizhi sized him up carefully, thinking that A-Ye truly wasn't bragging; he was indeed a looker. Presumably, he took after his mother more.

How would Shen Zechuan know that Lu Yizhi was sizing him up? He spoke to Zhou Gui in a hushed tone. "I'd like to ask the various advisors to draft up the new document today. Other matters can be temporarily postponed for discussion another day."

Even if Zhou Gui was an obtuse one, he also knew who Lu Yizhi was here to see. He followed Shen Zechuan closely and said, "I'll immediately assign some men from the *yamen* over."

Shen Zechuan was momentarily taken aback. "Whatever for?"

Zhou Gui's palms were sweating as he answered, "To protect you!"

Shen Zechuan was speechless. He looked at the accompanying retinue of about five hundred men from the Libei Armored Cavalry. If they were really here to capture him, Zhou Gui would not have been able to stop them, even if he wanted to. Xiao Chiye had not sent any letters after the eighth month, so he could only act based on his conjectures. He promptly reassured Zhou Gui in a casual tone, "Perhaps the Hereditary Prince's Consort is merely passing through. Cizhou leads directly to Chazhou, and it's a lot more convenient to head into Qidong from there. There is no need for Your Excellency to be overly worried. We are not enemies with Libei."

Who would have guessed that such a spontaneous remark from Shen Zechuan would really hit the nail on the head?

It was precisely to go to Qidong that Lu Yizhi headed south this time.

Due to Lu Guangbai's desertion, Lu Pingyan had been implicated, and the imperial court had ordered him to be taken into custody for a trial. However, Qi Zhuyin simply outright detained Yingxi, the Army-inspecting eunuch of the Bianjun Commandery, and demanded an explanation from the Ministry of War on the grounds of Yingxi's repeated interference in military affairs of Bianjun and involvement in the issue of Bianjun's army provisions. At the same time, she took Lu Pingyan into her own camp to look after him. Qi Zhuyin had sent a letter to Libei back in the sixth month, asking Xiao Jiming to fetch Lu Pingyan away as soon as possible.



This was a major case, and the crux lay in whether or not Lu Guangbai would throw in his lot with the Twelve Tribes of Biansha. Dazhou currently could not receive any news regarding the Bianjun Commandery Garrison Troops, and by just looking at Lu Guangbai's act of penetrating deep into the desert, there was a high possibility of him defecting to the Twelve Tribes of Biansha. The court ministers' request to put Lu Pingyan on trial was meant to hold him hostage in Qudu, so that they would have the leverage to negotiate with Lu Guangbai in the future. The document relayed by the Ministry of War met with obstruction in Qidong, with Qi Zhuyin turning a blind eye to it. At this juncture, the Imperial Bodyguards ought to have been the ones with the responsibility of carrying out the arrest on orders of the imperial edict.

But the capture did not happen.

When the Zhongbo troops were defeated six years ago, it was on imperial edict orders that the Imperial Bodyguards led by Ji Lei detained Shen Zechuan for questioning. It required not only an arrest warrant, but also the official writ of arrest decreed by the Ministry of Justice at the behest of the emperor, as well as the emperor's orders in ink. After Li Jianheng's death, the Empress Dowager took over the mandate of heaven in his place. There was originally a plan for the Empress Dowager and Grand Secretariat to jointly issue the paperwork in place of approval personally penned by the emperor himself. However, Qi Zhuyin did not accept this; she only acknowledged imperial orders personally issued by the emperor himself, and as long as the Imperial Bodyguards who went down to Qidong did not come bearing the imperial edict drafted from the hand of the emperor, she would not release Lu Pingyan.

Han Cheng, in personally leading the ceremonial guards of honor for the marriage between the Hua and Qi clans, was also meant to negotiate with Qi Zhuyin. The remuneration offered by the Empress Dowager was rather generous, but no agreement was reached. As Qudu was now reliant on Qi Zhuyin's military forces, they did not dare force Qi Zhuyin to hand the man over. Xiao Jiming had previously sent people over to inquire about the situation on the pretext of sending congratulatory gifts, to which Qi Zhuyin had verbally given him an unequivocal answer. Lu Yizhi's current trip was thus for the precise purpose of fetching Lu Pingyan to Libei.

And to help her father-in-law back at home find out the kind of person Shen Zechuan was while she was passing through.

Shen Zechuan naturally could not allow Lu Yizhi to stay over at a relay station, which was rather unfitting of her status, so he made a special point of deploying people to tidy up the courtyard and invite Lu Yizhi to stay for the night in Xiao Chiye's name. Lu Yizhi noted that the upturned eaves of the residence were all in a style that Xiao Chiye was partial to, and the insides and outsides were both organized and well taken care of. She could not help recalling the letter Xiao Chiye wrote to her before her departure, of which three pages were devoted to showering Shen Zechuan with praise.

Lu Yizhi got off the horse carriage, and Ding Tao joyfully came over to greet her. Lu Yizhi was happy to see him and pulled him along as she gave him a once-over. "Tao-zi has also grown a head taller now. Why didn't you return home with the Second Young Master?"

Ding Tao replied, "Master commanded me to stay put and stay by Young Master's side."

Lu Yizhi called for the maidservant to bring candies for Ding Tao. She sat on the chair, put her hands together under her sleeves, and asked gently, "Does the Second Young Master often stay here?"

Ding Tao hemmed and hawed, having been cautioned by Qiao Tianya before, yet he also did not dare lie to the Hereditary Prince's Consort.

And so Lu Yizhi spoke in an even softer voice, "When you were home last time, you'd often come over to ease my boredom. The grandson-heir has always known of his Tao-zi gege; he's constantly longing for you to come home and play with him." As she spoke, she turned slightly to the side, looking a little sad. "It has been six years since we last saw our little Tao-zi, and he has grown so distant from me."

Ding Tao hurriedly replied, "No, not at all! Your Ladyship treats me well. Even before I left for Qudu, you instructed Jin-ge to look after me. I remember it all."

Lu Yizhi then turned back around and said, "You're young. As the older brothers, it's their responsibility to take good care of you. When I heard about how A-Ye was constantly bullied in Qudu, I couldn't eat and kept tossing and turning all night long. I worried for a long time..."

On hearing this, Ding Tao immediately responded, "Master wasn't injured when he left Qudu. The Eight Great Training Divisions couldn't catch up to us, and that Han Jin who came after us is still locked up in jail. Your Ladyship need not worry, Master is a very formidable man now."

“Since A-Ye is this impressive,” Lu Yizhi worriedly spoke, “Why did your journey take so long?”

“The Young Master was injured,” Ding Tao recounted. “Master was trapped in the capital by Han Cheng, and Young Master helped a great deal. But that Han Cheng was truly an abominable one—he even used Young Master’s teacher to threaten him. Young Master didn’t manage to save his teacher, and after leaving Qudu, he fell heavily ill. All the physicians along the way weren’t any help, so we didn’t dare to hurry.”

Lu Yizhi did not know who Shen Zechuan’s teacher was, but she was alarmed to hear this, and her expressions betrayed some of her genuine concern as she asked, “What happened after? Has he recovered?”

Ding Tao was unsure of how to explain this. “He looks to have recovered, but Master and Grandpa both say he hasn’t. The last time Young Master was in Chazhou for business, he fell sick en route, and Master flew into a terrible rage when he came back.”

Lu Yizhi knew it. As expected, Xiao Chiye did indeed come by often. “I’ve never seen A-Ye angry.”

“But Master was in a rush and only stayed a night before he had to leave.” Ding Tao thought about it for a moment before adding on in a small voice, “He got in by somersaulting over the walls.”

Understanding dawned on Lu Yizhi, and she said, “Then, are you happy staying here? If you want to go back with me, I’ll bring you along.”

Ding Tao hesitated; he wanted to return to Libei, but he could not simply just let go of Cizhou either. He had made plans with Li Xiong to go fishing at the outskirts of the city in winter, and had also promised Ji Gang that he would learn a set of moves before the new year. Most importantly, Shen Zechuan never deducted his allowance, and he had never scolded him even when he kept the frogs in Shen Zechuan’s courtyard.

Lu Yizhi looked pensive on observing this. She patted Ding Tao on the head and did not put him further in a spot. If Ding Tao was this hesitant, it meant that Shen Zechuan treated him very well, and this was proof that Shen Zechuan was not a difficult person to get along with; at the very least, he had exceptional patience with this half-grown youth.

Lu Yizhi mused to herself.

Here was a good-looking, domestic, patient, and loyal man who valued ties. Not only could he take care of domestic affairs, but he could also

attend to official duties. He could keep A-Ye in check, and yet he was not overly domineering. His health wasn't the best, likely an old ailment from his earlier years in Qudu. And despite the many setbacks he had suffered in his life, he remained amiable and easygoing.

Such a wonderful child!

Lu Yizhi clapped her hands together and said in excitement, "Quick, prepare the brush and ink. I'll write a letter. Send it back to Dajing overnight, and have the Hereditary Prince deliver it to His Lordship on the battleground once he's done reading it."



As a man who was not in Lu Yizhi's immediate family given her status, Shen Zechuan could not pay his respects to her face-to-face, so he erected a screen in the courtyard to separate them. They had already learned that Lu Yizhi was transiting through and thus prepared a small feast to welcome this guest from afar, with Zhou Gui's wife as company during the meal.

Madam Zhou was an astute one. She repeatedly praised Shen Zechuan to the skies during her private conversations with Lu Yizhi and picked a few incidents to recount to Lu Yizhi. Lu Yizhi's initial impression of the Shen clan had all been based on Shen Wei. It was Xiao Chiye who sent her a letter overnight to gush on and on about Shen Zechuan's good points for a whole three pages. Eventually, he implicitly said that he had been beaten up by his old man at the battleground and even demoted. He also concealed the incident where he had been in danger at the Tudalong Banner and merely said that he was injured, which made Lu Yizhi's heart ache so much that she did not want to reproach him further regarding this matter.

Lu Yizhi was only staying over for one night. She still had to head south to Chazhou tomorrow. When the feast ended, she specifically summoned Shen Zechuan into the hall. The more she looked, the more good-looking she found him to be, and the more satisfied she was. Remembering Xiao Chiye's mention of Shen Zechuan's past, as well as what she'd heard from Ding Tao, she could not help but feel tender affection for Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan thought the way the Hereditary Prince's Consort looked at him was just like how one would look at a rabbit; she was as gentle as she could possibly be, as though being just a tad fiercer would send him into shock.

“Vice Commander Shen,” Lu Yizhi said in a soft, gentle voice. “I’ve imposed on you and caused you trouble, so I hope you can accept this gift as a gesture of my thanks and appreciation.”

Without even waiting for Shen Zechuan to answer, she gestured for the maidservant to present it to him. Contrary to his expectation, it was nothing rare, just satin in a box. As it was nothing valuable, Shen Zechuan did not turn it down after some polite civilities. But as he accepted it, he found the box heavy.

When Shen Zechuan returned to the courtyard, he opened it to take a look. There were gold and jade bracelets cushioned at the bottom, all intricately inlaid and exquisitely crafted family heirlooms of quality workmanship.

Fei Sheng sneaked a peek from behind him and marveled if this weren’t a set of family heirlooms meant to be passed down to a daughter-in-law! But he dared not vocalize his thoughts and silently shifted his gaze away, leaving Shen Zechuan to stand alone in place all puzzled.



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## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 157 : ZHONGXIONG

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



When Lu Yizhi left Cizhou the following day, Shen Zechuan had Fei Sheng join her entourage with the Imperial Bodyguards and instructed him to escort her into the territory of Qidong. Official business that had yet to be finalized yesterday still had to be discussed further, and so everyone settled back into their respective seats in the study with the windows open.

“This is the new document from last night for the Vice Commander’s perusal, if you may.” Zhou Gui presented the papers on the table, “We initially separated the registered citizens from the undocumented refugees and increased the severity of punishments, but during the discussion with Yuanzhuo this morning, he proposed we continue keeping both groups together and not govern them separately.”

“Post the notice up, and the issue of household registrations will be easily resolved.” Yao Wenyu let out a couple of coughs. “It’ll be unsuitable if we take the extra move of segregating them; it’ll create unhappiness among the commoners who are newly registered, as well as make it difficult for the yamen to differentiate between the old and new when they carry out their duties.”

After reading through it, Shen Zechuan nodded. “It’ll be a disaster waiting to happen too if anyone tries to fish in troubled waters when the time comes. Since this matter is settled, the only issue left for us to handle before the end of the year is that of the surveyance of fields. The current land records of the fields in Cizhou were all measured during the reign of Yongyi; they’re too outdated.”

“Cizhou has been reclaiming wastelands for three years in a row, and in truth, the acreage of land has seen a significant increase. We ought to have re-surveyed the land last year, but manpower was lacking then, and Lei Changming was driving us into such a corner; that’s why it has been delayed until now.” Zhou Gui calculated the time. “This task has to be completed before the end of the year, or errors will inevitably arise once the snow thickens.”

Cizhou now had plenty of yamen runners and constables, but capable government clerks and other lesser functionaries<sup>1</sup> were few and far between. The advisors were mostly in charge of deliberating over official matters and were not responsible for the transcription of official documents, let alone sending them down to survey the lands. The yamen had a manpower shortage, and so did Shen Zechuan.

“After the registration and classification of households, screen them on the spot. As long as they are literate, record them down on file first for future use, regardless of whether they are locals from Cizhou or non-natives from Dancheng.” When Shen Zechuan spoke to this point, he looked around the advisors. “If someone has committed a crime in the past, we won’t be able to find out if he doesn’t declare it to us, so we have to be prudent during the screening and vetting process. Some may well see it as a business too, and it’s inevitable that there will be people who attempt to curry favor with those in authority for personal gain. However, I trust that the various gentlemen here are all men of integrity who can distinguish between the crafty and the virtuous and do the right thing when it comes down to it.”

Given how frankly he had said it, who would still not understand? The seated advisors who were initially smoking their pipes all rose to their feet noisily. A few of them looked embarrassed, no longer daring to jest around again.



The advisors were all Zhou Gui’s honored guests with free access to the governmental office. Most of them were addressed as “mister”, with their daily needs provided by Zhou Gui. There were only two ways that they could earn some spare cash. The first was to provide literary services, and the second was to attend the banquets of the local squires and elders, where they would be able to obtain monetary rewards from the household’s masters. But now that they were in charge of recording the registrations and screening the lesser functionaries, there was no doubt some among the current flood of refugees into Cizhou would be thinking of pulling strings and sneaking them bribes on the sly.

Gao Zhongxiong was one of the unlucky ones.

After Han Jin was taken as prisoner, Gao Zhongxiong did not dare to return to Qudu for fear that Han Cheng would pursue the matter, so he relied on his connection to his maternal uncle in Dancheng and remained in

Dancheng as Pan Yi's advisor. At first, Pan Yi had the intent to entrust him with heavy responsibility, but many of the plans and strategies he put forth were impractical theories that only looked good on paper, and so Pan Yi gradually gave him the cold shoulder. Bullied and humiliated by the servants in the Pan's residence, he had no choice but to return to his uncle's house. But when it rains, it pours, and his uncle fell to his death one night while in a drunken stupor. Gao Zhongxiong was a scholar who was too physically weak to carry out practical work, and his auntie, disdaining him for being useless, found an excuse to send him back to Yuzhou.

Gao Zhongxiong felt ashamed to return home to face his elders and fellow townsfolk, so he thought of selling calligraphy and paintings to rent a few acres of low-yield land and do an imitation of a carefree immortal leading a simple and virtuous life far from the struggle for power and wealth. But who knew? He had not even worked in the field a couple of times after saving enough money to buy it when the field was forcibly seized by the local despot from the Fei clan. Gao Zhongxiong went to the *yamen* to lodge a complaint, and on that very same night, he was stopped by some men in the alley and beaten up. Even his house was robbed. Without a penny to his name, he was driven to the streets and reduced to beggary. He wanted to return to Yuzhou, but he had no traveling expenses. Left without an alternative, he fled Dancheng with the other refugees and came to Cizhou, hoping to try his luck.

"Old Man Xu," Gao Zhongxiong stood reservedly outside the door and hurriedly called out when he saw the man coming out. "Any news about the matter from the *yamen*?"

To think he used to be an outstanding personage back in Qudu, but now, he had to humble himself when speaking to others. He wanted to ingratiate himself with the other man, but he was unwilling to overdo it due to his pride. However, standing fixed in place made him look rather out of place.

The *yamen* runner with the surname Xu brandished his *yamen* paddle<sup>2</sup> and shooed Gao Zhongxiong to a side. It was only when he turned back and could no longer see the interior of the *yamen* that he reproached Gao Zhongxiong in a hushed tone, "What are you doing here?"

Gao Zhongxiong felt so humiliated from the admonishment that he could not lift his head. He clenched his sleeves and forced a smile when he managed to raise his head again. "I passed by the wine store ahead earlier,



and I brought some over for you to quench your thirst. Here, have some.” He presented the wine with both hands, continuing only when he saw the other man’s expression softened some. “I’ve been in Cizhou for a few days. About that matter I spoke to you about the last time—”

“That matter? That matter?” *Yamen* runner Xu drank the wine and denied it after wiping his mouth. “What matter?”

“About getting a job in the *yamen*.” Gao Zhongxiong did not lift his hand to wipe away the spittle on his face. “Please do me a favor and pass a message to the various advisors. Just say that I was formerly a student from Qudu who has received the Chief Surveillance Bureau, Cen...”

“Oh, *that* matter. That can be easily arranged!” *Yamen* runner Xu moved in closer. “Prepare three taels of silvers, and I’ll buy a few packs of tobacco for the various gentlemen. You’ll be able to get past this hurdle then!”

Gao Zhongxiong was stunned for a moment, his expression a mixture of joy and sorrow. “I’ve already given it all to you. I have no more money.”

*Yamen* runner Xu instantly turned hostile. The old man said, “How can you do anything without money? You think the gentlemen live on vegetables? They’ll only acknowledge cold hard cash! If I hadn’t taken pity on you and was willing to help you out, how could these silvers have been enough? No way it would have been enough!”

Gao Zhongxiong hastily tugged on *yamen* runner Xu’s arm. “I’ve already given you a total of seven taels of silver in all. You must have some news...”

“You want to get in through the use of connections, but you can’t bear to part with your money.” *Yamen* runner Xu threw the wine gourd into Gao Zhongxiong’s arms and stretched his neck out to spat at him, his words contemptuous, “You know, even when you pee or shit, you still have to undo your belt!”

All of Gao Zhongxiong’s money had been cheated out of him by *yamen* runner Xu, and since he had been hanging out with the group of refugees all day, he was as filthy as a beggar. As he looked at *yamen* runner Xu’s mug now, he recalled the humiliation he experienced in Dancheng. In a fit of anger, he charged towards *yamen* runner Xu without a care, threw him one tight slap, and yelled, “Since you didn’t do what I asked, give me back my money!”

*Yamen* runner Xu could not have imagined that Gao Zhongxiong would dare to hit him. He pointed at the tip of Gao Zhongxiong's nose. "You, you! A despicable cheapskate like you dares to hit me?!"

As they exchanged blows, *yamen* runner Xu swung his *yamen* paddle at Gao Zhongxiong's waist, kicked him over to the ground, and whacked away at him viciously. Gao Zhongxiong, a mere scholar who had been starving for days, felt a stab of intense pain on his waist as one of the blows landed on an undetermined bone in his body. He rolled on the floor, covering his head as he attempted to dodge the blows, crying so hard he was out of breath. Even so, he still shouted, "Are you human? You cheated me out of my money. Are you still human?!"

With more people crowding over, *yamen* runner Xu did not dare stir up a big commotion, lest the *yamen* came to investigate. He tossed aside his *yamen* paddle and straddled on top of Gao Zhongxiong, then gripped his face by the jaw and shoved a towel used for wiping sweat into his mouth to gag him. Gao Zhongxiong was howling as he struggled, so *yamen* runner Xu slapped him ruthlessly multiple times until Gao Zhongxiong's ears were ringing and his vision blurred; even the corners of his mouth were bleeding.

"I'm on official business here!" *Yamen* runner Xu shouted to the crowd around him, "This son of a bitch is a thief from Dancheng. I caught him the last time. To think he still dares come and seek revenge today!"

A sound escaped from Gao Zhongxiong's throat as *yamen* runner Xu dragged him by the collar towards the *yamen*'s entrance. The side of his cheek scraped against the ground, bloodied by the gravel. He reached his hand out towards those before him in a plea for help.

*Yamen* runner Xu kicked Gao Zhongxiong a few more times on the chest and abdomen. As *yamen* runners, they were the most adept at running around detaining and summoning people for questioning—teaching a frail scholar like Gao Zhongxiong a lesson was simply a piece of cake. As long as he dragged Gao Zhongxiong in today and kept the latter gagged while he processed the latter with a thievery charge, he could throw him in jail. By then, all he had to do was to give the wardens he was on familiar terms with a heads-up, and Gao Zhongxiong would have it coming for him. Whether or not he could survive past the eighth month would all depend on *yamen* runner Xu's mood!

At the same time the commotion was ongoing, Zhou Gui was returning with Shen Zechuan from the fields on the outskirts of the city. The horse

carriage had been obstructed midway along the path, and he thought it was yet another instance of the refugees causing trouble.

Shen Zechuan did not say a word. Zhou Gui hurriedly stepped off his own carriage and hoisted up the hem of his robe as he pushed through the crowd and asked, "What's going on? Who is kicking up a ruckus by the entrance of the *yamen*?!"

*Yamen* runner Xu immediately replied, "To answer Your Excellency, I've caught a thief! He not only refuses to submit, but even hits others!"

For the past few days, Zhou Gui had been perturbed over the lack of public order in the city. He furrowed his brow at hearing this. "Even so, that's no way to handle the situation. What do you mean by beating up others in the streets? That's not right!" He took a glance at Gao Zhongxiong. He initially intended to chastise him and educate him on the proprieties and morals. However, he remembered that Shen Zechuan's horse carriage was still obstructed at the back. They could not afford a delay, so he said, "Hurry and bring him in. Give him a proper trial once he has been cleaned up."

Upon hearing this, Gao Zhongxiong started struggling with all his might and attempted to spit out the towel in his mouth.

Yao Wenyu was currently discussing the reviews of the clerks and other lesser functionaries over these few days with Shen Zechuan. The carriage had remained stuck for a long time with no signs of movement. Qiao Tianya returned and lifted a corner of the curtain to report to Shen Zechuan. "Master, they're still making a ruckus. Let's take a detour."

Shen Zechuan pushed the curtains higher with his folding fan and asked, "What's the matter?"

"They're saying it's a thief; the *yamen* runner arrested him on the streets." Qiao Tianya shifted his body slightly to give way. "I didn't see any calluses on his hands; he seems to be a scholar."

Yao Wenyu, who rarely enjoyed being in noisy places now, looked over together with them. The area ahead was swarming with a crowd of people; he could see nothing at all.

"Let's take a detour." Shen Zechuan released the drapes and let it fall. "Head straight to the Zhou's residence. There are still people waiting in the study. We have to discuss the matter of the mutual market before the hour of you."

Qiao Tianya ordered the carriage driver to turn the horses around. As they were turning, they suddenly heard a heartbreaking wail from ahead. “You people are forcing me to my death! What kind of *yamen* is this?! Oh heavens, do you have to reduce me, Gao Zhongxiong, to such straits?!”

Yao Wenyu abruptly lifted the drapes and said to Qiao Tianya, “Hold on, that person is Gao Zhongxiong, whose essays Cen Yu have given pointers to before.” He then looked towards Shen Zechuan. “He’s the student who led three thousand students from the Imperial College to denounce Pan Rugui that rainy night. Vice Commander, this person is of use to us!”



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#### Footnotes

1. 胥吏 Throughout history, one of the most general generic designations for a class of minor staff who performed the more menial tasks in all governmental units and had no ranked civil service status, though at times they could be promoted into official status for meritorious service.



- 2.
3. 水火棍 a red and black rod or paddle used by *yamen* underlings in the past.

# QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 158 : BROKEN JADE

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



Lesser functionaries like clerks<sup>1</sup> should not be confused with governmental officials. They were at the bottom of the hierarchy with no rank and were technically not considered officials. But they could write and count, and they were far more proficient in local law than the local officials, so they could dispose of all incriminating evidence and leave no traces for anyone to use against them whenever they oppressed, hoodwinked, and even extorted the local commoners. Furthermore, mutual cover-ups were prevalent, given the geographical limitations in place.

When Luo Mu initially arrived at Chazhou, there were plenty of matters he did not manage to work on, and one of the reasons was that he was impeded by the functionaries of Chazhou. The local administration not only affected the official's political track record; sometimes, they could also become obstacles to the implementation of local policies.

The imperial court had assigned a Provincial Surveillance Commissioner to Zhongbo after the defeat of its troops, but Dunzhou had already lost the ability to control and hold the other five prefectures in check. Consequently, the corruption of local administrations in Zhongbo degenerated over the years to the point it was grim.



Gao Zhongxiong had already been taken to a physician, and Zhou Gui was pacing the study. The advisors all sat in the partitioned area and waited silently with rapt attention for Shen Zechuan to speak. This matter concerned the screening of the functionaries, and it was also a question as to whether the *yamen* would be replacing its current *yamen* runners.

Zhou Gui spoke in a grave tone. "We were just discussing this matter yesterday, and things have gone awry today. That Old Man Xu is a *yamen* runner, and he has already obtained bribes over a dozen silver taels just for the screening of the functionaries alone. There are so many staff and subordinates from top to bottom in the *yamen*. If others are also conducting deals on this, then how many of the functionaries we employ as a result of this screening process will be truly of use?"

Yao Wenyu drank the tea and said nothing as he put the lid back on.

Anyone who was discerning could tell at a glance that this affair undoubtedly implicated Zhou Gui's advisors. Old Man Xu was just a *yamen* runner, yet he dared to take advantage of the opportunity presented to make a quick buck. This would not have been doable for him at all, not unless someone was in communication with him from behind the scenes.

Yao Wenyu was Shen Zechuan's advisor. If he were to speak up and ask for them to deal with the matter severely, he would be suspected of trying to supplant Zhou Gui's advisors. In all the recent discussions, he had remained secure in the seat by Shen Zechuan's side as his council, but he was a newcomer, and he could not compare in terms of seniority. The reputation of "Unpolished Jade Yuanzhuo" had reached far and wide. Others treated him as an immortal when he had been beyond their reach, but now that he had fallen, they treated him as a live target. Criticism among peers was a minor affair, but if this led to friction between Shen Zechuan and Zhou Gui, it would be to the detriment of Cizhou.

"As the saying goes, every injustice has its perpetrator, and every debt, its debtor." Shen Zechuan weighed his folding fan in his chair, his expression unreadable as he sat on the chair. "Whoever did it, just deal with said person in accordance with the standard procedure. The screening process is no small matter, and there is plenty at stake. We cannot end up hurting the various diligent and hardworking gentlemen because of paranoia."

The advisors in the partitioned area did not dare make a sound, although a few inwardly let out sighs of relief. Shen Zechuan was in Cizhou; he still had to count on Zhou Gui's power and influence, so it was only to be expected for him to handle the matter with care. It was still salvageable if the administration was corrupt, but it was obviously not a good time now. If they cracked down too hard and ended up implicating over half of Cizhou's *yamen* by following the trail, then how were they going to get any work done when all the functionaries and subordinates' positions have been emptied out?

Conversely, Zhou Gui was reluctant now. "Vice Commander, it is precisely because it's no small matter that it has to be investigated! We cannot let people ruin the ethos of the *yamen*. If others were to imitate this behavior in the future, then it's still the commoners who will suffer."

“Of course, it has to be investigated. What I meant is for us to go by the book.” Shen Zechuan called for someone to steep the tea, then continued, “Old Man Xu has already been taken into custody. If Your Excellency doesn’t feel reassured, then, by all means, send someone you can trust to sit in and transcribe it down. With the Imperial Bodyguards conducting the trial, there will be results by tonight. Baseless accusations cannot be trusted, but conclusive evidence cannot be disregarded either. Whoever wants to violate the regulations of the *yamen* then will have to bear the responsibility for their actions. Wasn’t the newly transcribed penal laws just posted? This incident came at the right time; Your Excellency can set up court and hold the trial before the citizens of Cizhou. The more turbid the waters, the more they have to be sifted clear. But once the case concludes, we must never take inaccurate rumors for truth and jump to conclusions; the *yamen* does not do anything that will implicate the innocent.”

Zhou Gui said, “This matter must be taken as a warning.”

Shen Zechuan replied, “But of course; those who are lightly punished shall be dismissed from their position, and those who are severely punished shall be exiled to barren lands. If public sentiment runs high, an on-the-spot execution in the court can also serve to bring immense satisfaction to all.”

A crash rang out from the partitioned area, and the stunned gasps of the advisors suddenly rose.

Zhou Gui hurriedly asked, “What’s the matter?”

A few people responded, “Your Excellency, someone fainted!”

They initially assumed that Shen Zechuan meant to punish only Old Man Xu and show mercy to the rest of them, but who would have thought that Shen Zechuan wanted to make an example out of them. The Imperial Bodyguards were the ones presiding over the interrogation, so how could an old chap from the countryside like Old Man Xu withstand it? Not implicating the innocent meant not pursuing the matter for the others, but not a single one of the parties involved in Old Man Xu’s case this time was going to get away with it. The more those sitting in the partitioned area listened, the more seized with terror they became, so much that when Shen Zechuan uttered the four words’ on-the-spot execution’, one of them promptly passed out cold.



It was a state of pandemonium in the study. On the other side, Gao Zhongxiong was grimacing in pain under the hands of the physician. After

the physician left, he changed into a clean set of clothes with the help of the maidservants. He was one to keep himself in good health back in Qudu, so even if he was starving right now, he dared not gobble down his meal.

After he was done eating, the maidservants led Gao Zhongxiong to the courtyard. On the way there, he did not dare to look around. He knew Shen Zechuan was now residing in Cizhou, and he felt rather apprehensive. For someone who had given Han Jin counsel on the pursuit and capture of Xiao Chiye, coming to Cizhou could be said to be a risky, last-ditch move.

Gao Zhongxiong entered the courtyard and saw that the jasmine orange beyond the wooden railing of the covered walkway had all withered. No one had swept away the blanket of white petals on the ground; presumably, it was on the specific instruction of the master of the house to allow its natural fragrance to remain lingering in the air. Meanwhile, the green moss and gravelstone left along the edge of the pond bridge made it appear as though it was paved with a new, visually pleasing mattress.

Gao Zhongxiong ascended the stairs as he peeked at it, and in a moment of inattention, he nearly slipped. After he awkwardly braced himself up, he hurriedly bowed to the maidservants in front who were snickering behind covered mouths, sweating profusely as he repeated the bows.

Wind chimes dangled beneath the eaves. Ding Tao waited for Gao Zhongxiong to come over before he lifted the curtains for him and led him inside. Gao Zhongxiong did not know Ding Tao's identity and so did not dare to offend him. Instead, he lifted the hem of his own robe, intending to stride in, only to realize that there was no threshold in this room.

The interior of the hall was bright and spacious, with no valuable ornaments. When Gao Zhongxiong was in Qudu, he often heard that Shen Zechuan kept company with Xi Hongxuan and the rest and was fond of extravagance, carrying small ivory fans on him all the time. Thus, he guessed that the owner of this residence was perhaps Zhou Gui.

Gao Zhongxiong sat upright, all prim and proper, his butt barely touching the edge of the chair as he focused and paid close attention to the signs of movement in the courtyard. A short moment later, he suddenly heard the sound of wheels from the courtyard. Ding Tao, who had been under the eaves, stepped out to greet, "Young Master."

The curtain was lifted up, and Gao Zhongxiong promptly rose to his feet. However, the first one to enter was not Shen Zechuan or Zhou Gui, but



a tall, unconventional bodyguard. This bodyguard did not look at Gao Zhongxiong. Instead, he leaned over to take over the wheelchair and pushed in a young master dressed in green with an overcoat draped over him.

Gao Zhongxiong was about to go by the propriety and kneel, but then, when he got a clear look at who was in the wheelchair, he could not help but gape with wide-opened eyes. Then he took a step back and exclaimed in shock, “Yao... Yuanzhuo!”

This exclamation put a frown onto the face of Shen Zechuan, who entered after the two. He removed his overcoat and made a beeline for the seat of honor.

Qiao Tianya pushed Yao Wenyu to the front, and the maidservants came forth to serve the tea. Yao Wenyu held the teacup in his hands and said with a neutral expression, “It has been a long time. I didn’t expect Shenwei to come to Cizhou too.”

For some reason, Gao Zhongxiong broke out in a cold sweat. He dabbed at his sweat and uttered a sound of acknowledgment. Not daring to continue looking Yao Wenyu in the eyes, he hastily paid his respects to Shen Zechuan. “Your, Your Excellency...”

Shen Zechuan found this man’s expression odd. After he took his seat, he said, “There’s no need to be so formal. Take a seat.”

How would Gao Zhongxiong dare to?

“Since Shenwei knows who the Vice Commander is, then there is no need for me to waste my breath.” Yao Wenyu initially wanted to introduce Gao Zhongxiong to Shen Zechuan, but on seeing how deathly pale Gao Zhongxiong was, he paused and changed his tone to soothe him. “Shenwei, don’t be afraid. I’m a living man.”

Gao Zhongxiong still did not dare to look up and merely repeated “yes.”

Shen Zechuan asked, “Yuanzhuo, what makes you say that?”

Yao Wenyu was succinct in his answer, “I had a chance encounter with Shenwei in Dancheng once. The poison and my injuries acted up simultaneously at that time and gave him a scare.”

But Gao Zhongxiong looked nervous. It was clearly not as simple as a chance encounter. After Yao Wenyu had his legs broken and left the capital, he went to Dancheng, where he received the care of Pan Yi and the Commandery Princess Zhaoyue. He was apparently poisoned in Dancheng, although he had never told anyone the story behind it.

Gao Zhongxiong, however, knew about it.

"I left Dancheng in such a hurry. Are the Commandant and Commandery Princess well?" Yao Wenyu asked.

At Yao Wenyu's tone, Gao Zhongxiong gradually relaxed enough for him to answer smoothly, but he was still turned to the side and did not dare to look at Yao Wenyu. "Yes, they are both fine..."

Shen Zechuan could sense something from this exchange.

The maidservants had all retreated, while Ding Tao was striking the wind chimes for fun under the eaves. They clinked and clanked noisily, as if a gale was wreaking havoc. Qiao Tianya lifted the curtain to chase Ding Tao away, and it finally quietened down on the other side of the beaded curtain.

Yao Wenyu seemed neither happy nor unhappy to hear this piece of news. He set aside his teacup and broke the silence to say to Shen Zechuan, "When I arrived in Dancheng, the Commandery Princess was looking after me, but she is, after all, a married woman, and there were many areas that was inconvenient for her to intervene with. The Commandant thus sought out Pan Yuan, who was still living at home at that time. This Pan Yuan is the Commandant's younger brother of common birth."

Pan Yuan was an idler who loafed around all day. He was fond of gambling, but he was not a direct descendant of lawful birth from the Pan clan, so he could only rely on Pan Yi and his wife to repay the huge debt he owned. Pan Yi had him take care of Yao Wenyu, hoping that he could be inspired to "emulate the virtuous" and better himself. Furthermore, Pan Yuan had been very dedicated to taking care of their father in the past and could be considered a filial son.

At first, Pan Yuan could be said to be attentive. With Commandery Princess Zhaoyue's exhortations, he did not dare to be shoddy in his treatment of Yao Wenyu. He did not have to do anything personally, either. All he had to do was watch the physicians and attendants to ensure that they were timely with the meals and medicine and that they were not loafing off on the job. But after time, Pan Yuan got tired and fed up with it and started to find excuses to venture outdoors to gamble.

"Pan Lin used a prisoner's body as a decoy, but this move did not dispel Xue Xiuzhou's suspicions. The Commandery Princess left in a hurry back then, and it was inevitable for there to be spies in her entourage." Yao Wenyu continued. "The gambling den later came hounding Pan Yuan for payment, and Pan Yuan went into hiding all over. He did not dare to tell his

family, so he often poured out his woes to me. But I was penniless, and I was in no position to help even if I wanted to.”

Gao Zhongxiong nodded. “Pan Yuan sought me out at that time to borrow money too. He said he had been forced into a corner. Despite selling off the fields belonging to his branch of the family, he still could not pay off his debt. I advised him to tell the Commandant as soon as possible before it was too late, but he simply refused to.”

Yao Wenyu did not speak again when Gao Zhongxiong spoke to this point.

Gao Zhongxiong continued, “In less than half a month, Pan Yuan suddenly came to me for a drink. He said his gambling debt had been fully paid off, as he had met a benefactor who had extended him help. I was worried he had been deceived by the gambling den, so I sounded him out during the feast about this benefactor. He only said this person was a Longyou merchant<sup>2</sup> from Qudu who had asked him to run an errand for him.”

Another half a month passed. Yao Wenyu’s injuries not only did not heal, but had instead even deteriorated further. Commandery Princess Zhaoyue asked all the physicians at home, but Yao Wenyu’s condition showed no improvement. At that time, Pan Lin suffered a setback in Qudu, and even Pan Yi was impeached along with him. The issue at hand turned out to be about the Pan clan’s fields in Dancheng. Pan Xiangjie did not dare to speak up for his sons, fearful that the matter would snowball into disproportionate proportions. But even the Pan clan’s repeated concessions did not manage to stop this storm from blowing their way, and the imperial censors got so heated that they vehemently demanded Pan Lin to be suspended pending trial.

There was indeed an issue with the Pan clan, but that was a debt borne out of Pan Xiangjie’s greed. The reason Pan Lin bore the brunt of it was rather obvious—it was because he harbored Yao Wenyu. But he acted in a fit of pique at this injustice, adamant on fighting Xue Xiuzhuo till the end.

It did not take long for Pan Xiangjie to learn of the inside story. Fearing that the Pan clan would be implicated, he wrote a letter overnight to Pan Yi, who was in Dancheng, and demanded him to send Yao Wenyu back to Qudu as soon as possible. Pan Yi refused, and so Pan Xiangjie blew his top and subsequently became bedridden in illness, putting Pan Yi in a dilemma. At the same time, the Commandery Princess Zhaoyue noticed the oddness

of Yao Wenyu's condition and grew suspicious, so she bypassed the front hall and got her personal maid to call over a physician from outside the residence to take a look.

Yao Wenyu had no wish to get into the details. After a moment of silence, he merely said, "The Commandery Princess was worried that Qudu would use the matter of inspecting the fields as a pretext to come over and capture me. She initially wanted to send me to the manor that came as part of her dowry to recuperate, but there were problems with the medicine, and she could no longer trust the people in the Pan's residence. So she prepared traveling expenses and entrusted someone with the task of sending me secretly to Jincheng, where my late teacher's long-time friends still reside."

But misfortune never comes singly. The people in his entourage saw that Yao Wenyu was not only seriously ill but also had both his legs broken, so after they left the city, they forgot all that the Commandery Princess Zhaoyue had entrusted to them and ran away with the traveling expenses and horse carriage under cover of the night.

That night, Yao Wenyu was thrown into the wilderness. All that remained other than the donkey was the cat. He used to sleep in the wild with mother earth as his pillow when he was wandering the mountains and plains, but the experience of it this time was completely poles apart. For the first time in his twenty-four years of life, he realized that he was nothing. He was a nobody once his reputation was stripped from him. *Unpolished Jade Yuanzhuo*—it was at that moment Yao Wenyu loathed these words to the core. They were like humiliation branded deep into his bone marrow.

In the wilderness, Yao Wenyu broke down and cried inconsolably.  
For his teacher, and for himself.

He refused to see anyone when he was in Dancheng, merely lying all day long on that bed shrouded in dimness. His legs were the ones that hurt, but his self-esteem was the one that had shattered. He had to face up to the fact that he was no longer able to take care of himself. All that carefree spirit of his had turned into a thing of the past. Such were his dreams for each sleep he took, and it remained the same when he woke.

He was broken through and through.

He still wanted to live.



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### Footnotes

1. 胥吏 Throughout history, one of the most general generic designations for a class of personnel who performed the more menial tasks in all governmental units and had no ranked civil service status, though at times they could be promoted into official status for meritorious service.
2. 龙游商人 Longyou merchants, from the Longyou Group (龙游商帮), were famous merchants during the Ming and Qing dynasties for its operations in jewelry, book publishing, and paper-making industries.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 159 : NAMELESS

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



There was something amiss with Yao Wenyu's medicine; the physicians from the Pan's residence could not figure out what was wrong, but this no doubt had something to do with Pan Yuan, considering that he had been the one taking care of Yao Wenyu. The Commandery Princess Zhaoyue later checked on the Longyou merchant who had paid off Pan Yuan's debt, but the other party had long disappeared without a trace. Not long after Yao Wenyu left, Pan Yuan fell off his horse and died, and thus, the trail leading to the identity of the person who instigated him to poison Yao Wenyu hit a dead end. However, Pan Lin had the blame pinned on Xue Xiuzhuo, and both parties' relationship in Qudu continued to deteriorate.

Gao Zhongxiong sensed the atmosphere in the room growing tense. When he remembered he was also on friendly terms with Pan Yuan, he felt as though he was sitting on pins and needles, worried that Yao Wenyu would blame him for it by association. The silence was too much for him to bear, and he could not help breaking it. "Although I am acquainted with Pan Yuan, we do not share the same ideals. All the typical exchange of formalities over wine we had are merely a matter of necessity." He was not adept at flattery and stumbled over his words, "On the contrary, I am in admiration of Yuanzhuo's talent... we once had an encounter over a poetry meet during the reign of Xiande, and Yuanzhuo's talent and bearing were so out of this world that it was truly an ethereal sight to behold..."

Yao Wenyu waited for Gao Zhongxiong to finish before he calmly said, "The past is but a dream: it's all now water under the bridge. It's fate that we can meet again in Cizhou alive. Now that I've found a good master, may I ask what plans you have for the future?"

Gao Zhongxiong stole a glance at Shen Zechuan. "What plans could I even have now that I've been reduced to such a state?" He revealed a bitter smile as he spoke. "I've made a laughingstock of myself with my behavior today. I've persevered in my studies for so many years, but in the end, it has all come to nothing."

Shen Zechuan clasped his folding fan under his sleeves. The room felt chilly to him; it was time to get someone to prepare the hand warmer. He pulled his wandering mind back in an instant, his jade earring turning to the side slightly as he spoke politely to Gao Zhongxiong, "The political climate is currently unstable, and the various heroes are fighting over themselves to make a play for the top. Since Mister Shenwei has come to Cizhou, why don't you reside temporarily in my residence and take your time to decide?"

Gao Zhongxiong could not help feeling greatly touched when he heard Shen Zechuan calling him "Mister Shenwei". He had been through a lot of hardships on this life journey of his, and the masters he had successively encountered and served had not been good masters. And so he stood up and bowed deeply to Shen Zechuan, his words even more awkward and inarticulate. Shen Zechuan comforted him a little, and it was an hour later before Gao Zhongxiong withdrew.

Yao Wenyu looked at the bamboo blinds falling back into place. He waited until Gao Zhongxiong had walked out of the walkway before he asked, "Does the Vice Commander find this man to be of no use?"

Even if Shen Zechuan truly thought so, he could not say it outright. Thus, he answered, "He must have his forte for you to recommend him to this extent."

"That's right." Yao Wenyu said. "Gao Zhongxiong's courtesy name is Shenwei, and he has always been known as the 'eloquent brush' when he was in the Imperial College. Back then, when Xi Hongxuan was setting the storm in motion in Qudu by inciting the Imperial College, he chose Gao Zhongxiong precisely because of the latter's penmanship. Gao Zhongxiong was a student who entered the capital in the fourth year of Xiande, which coincided with the defeat of Zhongbo's troops. It was a scene of devastation everywhere in the Six Prefectures then, and the 'Lamentation of Chashi' he wrote under the influence of wine caused the students to fall over themselves to transcribe private copies for distribution. When it made its way into Cen Yu's hands, it even made Cen Yu shed tears by the candlelight, deeply moved as he was."

Shen Zechuan drank the tea and said, "So that's how it is."

The Imperial College's disturbance that Xi Hongxuan had facilitated was, in fact, instigated by Shen Zechuan. Gao Zhongxiong led the students to demand answers for Shen Zechuan's release from the temple and ended up being forcibly quelled by Pan Rugui and Ji Lei. This led to a turnabout

of the then-students' direction, turning the entire farce into a dispute between them and the Pan faction. Ji Lei and the others were caught off-guard before they could act, and subsequently, they lost the initiative to land a decisive blow on Shen Zechuan to take him down.

Shen Zechuan himself knew best what had played a key role in that fiasco, including the Imperial College uproar that Xue Xiuzhuo had later stirred up again. They had both gotten a firm grasp on the inclination of the public sentiments before herding them into moving in the direction they wanted. To do this, compelling rhetoric and articles that had the power to move men were the most indispensable. Yao Wenyu's meaning was clear—Gao Zhongxiong's writing had such power. He could stir up a storm, and it was precisely such literary prowess that Shen Zechuan was in need of right now.

"The Chazhou trip has made the Vice Commander a well-known name, but because of the taint that is Shen Wei, it's still far from enough if you want to lead and command the various heroes in an open and aboveboard manner." Yao Wenyu paused for a moment. "Even if the full story of the defeat from start to end is made public in the future, it'd still prove to be hard for Shen Wei to be absolved of blame."

*An ill reputation lends no weight to one's words.* This was a problem that Shen Zechuan could not circumvent.

King Yi of Fanzhou was currently drafting up documents to attack and vilify Cizhou, and he had made reference to the defeat multiple times. Shen Wei's withdrawal from battle without so much a fight was a fact, and there was no way to refute that even if Zhou Gui wanted to. Firstly, Shen Zechuan was indeed Shen Wei's eighth son of common birth; he was Shen Wei's son by blood, and the so-called "unfavored" treatment he had received held no water in quelling the anger of the public. That was a blood relation, one unlike Fei Sheng with a remote common birth connection, where a glib tongue was all that was needed to convince the people. Secondly, the defeat of the troops was a tragedy caused by Hua Siqian and the rest's attempts to fill up the void in the state treasury, but the evidence had all been destroyed. Shen Wei committed suicide by self-immolation, Hua Siqian died in prison, and Wei Huaigu succumbed to poison. Not a single trace was left of their collusion with the Biansha Cavalry to sell out Dazhou's military defense maps.



This was the dark cloud that was constantly hanging over Shen Zechuan's head. It was also his greatest pitfall. He had risen to power in Cizhou, but why was he faced with such a scarcity of talents? Because the talents of the world refused to come to him. They'd rather follow heroes like King Yi who had risen in rebellion among the common people than throw in their lots with Shen Zechuan.

"The Vice Commander executed an advisor of Cizhou today, and it's only by holding the trial publicly that the Vice Commander's name did not fall into further disrepute. But with the rise of Cizhou and the allegiance of Chazhou, the Vice Commander must first drop the title of 'Vice Commander' if the Vice Commander wishes to advance a step further." Noting Shen Zechuan's neutral expression as he fiddled with his folding fan, Yao Wenyu knew then that Shen Zechuan had already considered this, so he continued, "Cizhou has long freed itself from Qudu's control. Using the former title makes it all too easy to confound the status of master and subordinates. It's no longer apt to keep the address, 'Vice Commander'."

By the time Yao Wenyu had spoken to this point, both men had reached a tacit understanding.

Shen Zechuan could be addressed as "Vice Commander", or even "Judge"—those were his titles in the Imperial Bodyguards, although they were rendered void when he left Qudu. He was now in Cizhou, and Cizhou's prefectural prefect was Zhou Gui. If he had no new form of address, it would imply that he was still the guest and Zhou Gui was the host and the master. The offending advisors could still remain securely seated in place in the partitioned area despite what had happened at the *yamen* because they still treated Zhou Gui as the master of Cizhou. They did not see themselves as subordinate to Shen Zechuan. There was still a line between both parties.

Only Kong Ling had long since recognized the problem. He brought this to Zhou Gui's attention before he set off for Chazhou the last time, and he had reminded Zhou Gui again when he set off for Huaizhou this time. But Zhou Gui truly was not well-acquainted with the ins and outs of the matter, and that was why he had been slow to react.

Shen Zechuan could not proclaim himself king, at least, not now. King Yi of Fanzhou established himself so early that he was literally the prey standing right in front of Qidong. Qi Zhuyin already had the time to catch a breather and get back in the game. Once she filled in the gap at Bianjun

Commandery, she would have spare resources to deploy troops to Zhongbo, and the first one she was going to fight would be these random kings that had risen from among the common people.

“There are benefits to being nameless nobodies.” Shen Zechuan leaned back slightly. “At least if Qi Zhuyin dispatches troops without any justifiable cause, she would not be able to bypass the other five prefectures to come after Cizhou.”

Cizhou did not have bandits or self-proclaimed kings. Xiao Chiye, who commanded the Imperial Army, was the one the Eight Great Training Divisions were pursuing. Shen Zechuan was at most a “fugitive”, and Cizhou was at most “harboring a fugitive”. Zhou Gui had not openly and blatantly hung up the rebel flag, and he was still the “prefect” in the territory. His turning of a deaf ear to Qudu’s orders could be put down to the long distance between Cizhou and Qudu, and just based on this alone, Qi Zhuyin could not attack Cizhou—not unless she used the suppression of bandits as a pretext to route her troops to the western side of Cizhou, then enter Cizhou with the excuse that she was just transiting through. However, the deployment of troops like this meant that the military expenditure required would increase exponentially, and Qudu might not necessarily be able to spare the money. The best option was still for the Eight Great Training Divisions to deploy their troops. They had support for provisions from Dancheng and were located close enough, and they could also use the reason of tracking down Shen Zechuan to take him in for questioning to launch a war with Cizhou. But Han Jin was too impatient. Not only were his troops broken up by Xiao Chiye, he was also beaten silly by Xiao Chiye. This consequently led the Eight Great Training Divisions into cowering back.

But such a situation could not last for long.

Because the Eight Great Training Divisions were bound to stage a comeback. Once the three parties in Qudu entered a period of stability, the Ministry of War would re-elect a new chief commander. It was to guard against this situation that Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan purchased the Beiyuan Hunting Grounds from Zhou Gui for use as the Imperial Army’s camp. This way, a 20,000-strong Imperial Army would be the shield at the west of Cizhou, used for the specific purpose of resisting the Eight Great Training Divisions. But at the same time, the Imperial Army only had to return to Cizhou’s territory, and Qi Zhuyin would be able to head north and

launch a direct assault on Cizhou on the grounds of eliminating the rebel forces.

Therefore, Shen Zechuan was in no hurry to get rid of King Yi of Fanzhou. He wanted King Yi to be the mountain that straddled between him and Qidong. However, he could not allow King Yi to expand unchecked either.

“I once made a proposal for the Vice Commander to take down Fanzhou swiftly, but it’s no longer a good time now.” The tea in Yao Wenyu’s palm had cooled. He continued, “If the Vice Commander wants to keep King Yi going, then you have to first hack off the hand he is reaching out to the north with.”

“A few months ago,” Shen Zechuan’s eyes were clear. “Lei Jingzhe was sent back to Mount Luo by Ce’an, where he became the target of public censure and could no longer command the bandits, resulting in chaos on Mount Luo as the various internal factions turned against one another. Now that King Yi wants to form an alliance with Mount Luo, Lei Jingzhe, who wholeheartedly wants to stage a comeback, will not miss this opportunity.”

Something stirred in Yao Wenyu’s eyes. He said, “Vice Commander means to...”

Shen Zechuan suddenly opened his folding fan and partially covered his face. With a smile in his eyes, he slowly said, “I’m going to give him a helping hand.”

The wind had picked up outside the window; it looked like it was about to rain again.



Han Jin gouged away at the walls until his ten fingers were scraped bare. He had been in the Cizhou prison for close to three months, and he had gotten so emaciated he was barely recognizable. What’s more, he still had to put up with verbal abuse and insults from the others. At first, he could not stand it, and he would even cry himself a river, but as time passed, he gradually grew numb.

“Mealtime.” Carrying a tub in hand, the warden knocked on the cell doors one at a time with a wooden spoon and hollered, “It’s mealtime!”

They were adept at this and could swiftly dish out the broth and rice, filling the bowl to the brim without missing a drop. On hearing his voice, Han Jin hurried over to the cell door and reached out for the bowl.

Unexpectedly, the warden passing by behind kicked the bowl over, sending the mixture of rice and broth spilling all over the ground.

Han Jin was so hungry he was having gastric pains. He kneeled and pinched up the rice on the ground with his fingers and desperately shoved them into his mouth. There were grains of sand and gravel among the rice, which made his teeth ache as he chomped down on them. He pressed his head against the cell door and reached into his mouth with his dirty hand to dig out the stones.

As he was doing so, he suddenly saw a pair of legs stopping at the other end of the cell door.

Han Jin carefully lifted his eyes and looked out evasively.

Gao Zhongxiong, who had initially meant to come and take a look at his former master, never expected Han Jin to be reduced to such a state.

Han Jin was Han Cheng's younger brother, and he could be said to have been a free-spirited young master in Qudu. He succeeded Xi Gu'an as the viceroy of the Eight Great Training Divisions, and he had also been there in person during the public ditches case and gone into the waters. At that time, he had great respect for Xiao Chiye.

Gao Zhongxiong felt a lump in his throat. There were several times he wanted to open his mouth and speak, but words failed him.

Han Jin looked blankly at Gao Zhongxiong, then abruptly pounced over to grab the bars and ask in a tearful voice, "Is my elder brother here? Tell me, has my elder brother come?"



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## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 160 : RUMOR

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



Shocked by Han Jin, Gao Zhongxiong took a couple of steps back and bumped into the bars behind him.

Han Jin could not even stand the mosquito bites when he marched to war, much less endure the dirty conditions in prison; it was very much against his will to end up in such a plight. When he saw Gao Zhongxiong's expression, he could not help but burst out wailing, "You treacherous man! It's all your fault I'm in this state!"

Gao Zhongxiong dared not respond and stuck close to the bars as he headed for the entrance.

Feeling his hatred rise, Han Jin launched into a torrent of abuses. "You threw in your lot with traitor Shen. How shameless! You disloyal, turncoat slave who panders to a traitor!<sup>1</sup> Gao Zhongxiong, you're just a wretched soul with nobody to turn to! Don't go, come back, you..."

Gao Zhongxiong cut a sorry figure as he pushed the prison door open and shook off that relentless, haunting voice behind him. Outside, the chilly wind blew his entire back cold. The literati cherished their reputation. Who didn't want to go down in history as an honorable scholar untainted by political ills?<sup>2</sup> The words 'disloyal, turncoat slave' dealt such a hard blow to Gao Zhongxiong that he almost could not get back up on his feet. He had tens of thousands of grievances pent up in his chest with nowhere to vent, and they eventually amassed into a wave of nausea so overwhelming that he grabbed at the wall and threw up.

Gao Zhongxiong threw up everything he had consumed that day, puking until he had a case of acid reflux. He leaned against the wall, gradually sliding into a sitting position on the ground. As he gazed towards the vast sky, he thought of his elders back in Yuzhou. He wiped his mouth with a handkerchief, but the tears would not stop streaming down his cheeks, so he wiped them with his sleeve instead. Eventually, he hugged his arms, rolled over to curl up in a corner, and cried while trying to suppress it.

Who would be willing to give up his dignity and bow to power for a pittance?

Not Gao Zhongxiong. But without this pittance, he would die. In order to seek a way out for himself, he even cast aside his sensibilities. If someone were to tell him five years ago that he would bow obsequiously to a *yamen* runner for the sake of being a lesser functionary in the future, he would rather die. But he had not only done that now; he was even willing to learn to flatter others for petty gains.

An unspecified amount of time later, Gao Zhongxiong got up, tidied himself, and edged along the wall as he made his way outside. As he passed by the *yamen*, he had the sense that the whisperings around him were directed at him, but he did not seem to feel a thing. Like what Yao Wenyu had said, the past was but a dream. He had woken up too.

“This humble one is Gao Zhongxiong, and my humble courtesy name is Shenwei.” Gao Zhongxiong strode into the *yamen* and bowed as he said to the others. “It is on the personal recommendation of the Vice Commander that this humble one has come to offer my writing skills for the *yamen*’s use. In the future, this humble one shall be responsible for drafting up all the official proclamations and public notices the *yamen* needs.”



In the twinkling of an eye, it was already the end of the eighth month. Kong Ling and Yu Xiaozai had returned from their trip to Huaizhou. The discussion in Huaizhou had gone smoothly. The only odd thing was that when they passed by Luoxia Pass on the way back, they found the attitude of the Luoxia Pass’s Commandant loaded with subtleties; it was far more agreeable than it had been when they passed through on their way to Huaizhou.

“That Commandant from Luoxia Pass...” Yu Xiaozai said, “was trying to dig for information on our Vice Commander. He made several inquiries on the Vice Commander’s marriage.”

“He couldn’t be trying to play matchmaker for the Vice Commander, could he?” Zhou Gui thought of Xiao Chiye and hurriedly asked, “Then, how did you answer?”

“I initially wanted to answer that the Vice Commander already has a spouse.” Yu Xiaozai had darkened a lot on this trip. “But Chengfeng advised me not to, so I just replied that he was still unmarried.”

Both of them did not understand, but Kong Ling was a discerning and insightful man. He had heard that the Hereditary Prince’s Consort of Libei had come to Cizhou, so he paid special attention to Luoxia Pass’s attitude

on their return trip. He knew very well the reason for the change in their attitude. No doubt Libei had reached out to them in advance, wanting to understand Shen Zechuan through them—he just did not know if it was the Prince or the Hereditary Prince.

Kong Ling picked up the tea and said, “The Vice Commander isn’t married to begin with. It’s better to say it as it is when it comes to this matter, lest it provides others with grounds for gossip and leads to misunderstandings.”

Zhou Gui was just about to speak to Kong Ling about the screening of the functionaries from the last time when Qiao Tianya lifted the curtains. They rose to greet in unison, “Vice Commander.”

It was raining outside, and Shen Zechuan had walked all the way over from his residence. Even if he had an umbrella, it was inevitable for him to get wet. On the contrary, Yao Wenyu was all securely bundled up as he was pushed in. The only thing was that he was too thin, and even when he sat in the wheelchair, he did not feel like a living being. Gao Zhongxiong came in last after them. He was dressed very simply, with a pile of books in his arms and half of his shoulder wet.

“Gentlemen, please take a seat.” Shen Zechuan settled into his seat and wiped away the water droplets on his hand with his handkerchief. “It has been hard on Mister Chengfeng and Youjing on this long trip. There’s no need to be in a hurry to return to duty these few days. Take a break.”

Kong Ling and Yu Xiaozai said their thanks in succession.

“Shenwei, do sit too. There’s no need to be formal.” Shen Zechuan lifted a palm to motion to Gao Zhongxiong. At the same time, he said to Kong Ling, “This is Shenwei, a new subordinate of mine who specializes in writing. He is presently gaining experience in the *yamen*, and there are still plenty of many matters on which he will need Mister Chengfeng’s guidance on.”

Kong Ling politely and humbly played down the accolade and sized up Gao Zhongxiong. Gao Zhongxiong had secured his hair up in a simple bun today. As he had to move around in the *yamen* for the whole day now, efficiency had taken precedence over everything else, and so he no longer looked so much like a scholar.

Gao Zhongxiong set down the books and bowed to Kong Ling in a greeting. “I’ve long heard much of Mister Chengfeng’s reputation. It’s an honor to meet you.”

Kong Ling rose to his feet and returned the greeting.

Shen Zechuan waited until they each took their respective seats before saying, "With things going smoothly in Huaizhou and Chazhou, everyone can have a good year this year. The functionaries to survey the fields have already been sent down. To ensure the accuracy of the acreage, there will be two more checks carried out after. By the time this is done, it will be the end of the year, but the good thing is that we can finish the surveyance in time for this year. Now that the recording of registrations is done, the moving of Cizhou's autumn harvest into the granaries is completed too. As soon as the snow falls, we should discuss the allocation of lands."

Yao Wenyu spoke up just then, "In the past, the land taxes and levies in Qudu were all paid in kind. After the grain was collected and put into storage at the granaries, it was manually audited and converted by people. The labor costs of the transport office also had to be apportioned among them, so it might not necessarily be accurate. We are now in Cizhou, and we can dispense with the escort and transportation of grains. But to increase the expenses for the upkeep of the granary, the most appropriate way to collect silver would be to combine the miscellaneous taxes."

"The trading of grains is not a long-term endeavor either." Kong Ling said, "Once Chazhou is done with the reorganization this year, they can start tilling their lands at the beginning of spring next year. If they can get through it, it will be a bumper harvest for them, and they will no longer need to do business with us."

"Wouldn't the other four prefectures need it?" Yu Xiaozai was not as familiar with the situation in Zhongbo as the rest of them. "Seems to me that King Yi won't be in the running for long. The two prefectures of Fanzhou and Dengzhou are so poor that the people are turning against each other, yet he's still bestowing awards and conferring titles on a motley crew of ministers for his court. If we aren't doing business with Chazhou, we can do it with them."

The others laughed.

Shen Zechuan said, "Youjing is truly from the Chief Surveillance Bureau."

Seeing as Yu Xiaozai did not comprehend, Kong Ling said, "When you see others conducting themselves with such behavior, you think about impeachment, forgetting that they're impoverished to the extent that they'd



turn against one another. So how would they have the money to buy grains from us?"

"Human trafficking is rampant in Fanzhou, and traffickers are running amuck all around. If we have them purchase the grains, they might even use children to barter. These people are incorrigible!" It filled Zhou Gui with contempt just to bring up this subject.

"This is something that has to be combated, but the source is still at Mount Luo. As for King Yi, he can't die no matter what." Yao Wenyu relaxed a little and revealed a smile. "He is currently our barrier in the south. Without him, we will come face to face with Qi Zhuyin."

"Speaking of Qi Zhuyin." Yu Xiaozai rolled up his sleeves slightly. "This reminds me of Qi Shiyu. I heard some news. During the wedding ceremony when Third Missy Hua married over, the Old Commander saw what an unparalleled beauty his new wife was, and in a moment of happiness, he collapsed."

Zhou Gui was stunned. "Collapsed?"

Yu Xiaozai continued, "He had a stroke!"

Whether Qi Shiyu had a genuine stroke or a bogus one, this incident made it clear that he would not be sharing a room with Hua Xiangyi. The Empress Dowager got the in-laws relationship she wanted with Qidong, but she had no way to take it any further. If Hua Xiangyi did not beget an heir, Qi Zhuyin would retain her position as the commander-in-chief. With her stepmother in her hands, she had every reason to suppress and hold her other brothers in check.

"Man proposes, God disposes." Zhou Gui lamented. "It's fortunate that Qi Zhuyin is not a man."

They laughed and chatted about something else. Kong Ling and Yu Xiaozai had only just returned today, so Shen Zechuan could not really let them sit and chat the entire night. At around the hour of chou, he dismissed them.

Zhou Gui personally saw Kong Ling back to his courtyard and gave him a brief and concise account of the screening incident on their way over. Finally, he said. "We executed an advisor who took bribes and kept the peace in the *yamen* until now. But rumors keep popping up recently, saying that the Vice Commander came to Cizhou to coerce me. Can you believe this? Alas, I can't eat or sleep well these few days, worried that these words

will make their way to the Vice Commander's ears and cause misunderstandings between us."

Kong Ling held the umbrella and said, "I reminded you a long time ago that the address of 'prefectural prefect' should be done away with. If this matter had played out before someone who is oversuspicious and distrustful by nature, you and I would have long lost the trust of the Vice Commander."

"But I," Zhou Gui said anxiously, "don't know what to change it to!"

"It doesn't matter what you change it to. What's important is the attitude." Kong Ling tilted the umbrella to allow Zhou Gui to raise up the lantern. "Cizhou has already established itself. Naturally, it can no longer leave this matter ambiguous. You may not intend it that way, but you won't be able to hold up against repeated rumors, so distinguish between master and subordinate clearly as soon as possible and make it clear to the others as well that Cizhou has already changed masters."

During their discussion, both men had already gone up the steps. The attendants followed behind them. Before Kong Ling stepped onto the walkway, he looked back and motioned for them to slow down and not to follow too close.

"It's not appropriate to call him the Provincial Administration Commissioner, and it's not appropriate to call him the Viceroy either. Think of one for me." Zhou Gui said after him. "And I can get it settled tomorrow morning."

"Those are all titles designated by Qudu; of course, they aren't appropriate." Kong Ling could not think of one at such short notice either. He stood for a moment, then said with a headache, "Shen Wei was the Prince of Jianxing, but he has been stripped of his noble rank and title. We mustn't allow this relationship to be associated with the Vice Commander anymore."

Both men stood side by side in the chilly night, with the wind rustling past their clothes. It was so freezing that both men shivered simultaneously. Kong Ling was tired and cold, and so he chased Zhou Gui off. "Go back and think of one yourself."



Two days later, Zhou Gui submitted a document with the request to change "Vice Commander" to "Prefectural Lord".<sup>3</sup> He initially meant to address him as "Lord Shen", but the word Shen was associated with Shen

Wei, so it was revised to the “prefectural” in “prefectural prefect”. The word ‘prefectural’ was flexible; it could progress in tiers according to their future expansion in the region, making it convenient to make changes again. This was the first time Cizhou explicitly recognized Shen Zechuan as the one who reigned supreme in Cizhou. Meanwhile, Zhou Gui demoted himself back into his original position and became a subordinate of Shen Zechuan.

Once this matter was made public, King Yi of Fanzhou was the first one to get anxious. He repeatedly issued several notices angrily denouncing Zhou Gui for defecting to the traitor. But Cizhou now had Gao Zhongxiong, an eloquent writer of quick wit and great speed who could twist the narrative in their favor. At the same time he condemned King Yi for his heartlessness in disregarding the lives and deaths of the commoners in Fanzhou by carrying out wasteful large scale construction of extravagant buildings for his enjoyment, he also composed a ballad for distribution to the four prefectures east of Zhongbo, singing the story of how Shen Zechuan had traveled thousands of *li* to deliver grains but had instead gotten injured, so much that it moved all the listeners to tears. The more that rumor spread, the more exaggerated it became. By the time it reached Xiao Fangxu’s ears, it had already become “seriously wounded” and “almost broke an arm”.

Xiao Fangxu got a fright and went to grab up a diligent Xiao Chiye in the middle of the night to ask, “He broke an arm?”

Xiao Chiye, who had been continuously running errands for half a month, had only just fallen asleep when his old man yanked him up. He was still half-asleep, so Xiao Fangxu shook him and asked his question again.

Annoyed by the shaking, Xiao Chiye asked in a hoarse voice, “Who, who broke an arm?”

Xiao Fangxu said, “Shen Zechuan!”



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#### **Footnotes**

1. 三姓家奴 literally, a slave with three surnames. The term originates from the Romance of the Three Kingdoms 《三国演义》

and refers specifically to Lu Bu. It's used mockingly to refer to capricious, disloyal and unrighteous people who serve traitors (以身侍贼)

2. 清流 renowned and unsullied scholars who were concerned with politics but held themselves aloof from those in power, i.e., political outsiders (e.g., members of the Donglin Clique in the late Ming Dynasty)

3. 府君 literally magistrate of a prefecture, also used to refer to 太守 or 知府 so this term can also be translated as Prefectural Magistrate, Prefectural Governor, or Prefectural Prefect.

# QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 161 : SUNSET GLOW

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



Xiao Chiye felt as though he had been doused with a bucket of icy water that not only sober him up but also caused his hairs to stand on end. He sat up and stared at Xiao Fangxu for a moment, yet his mind was blank. It was as if he had been punched so hard by someone that even the insides of his chest cavity were a rotten mess. He abruptly pushed Xiao Fangxu aside and got off the couch to put on his boots. But he knocked against the corner of the table and almost couldn't get up. Where in the hell were those damn boots?

Chen Yang and Gu Jin were initially standing outside the tent to keep watch for the night when they heard the sound of the flap being lifted and saw Xiao Chiye stumbling out like a wandering soul with one foot stepping down on the back of a boot and the other stepping on the ground. He did not even have his outer robes on as he went over to undo Lang Tao Xue Jin's reins.

Gu Jin was the quickest to react. He strode a step out to tug at the reins and called out in an urgent voice, "Master!"

Chen Yang followed closely behind, intending to head inside to look for his robes and boots.

Xiao Fangxu bent over to step outside and asked in puzzlement, "You didn't know? Didn't this happen a long time ago? When he went to Chazhou."

Chen Yang observed Xiao Fangxu's expression, and realization suddenly dawned on him. He slapped his forehead and turned around to shout, "Chazhou! Master, it's Chazhou! Young Master is fine!"

These shouts were so strikingly loud that they shocked Xiao Chiye's startled soul back into his body. He turned around and made a beeline for Xiao Fangxu, so agitated that his eyes had gone red. When he came to Xiao Fangxu, he spun around on the spot once before he finally wiped at his face and said, "Good grief, father dearest!"



The scabs on Shen Zechuan's palm had fallen off, leaving only a scar behind.

As soon as the eighth month passed, the rain in Cizhou ceased. The frost intensified, and the weather grew even colder. Yao Wenyu, having caught a cold in recent days, remained indoors with the hand warmer in hand and rarely ventured outdoors. Shen Zechuan still had Fei Sheng following him around. Contrary to expectations, Li Xiong hardly mentioned Lei Jingzhe again.

"Is Han Jin still in prison?" Shen Zechuan drank his medicine and asked Fei Sheng as he stood by the window.

Fei Sheng answered, "He's still there. Master is benevolent not to kill him, yet he keeps raising a hue and cry the whole day without so much a sign of repentance."

Shen Zechuan gripped the porcelain bowl in his hand and looked at the pattern for a while before he said, "He's Han Cheng's younger brother."

Fei Sheng lowered his eyes for no reason and shivered.

Han Cheng executed Qi Huilian right there on the streets. Based on what Fei Sheng had figured out regarding Shen Zechuan's temper, the reason Shen Zechuan had kept Han Jin alive without killing him was not to coerce Qudu at all, but to retain him for a bigger purpose. Fei Sheng did not dare to guess. He had no wish to guess either. As a guard, he was Shen Zechuan's dagger. Shen Zechuan's wish was his command.

Shen Zechuan raised his eyes and looked out of the window at the cold rays of sunlight on the ground, which left trails of tear stains through the frost. He let out an inexplicable smile and said, "Release him."

Fei Sheng acknowledged the order.

Shen Zechuan added, "Get him a bath and a change of clothes, then give him a meal and a soft couch. There is no need for him to do anything. Just let him play to his heart's content."

Fei Sheng did not dare to object and merely uttered his acknowledgment again before taking his leave. The moment he left, Qiao Tianya lifted the curtain and entered.

"Letter from Libei." Qiao Tianya set the letter on Shen Zechuan's table. "It was sent posthaste. Must be something Master needs to be informed of."

"Is Yuanzhuo doing better?" Shen Zechuan asked as he opened the letter.

Before Qiao Tianya could answer, he saw Shen Zechuan's stunned expression as he reread the letter several times.

"It's about the frontier trade market in winter." Shen Zechuan paused for a moment. "I'm going to the battlegrounds in person to have a face-to-face discussion with the Prince of Libei."



The weather in Libei was capricious. The remaining clear, sunny weather of autumn was few and far between, but once it made its appearance, it would get so hot that it made one want to strip.

Xiao Chiye returned to the battleground again at the end of the eighth month and did not leave again for the time being. After that defeat, he had never taken a break. Whether it was to head north to transport military supplies, or going west to contact Dajing, he was the one who led his men to make the trips. It was as if his rough edges had been completely tempered down by Xiao Fangxu to the point that he was starting to willingly serve as a young general in charge of military supplies.

When Chen Yang went to fetch water, he saw Xiao Chiye standing on the withered and yellow grassland training a horse. The keyword was training, but in truth, Xiao Chiye was a lot more gentle. That horse, snow-white all over with a patch of black on its chest, was the horse Lu Yizhi wanted to keep for Xiao Chiye's wife. When Xiao Chiye had been running errands for the last month, he brought it out with him, wanting to tame it himself.

Xiao Fangxu rode his horse over from the other end, and Meng came swooping down in the wind and brushed past Xiao Fangxu with a "swoosh". Then it took off again along the grass and soared into the air, where it spun around once before flying away.

Xiao Fangxu dismounted and threw the reins to the deputy general behind him. He took off his helmet, spat out the dust in his mouth, and narrowed his eyes to look at Xiao Chiye. After a while, he removed his heavy armor and took off the saddle on the back of his horse. He then flipped atop it once more and beckoned to Xiao Chiye from a distance away.

Zuo Qianqiu leaned over the railing, his white hair fluttering in the wind as he watched father and son side by side. Wu Ziyu ran a few steps closer and stepped up the railing to straddle over it. Behind him, the Libei

Armored Cavalry and Imperial Army came up and crowded around them on this side of the railing so closely that they were all packed like sardines.

It was so squeezed that Tantai Hu could not free his hands, so he craned his neck and yelled, "What's this about?!"

Wu Ziyu held up a steamed bun and shouted at the top of his hoarse voice over the din, "If the Second Young Master wins today, the convoy squad will be the champions this month! They will even have to give us two more scoops for our meals!"

On seeing this, Zuo Qianqiu said with a laugh, "It will take a few years more before A-Ye will defeat his old man."

"The Second Young Master will not let us down!" Tantai Hu shouted defiantly as he wiped the sweat that had trickled down onto his cheek. It was so scorching hot that his face was tanned and flushed.

Zuo Qianqiu asked, "What if His Lordship wins?"

Chen Yang was just about to say something when he heard Tantai Hu say in a booming voice, "Then we will run along the grassland and bark as we run—"

Wu Ziyu and Gu Jin, who were behind him, promptly leaped up to shut his mouth up.

Zuo Qianqiu did not let the opportunity slip. "Fine! A-Ye, you heard that? If you lose to your father today, your whole squad will have to go woof woof!"

Xiao Chiye lifted his finger and whistled, and Lang Tao Xue Jin circled over to his side. He mounted the horse and asked Xiao Fangxu, "Where to?"

Xiao Fangxu seemed hesitant as he parroted, "Where to..."

Before the words had fully left his mouth, he had already spurred his horse on ahead.

The Imperial Army booed in unison. Tantai Hu struggled to free his mouth and exclaimed, "How can His Lordship cheat?!"

Lang Tao Xue Jin shot forward like a black arrow leaving the bowstring, and the wind started rustling in an instant. The sun in the clear skies on the horizon was blinding, and the back views of father and son as they rode their horse were almost identical. Meng suddenly broke through the clouds and went all out to chase after them, sticking closely right behind Xiao Chiye as it looked down upon that pair of arrows, one in front and one at the back. Blades of grass went flying all over as horses' hooves trampled



over them, while the wind stirred up the endless expanse of luxuriant grass, sending them swaying in one direction. They rode amidst it, like a duo of big and small stars shooting into the waves of the ocean, leaving a long trail in their wake among the grasslands.

Xiao Chiye gazed at Xiao Fangxu's back as he listened to the souging of the wind.

Xiao Fangxu was not old yet. How could he be old? He looked so robust and strong, no different than he had been twenty years ago. As long as he raised both arms, he could lift both sons, laughing on the grasslands as he tossed them in turn until they cried.

Xiao Chiye gradually caught up to him. Lang Tao Xue Jin was far more sturdy and younger than that horse beneath Xiao Fangxu. It charged forth, full of vigor, its eyes staring fixedly ahead as if nothing could stop it.

Gradually, both men came to ride neck to neck with one another, both riding until they were drenched in sweat. The sun blazed overhead, searing their backs. This was perhaps the last sunny sky with a scorching sun in Libei this year.

There was a stone monument at the finishing point, with the names of the Libei Armored Cavalry who had died in battle the past year engraved on it, along with the falcons that had fallen with them and the battle steeds that had carried them. At the very last moment when father and son were about to reach, Meng beat them to it and darted over. It circled once before landing on the stone monument, thereby winning first place.

"The falcon is mine." Xiao Chiye slowed down and said, "So I win."

"The land is mine." Xiao Fangxu came to a stop and turned around to face Xiao Chiye while pointing at his feet. "I was here 800 years earlier than you."

Xiao Chiye apathetically ignored this statement.

They dismounted. The sun was already on its downward descent in the west. Xiao Fangxu headed up the stone steps and stood before the stone monument, then reached out to wipe away the dust on it. The wind was strong here. It sent his hair fluttering and tousled up the hair on his temples, revealing some streaks of white. He said, "Herein lie my brothers."

Xiao Chiye came up behind him and stood beside Xiao Fangxu.

"Ten years ago, I brought your eldest brother here." Xiao Fangxu pointed at a certain spot. "There was a lad here by the rather unique name of Suining. He was the same age as your brother."

Old names on this stone monument would be scrapped off every year and filled in with new ones. This signified that generation after generation of the Libei Armored Cavalry all existed here, and it also signified that generation after generation of the Libei Armored Cavalry had vanished here. It was here the stone monument, with its back to the Hongyan Mountains, lay in eternal rest. They were the wind of the Hongyan Mountains, and at the same time, the stars of the Hongyan Mountains.

“I want to be here.” Xiao Chiye pointed in the center. “The place is big, the location is good, and you can look far out into the distance.”

“That’s my spot.” Xiao Fangxu said pettily. “I want all the spots here.”

“What about my mother?” Xiao Chiye turned his head aside to scrutinize Xiao Fangxu. “You left her alone in Dajing.”

Xiao Fangxu didn’t respond. He gazed past the stone monument to look at the Hongyan Mountains. Then, as if dazzled by the setting sun, he turned around and looked in the direction of Dajing. He could barely open his eyes from the wind. “We can look at each other from afar, eyes to eyes—forever.”

Xiao Chiye followed his gaze and looked over.

“It is here we are born, and it is here we will die worthy deaths. People from Libei lie on the mountains and rivers with their faces to the blazing sun. Men or women, the bones on which the sun shines are all unyielding heroes.” Xiao Fangxu opened up his palm, and the wind burst past his palm so softly it felt like the long hair of his wife. This was the only indulgence he had allowed himself in the past decades. “One day, I will return to her embrace.”

Xiao Chiye looked at the waves of billowing grass at the other end; it was like a never-ending torrent. The so-called sorrow of parting and joy of reunions of every single person out there was merely a fleeting moment in the timelessness of the universe. In just the blink of an eye, it would disintegrate, and from then on, all would be silent, every vestige of it gone.

An encounter was truly a very precious thing.

Xiao Fangxu turned around and threw Xiao Chiye a punch, then lifted his arms to give Xiao Chiye a tight hug. But very quickly, he let go and said, “You still need a good several years before you can surpass me!”

“Who knows?” Xiao Chiye patted his own chest to hint at his height.

Xiao Fangxu took a few steps and made as if to pick something off the ground. Having horse dung flung at him had left a shadow over Xiao

Chiye's heart, and so he promptly turned around and ran. The moment he ran, Xiao Fangxu burst out laughing.

The wind was still blowing as the father and son made their way back, bathed in the evening glow of the setting sun.

Dusk was not yet over. As Xiao Chiye was drenched in sweat all over, he stripped off his upper garments and stood in the river to bathe. The surface of the water shimmered. As he poured water using the wooden bucket, dancing ripples of golden light covered the muscles on his entire back.

Xiao Chiye bent over and rinsed his arm guard in the water. The quality iron had been smashed to the point it was no longer usable, but he still did not have it changed. When he took it out of the water, he ripped away the badly worn dogskin rope on it and turned around to say, "Hand me the—"

A travel-worn Shen Zechuan stood on the slope by the riverside, the sunset glow spilling over the hems of his robe with bits of grass on it.

Xiao Chiye missed him so much.

And here he stood before Xiao Chiye at the very moment the last rays of the setting sun faded away.



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Credits: Many thanks to [Tea](#) for proofreading!

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 162 : FRONTIER TRADE MARKET

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



The dark blue dome of heaven lay out in a spread behind Shen Zechuan. He lifted his arms to remove his overcoat, exposing the earring on his right ear as he moved. His sleeves slid down to reveal the secured, snow-white sleeves of his inner garment underneath. He was just like a white bird stopping for a rest in this still and silent world, commanding all of Xiao Chiye's attention in just a matter of an instant.

Xiao Chiye did not blink. As he watched Shen Zechuan descend the slope in a few steps, he subconsciously opened his arms. The impact when Shen Zechuan rushed into him sent him half a step back, but at the same time, he took all of this white bird into his bosom, embracing him in a tight hug.

The swift, running waters of the river crashed into both of their legs, sending up sprays of water.

"You scared me," Recovering from his astonishment, Xiao Chiye abruptly lifted Shen Zechuan high and laughed as he looked up, "falling out of the sky the way you did!"

Shen Zechuan was a little short on breath as he said, "I'm here for an inspection."

Xiao Chiye lifted his palm to touch Shen Zechuan's cheek, then covered the back of Shen Zechuan's head with it and held him down for a kiss. Dusk closed in on them on all sides, their lips a scenic scene under the dimness. Shen Zechuan's palms slid up to cup both of Xiao Chiye's cheeks as he responded to him passionately.

The shimmer of water on the river surface disappeared, and the subsequent, pervading darkness of the night blurred the boundary between heaven and earth. They clung close together ever so intimately, unbosoming themselves of their fervent longing. Xiao Chiye kissed him so hard that Shen Zechuan could not help but suck in a breath when they parted and licked the spot that was nearly torn by his bites.

"Go ahead and inspect." Xiao Chiye laughed. "Come on. I've already stripped for you to inspect all you want."

Shen Zechuan put up his arms over Xiao Chiye's shoulders and tapped on Xiao Chiye's sturdy back with his dangling folding fan. "I disappeared without a trace the moment I got off the horse carriage. His Lordship has yet to meet me yet. I'll inspect you tonight."

"Ohhh." Xiao Chiye dragged out the word and said with displeasure as he continued to hug him in this posture, "So you're here to see my father."

Shen Zechuan swung the folding fan between his fingers and said, "That's something I have to do in passing while I'm at it. My heart is all here."

Xiao Chiye waded through the river and carried Shen Zechuan towards the riverbank. "I don't believe you."

Shen Zechuan felt that Xiao Chiye looked too dashing like this. When he landed on the ground, he leaned over to scrutinize him, so Xiao Chiye raised his arm and pressed against Shen Zechuan's forehead to put a little more distance between them.

"You should have seized the chance while you had it." Xiao Chiye picked up his clothes and said, "That's all I'm showing you."

Shen Zechuan teased him, "I'm leaving then?"

Xiao Chiye put on his robe and tilted his head up slightly to say, "Go ahead."

Shen Zechuan nodded in understanding and took a few steps backward. Seeing no movement from Xiao Chiye, he turned around for real. But who knew? Even before he had the chance to stride a step forward the moment he turned around, Xiao Chiye lifted him back and covered his head to kiss him until his waist went numb.

This wide robe that cloaked him was filled with Xiao Chiye's scent all over, the coolness and refreshingness of which engulfed Shen Zechuan whole. In that meager film of darkness, he revealed his avaricious nature, breathing hotly to seduce Xiao Chiye before he finally said into Xiao Chiye's ear, "Your. Father. Is. Coming."

The group of well-intentioned guards who had been squatting behind the slope started to cough violently in unison.

Xiao Chiye pulled back from the brink right in the nick of time and tore off the robe in a fit of pique.



Xiao Fangxu had long known that Shen Zechuan was here, but he did not communicate this to Xiao Chiye. At present, there were plenty of people

in the military tent. The commanding generals from Changzhu camp, Sha'er camp, and the Three Great Training Divisions of Liuyang were all present and were in the midst of discussing the news from Dajing.

"If the Biansha troops don't withdraw, this battle will no doubt last until winter." The commanding general of the Sha'er camp was called Jiang Sheng, who had been wounded some days back; his shoulders were still bandaged with gauze. He said, "If we are still going to keep up with the fight like this in winter, then the few battalions in the frontline will need to consider deploying more military craftsmen. Otherwise, we won't be able to make it in time if we simply rely on the convoy squad to make the deliveries back and forth when the wear and tear of the equipment gets too severe."

"Deploying more military craftsmen is an option." Zuo Qianqiu warmed himself by the fire and said, "but the need for military provisions will increase as well. If we transfer all the people from Dajing to the frontline, there will be no one back at home to cultivate the fields at the beginning of spring next year."

Now that Libei had lost the granaries in Juexi, its military provisions in the future were cut by half. They all had to rely on the military fields in Libei to survive. This was a matter that pertained to their success or failure on the battlefields.

"As the Hereditary Prince suggested," Zhao Hui said, "Building a new supply camp behind Sha'er camp will allow us to mutually guard and assist the Bianbo camp to the south, as well as meet the needs of the battlefields even faster than before. In times of emergency during the war, the territory can scrimp and save to supply the frontline."

"Winter is right around the corner, and the coats have yet to be distributed." Jiang Sheng knew everyone was in a difficult position, so it would not do for him to go too far with his words. He frowned worriedly in silence for a moment. "The Hereditary Prince's Consort is leading the old and weak, women and children to hasten production for the winter coats back in Dajing, and even the cotton used to make them was given to us by Luoxia Pass. We are in for a tough time this year. If we can't survive this winter, we can forget about discussing anything for next year."

"You are a veteran general." Xiao Fangxu drank hot milk and said, "So why lose heart? The men on the frontline aren't totally wiped out yet. If it's rough-going for us, it'll be even tougher on the Twelve Tribes of Biansha."

Amu'er has still yet to make it as their Great Lord. There are only six tribes under him that can be truly said to have pledged allegiance to him. The remaining ones merely want to have a share of the spoils and take risks with him. But when it really comes down to the last critical juncture, they might not necessarily be willing to stake it all with him."

"Biansha is gaining so much momentum this year." Zhao Hui said. "They must have come prepared."

"No doubt they have been planning for it for a long time." Zuo Qianqiu turned both of his palms over and pondered it over for a moment before continuing, "In the third year of Xiande, he colluded with others from within and from without to break through the Zhongbo's defenses line. It went all too smoothly that time, giving him a taste of sweet victory. That's why it comes as a surprise now that he's concentrating his attacks on a tough nut like Libei. But from this, we can tell that he is indeed now harboring the intent to invade Dazhou, and he wants to first smash down this side of the wall that is Libei in order not to repeat the same mistake."

"Someone out there is supplying grains to Amu'er." Xiao Fangxu's eyes were sharp and cutting. "Jiming was out of commission after the military provisions case, and Amu'er instantly transferred Hasen north. I don't believe it if you tell me he did not know about it in advance. So we should thank our lucky stars that Qudu did not have Libei's military defense map considering that Amu'er's inside contact is still hiding in Dazhou. A-Ye rebelled at the start of spring this year. Was it a bad thing? No, he did good. If Libei was still under Qudu's control, this battle would no longer be just a matter of worrying over provisions. As the saying goes, it is easy to dodge a spear in the open but hard to ward off an arrow in the dark.<sup>1</sup> It's too dangerous."

"No more eunuchs coming over to inspect the military and breathe down our necks." Jiang Sheng finally smiled a little and said as he shook his head, "This battle is really a comfortable one to fight."

"There are ways to resolve the issue of provisions next year." Xiao Fangxu set down his bowl. "And it's for this specific purpose I've found someone who can offer us a way."

Zuo Qianqiu laughed and rose to his feet. "Alright then. I'll invite this little buddy in."



Wu Ziyu wanted to take a look at Shen Zechuan, but it was inappropriate for him to be too brazen. He followed behind Tantai Hu and asked, "... This's the one?"

Tantai Hu looked back and whispered, "Just address him as 'Young Master' later."

Wu Ziyu saw Shen Zechuan listening to Fei Sheng. He could not tell if Shen Zechuan was happy or not from his side profile, but his entire person was like a brilliantly colored painting just by sitting there alone. His skin was fair, yet his facial features were so ravishing it was enthralling, so much that one dared not shift their eyes away, even though looking at him for too long would inexplicably give one the chills. But this chill was not obvious; it merely ran up one's spine, so cold it gave no indications of its advance. By the time realization dawned, the person would have already subconsciously sensed danger and felt the urge to dodge his cutting brilliance.

Ding Tao shot his mouth off and popped out his head to whisper, "See that jade earring? Our Master polished it personally. Young Master wears it every day."

That jade earring adorned his right ear, and it was still debatable whether Shen Zechuan embellished it or it embellished Shen Zechuan. It was like a needless warning that concealed Xiao Chiye's undisguised possessiveness behind that smoothness, making it clear to all that no one else, other than Xiao Chiye, could touch Shen Zechuan.

Wu Ziyu had only just burrowed his way among them and had still yet to decide what demeanor he should adopt to greet and welcome Shen Zechuan. But seeing as everyone around him looked as they usually did, he did the same as well, his prying gaze warding off by that jade earring.

By the time Shen Zechuan was able to meet Xiao Fangxu, it was already nearly the hour of zi. Chen Yang lifted the flap for him to let him enter.

Xiao Fangxu was initially sitting with his leg propped up, but on seeing the white figure entering, he suddenly sat straight up. But then, he felt he was really being too unnatural, so he attempted to cover it up by propping his hand on his knee to appear more imposing, only to look all the more conspicuous as he looked at Shen Zechuan without so much a smile.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting in the tent for so long." Zuo Qianqiu guided Shen Zechuan. "It's been a tough journey here, hasn't it? Come have



a meal with us first. We'll talk as we eat."

With that, he turned his head and signaled to Xiao Fangxu with his eyes.

Xiao Fangxu scrutinized Shen Zechuan. He still remembered this face, but his aura was completely poles apart from the person he had seen one year ago. He thought, *well then*.

He's truly too damn stunning.

"Sit." Xiao Fangxu said coolly.

Gu Jin served the tea, and Chen Yang brought out the dishes. The meal was simple, consisting of a large bowl of lamb stew, tea blended with fresh milk, piping hot flatbread, and commonly seen cabbages and green vegetables at the frontlines.

Shen Zechuan stared at the spread before him; they clearly overestimated him.

Zuo Qianqiu gestured for Shen Zechuan to dig in. He tore apart the flatbread and said, "There isn't much good stuff here. We wanted to welcome you with a meal, but there isn't much here, so this will have to do. If we can get a truce during the new year, we will surely not put you through such aggrievement when we are back in Dajing."

Shen Zechuan found the word "aggrievement" strange. He was here to discuss the frontier trade market and the use of paths with Xiao Fangxu. Xiao Fangxu was willing to meet him, so no matter how he looked at it, the word "aggrievement" should not be part of the picture at all.

"It's been half a year since we parted. When we met in Qudu the last time, you were not this thin." Zuo Qianqiu said, "Is your *shifu* well?"

Without putting down his chopsticks, Shen Zechuan nodded in reply. "*Shifu* has been in good health lately and leads a carefree life in Cizhou. He often misses you. Before I came, he specially instructed me to deliver a letter on his behalf." He then looked back and shouted, "Fei Sheng."

Fei Sheng handed the letter over to Chen Yang. As Zuo Qianqiu and Shen Zechuan exchanged pleasantries for a few moments, Xiao Fangxu sliced the lamb meat with a dagger and said, "Are you here to discuss the trade market with me?"

"That's right." Shen Zechuan replied, "And the matter of the bridle paths as well."

"Access to Libei's bridle paths will not be given for free," Xiao Fangxu placed the sliced lamb meat onto his plate, "It's all good as long as you can

afford to pay. However, the mutual trade market is not for external loan.”

“If Your Lordship doesn’t permit external loan of the trade market, it will be left vacant this year.” Shen Zechuan sampled the flatbread before continuing, “The war this year is intense, and the grasslands of the Huiyan Tribe have been commandeered for use by the Hanshe Tribe; they’re now waiting to trade their remaining cattle and sheep for grain at the trade market to get through winter. If the trade market doesn’t open up, then thousands of people will starve to death in the heavy snow.”

“Libei’s willingness to vacate land for the Huiyan Tribe to get through winter is already a magnanimous show of benevolence. They are well aware that we are in a difficult predicament this year.” Xiao Fangxu wiped the dagger clean and looked towards Shen Zechuan. “Do you know what it means to let you have the trade market? It means that your people can shuttle in and out of Libei this winter. It’s currently wartime. What if bandits of Mount Luo who have defected to the Biansha people infiltrate their way in? Dare you bear the consequences then?”

“I dare not,” Shen Zechuan locked eyes with Xiao Fangxu. “That’s why I will eliminate all possibilities of this ‘what if’.”

Xiao Fangxu tossed the dagger into the tray at the side, “I don’t believe that.”

“Then how about I hand the authority to inspect over to Your Lordship?” Shen Zechuan grasped his handkerchief and slowly let out a smile. “Cizhou will provide the grains. As for how to send it over, Libei will have the final say.”

“What do you want in exchange?” Xiao Fangxu asked in a quiet voice. “This transaction is not at all a good deal for you.”

“I want a road in exchange.” Shen Zechuan stretched out his index finger and drew a line in the air. “A commercial trade road that can run through the entire northeastern territories of Dazhou, one that will give Libei and Cizhou the opportunity to establish a long-term relationship with one another.”

Xiao Fangxu did not respond. The flap of the tent on the other side lifted, and Xiao Chiye entered.



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#### Footnotes

1. 明枪易躲，暗箭难防 it is easier to avoid open attacks but harder to guard against hidden ones.

# QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 163 : BOAT ON RIVER

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



Shen Zechuan's gaze roamed over Xiao Chiye's body, like an imperceptible tease. It lasted merely a split second, so fast that Xiao Chiye could only catch that last modicum of it.

"What benefits will Libei get out of it if I let you use the frontier trade market?" Xiao Fangxu wiped his hands clean. "Libei isn't dependent on the trade road for survival."

"In the past, the noble clans adopted the strategy of befriending distant states while attacking one nearby<sup>1</sup> in order to hold Libei in check. This rendered the southern side of Libei powerless and left Libei isolated and cut off from assistance. I'm now willing to be the link connecting Zhongbo and Libei again, as well as serve as a buffer zone between Libei and Qidong." Shen Zechuan said, "Libei has to fight a protracted war with Biansha, and it'll be too dangerous if it can't be allies with Zhongbo."

Xiao Chiye sat down next to Xiao Fangxu. After Chen Yang presented him with a new pair of chopsticks, he picked up a piece of lamb meat from the plate to eat.

Xiao Fangxu glanced at Xiao Chiye out of the corner of his eye, then looked at Shen Zechuan and said, "You are not the Prince of Jianxing, Shen Wei. Your words still don't carry enough weight to represent the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo. I know you wrestled away Zhou Gui's Cizhou using 'transiting through' as an excuse, and you also subdued Luo Mu's Chazhou into submission under the pretext of 'delivering grains'. But King Yi of the two prefectures of Fanzhou and Dengzhou and the bandits of Mount Luo of the two prefectures of Dunzhou and Duanzhou aren't under your control."

Shen Zechuan already had a scheme in mind. "King Yi is a commoner forced into rebellion by the bandits. The two prefectures of Fanzhou and Dengzhou have less than 30,000 troops. He can't beat the Biansha Cavalry to the east, and he doesn't dare to face up against Qi Zhuyin directly to the south. He can only establish a small imperial court in Fanzhou and attempt to join forces with the bandits from Mount Luo. This person is just like a

paper tiger, not significant enough to fear. The bandits of Mount Luo are presently mired in internal strife and torn apart by disunity; they are no longer a threat to Zhongbo. Besides, neither of them will negotiate with Libei. Only Cizhou comes with a sincere heart. Given that the trade route between Huaizhou, Cizhou, and Chazhou has already taken shape, Cizhou is able to bypass Qudu to conduct monetary transactions with Juexi. If Libei so needs, Cizhou can supply the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path.”

Filthy rich!

Xiao Fangxu and Zuo Qianqiu thought at the same time.

To supply the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path was to supply Libei with military provisions. Shen Zechuan’s greatest assets in Juexi lay in the Xi clan’s stores. He had long decided to continue using the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path when he left Qudu. The military provisions case brought the scalping of grains in Juexi to light, but it also allowed Shen Zechuan to lock on to a loophole. Xi Hongxuan was held back by the Hua clan of Dicheng to the north when he had to go through the Hezhou waterways while dealing in grains in the past. But now that Shen Zechuan had Huaizhou, he would be able to purchase grains from Juexi.

“But at the same time,” Shen Zechuan changed the subject. “I hope the newly established garrison troops of the six prefectures can receive guidance from the Libei Armored Cavalry and buy battle steeds from Hongyan Mountains in the future.”

This time, not only Xiao Fangxu turned his gaze to him; even Xiao Chiye did so.

“You want to establish a cavalry too?” Xiao Fangxu’s interest was piqued. “In Zhongbo, along Chashi River?”

Shen Zechuan drank the hot milk to warm himself a little. “Duanzhou needs a cavalry.”

Zhongbo had no grasslands, so the garrisons of the six prefectures of Zhongbo were mainly infantries. However, Zhongbo’s terrains did not enjoy the same natural geographical advantage as Qidong, which had the two checkpoints of Tianfei Watchtower and Suotian Pass for protection. The terrain along Chashi River was a vast, open expanse, and the line of defense Duanzhou set up there could not withstand the repeated assaults of the Biansha Cavalry. Zhongbo had long needed to rebuild the Chashi military defense.

“My elder brother’s name was Ji Mu. He was a Squad Commander in the Duanzhou garrison troops when the troops of Zhongbo suffered a defeat.” Shen Zechuan paused for a moment. “He was familiar with the area along the Chashi River. Like Libei, it’s a wide expanse of flatlands. The defense camps established at that time did not have the beacon towers of the Bianjun Commandery that stretched for tens of thousands of *li*, nor did they have the falcons reconnaissance of Libei. When they were breached one after another by the Biansha Cavalry, there was no time at all for them to pass on military intelligence.”

This was one of the reasons for the fall of Duanzhou. The public roads’ relay horses could not outrun the Biansha Cavalry, and they were all slaughtered en route to their destinations. With military information delayed in transit, the various cities in the rear could not receive any updates. What greeted them when the cities’ gates were broken down were the Biansha Cavalry’s scimitars right in their faces, and this was followed right after by the massacre of the cities.

Ji Mu had died with a grievance.

All the 40,000 garrison soldiers in the Chashi sinkhole died unjust deaths; they had the determination to die protecting their homes and country, but they never got the opportunity. Heavy snow blanketed the Chashi sinkhole, and from then on, the men of Zhongbo became the stray dogs of Dazhou.

“Duanzhou needs a light cavalry.” Shen Zechuan said firmly. “After the defeat of the troops, the area along Chashi River fell into the hands of the Biansha people, and whatever few were left of the Duanzhou’s defense camps all fell into disuse. To rebuild them, Duanzhou needs an army of light cavalry.”

Xiao Fangxu stroked his chin. “There are plenty of options if you only want a route to pass on military information efficiently. Re-establish a dense cluster of relay stations along Chashi River and repair the bridle paths as soon as possible, and you can be as swift as you want. But if you want an army of light cavalry that can rival the Biansha Cavalry, then Libei can’t help you.”

Zuo Qianqiu nodded and said to Shen Zechuan, “The Biansha Cavalry’s strength lies not only in their speed, but also in how far more adept they are on horseback than any of Dazhou’s soldiers; this is something that not even the Libei Armored Cavalry can compare to.”

“Furthermore, a Duanzhou that relinquishes its defenses is akin to an infant in swaddling clothes.” Through his peripheral vision, Xiao Fangxu watched Xiao Chiye stealthily push that plate of meat with his fingers towards Shen Zechuan. He shifted his foot and stomped on his son’s foot under the table.

Xiao Chiye sucked in a breath and said, “I think it’s... feasible!”

“The hell you know.” Xiao Fangxu reproved.

Xiao Chiye turned his thumb ring around twice. “I actually do know something.”

He looked towards Shen Zechuan again and felt a very subtle itch when their gazes met; Xiao Chiye knew exactly what Shen Zechuan was thinking.

“Why must this light cavalry compare to the Biansha Cavalry? Even if we remove the heavy armors of the Libei Armored Cavalry, we will not achieve the same results as the Biansha Cavalry.” Xiao Chiye felt a little lazy after eating his fill. “Lanzhou still has the Imperial Bodyguards in his command, and using them for information-gathering, data-tracking, and record-taking is too much of a waste. But, as long as you pair the Imperial Bodyguards with the best horses, they’ll have a chance to break through Biansha’s defenses along Chashi River.”

“How many men are there in the Imperial Bodyguards?” Xiao Fangxu scoffed. “Their addition to the battlefield is comparable to a strand of hair on an ox.”

“The Imperial Bodyguard can always be expanded according to their selection criteria if there aren’t enough men. Not only does Lanzhou have the fastest intelligence-gatherers in Dazhou, he also possesses assassins who are the most adept in the art of camouflage.” Xiao Chiye said, “Is having few men a shortcoming? Not always. As a light cavalry of assassins, being small in number is their advantage. Rather than calling them a strand of ox hair, why not call them a piece of steel needle.<sup>2</sup> Use this needle in the right place, and even a vulture will fall.”

Shen Zechuan was inspired by Xiao Jiming’s mode of warfare. If he were to establish camps along the Chashi River that could supply the frontline, then he still lacked a military force that could act as a heavy hammer like the Libei Armored Cavalry. But there was no way the Libei Armored Cavalry could be replicated, so Shen Zechuan swapped the hammer for a steel needle.

Think about it, a sufficiently fortified defense wall that could be built spanning from Dunzhou to Duanzhou. If Shen Zechuan had the infantry shifted behind this wall and transformed into bowmen equipped with additional defensive weapons, then had a troop of light cavalry with eccentric whereabouts placed along the Chashi River, he would possess a bird's eye panoramic view of everything within and beyond the wall. This cavalry – or perhaps it would be more appropriate to call them the assassination squad evolved from the Imperial Bodyguards – would be able to go under disguise; they would remain Shen Zechuan's eyes and ears on the ground.

Silent. And omnipresent.

As long as Shen Zechuan so desired, he would be able to hear everything.

Zuo Qianqiu inwardly sucked in a breath of cold air. Having been stationed in Tianfei Watchtower for so many years, he understood best the stealthiness of assassins such as this. This assumption was enough to give one the chills.

Silence descended upon the tent. Everyone was waiting for Xiao Fangxu to speak. Xiao Fangxu thought for a long time before he said to Shen Zechuan, "You may trade grains for horses, but if you were to succeed in establishing this light cavalry, don't ever let them take a single step into Libei." He pushed the plate away, propped up his arm on the table, and said to Shen Zechuan with a smile, "Or I'll kill them, and kill you."

An imposing aura that was all too substantive came bearing down on him, crushing him. Before Xiao Chiye could get to open his mouth, Shen Zechuan pressed down on his arm. He stood his own against the weight of the alpha wolf's gaze on him and, in that long, endless moment, slowly replied, "Deal."

Xiao Fangxu bent his finger and flicked it at the rim of the bowl, retracting his imposing aura just as freely as he had released it.



When everyone had dispersed, Xiao Fangxu sat by the fire and rotated the dagger to heat it.

"It's still not too late," Zuo Qianqiu sat down, "for regrets."

Light from the flame cast upon the side of Xiao Fangxu's face. He said, "This lad is too dangerous."



“You do know who his teacher is, don’t you?” Zuo Qianqiu soothed him. “What’s more, he’s Ji Gang’s disciple. He’s really not bad at heart.”

“Don’t try to fob me off with that. Even brothers born of the same parents differ from each other. Qi Huilian is not one to keep to his own devices either.” Xiao Fangxu caressed the blade with his thumb. “Cracks abound everywhere in the world. Men like this can’t fight battles, yet they can come out on top to stand upon a mountain of corpses amidst a sea of blood.”

After a long period of silence, Zuo Qianqiu asked, “Then why are you still willing to agree to it?”

Xiao Fangxu looked at that sliding glint of the blade as light from the flame bathed it in red. He examined his own reflection on the blade under the small crackling of the bonfire. Eventually, he said, “My son has himself made into a lock.”



Shen Zechuan undid the clasps on his coat as he faced the candle flame, looking a little weary.

He had not had this kind of feeling for a very long, long time—the sense of setback from being exposed for his bluff.

Shen Zechuan had never told anyone about Duanzhou’s light cavalry, not even Qi Huilian and Xiao Chiye. Many of what he did in the past had their roots in impure motives. As long as he got his hands on it, he would fully exploit it. He called all of those “hypocrisies”, and they were even more atrocious before Xiao Chiye had come into the picture. That was why he could not—dared not tell anyone.

Shen Zechuan loosened his collar, as if he would be able to breathe by doing so.

The sounds of footsteps rang out outside the military tent. Xiao Chiye spoke to the guards, and Shen Zechuan stopped what he was doing when he heard his voice. Just then, Xiao Chiye lifted the flap and entered.

“A-Ye.” Shen Zechuan did not turn around and merely inclined his head slightly to the side as he called out to him.

Xiao Chiye pressed his chest against him from behind.

Shen Zechuan melted under Xiao Chiye’s breathing, and the feeling earlier eased up some. As they nuzzled each other intimately, the temperature gradually rose, so hot was it that they were both sweating. Shen Zechuan breathed out hot air. It was as if Xiao Chiye’s kiss had scalded

him. He put on an expression similar to pain, but the corners of his eyes brimmed with pleasure as he indulged and lost himself within.

He was fond of Xiao Chiye's kisses.

Xiao Chiye took hold of both of Shen Zechuan's hands and brought them behind the latter as though he was binding him up. He extinguished the candle, and amid the remaining wisps of white smoke, edged along the nape of that neck where he buried his own despondency.

"Lanzhou." Xiao Chiye savored the word in his mouth.

All of a sudden, the table was swept clean. Shen Zechuan wanted to reach for the edge of the table, but his hands were bound and grasped so tightly by Xiao Chiye. Shen Zechuan tilted his head up until he could see the side of Xiao Chiye's face.

Kiss me.

Shen Zechuan mouthed silently.

But Xiao Chiye did not. He remained where he was a small distance apart and did not move again.



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#### Footnotes

1. 远交近攻 "Befriend a distant state; attack one nearby" from the Thirty-Six Stratagems (三十六计)
2. Strand of hair on an ox = a drop in the ocean; we are sticking to the literal translation to keep the imagery between one thin, soft hair and one stronk steel needle.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 164 : SUNRISE

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



There was clearly only a little distance between them. Xiao Chiye watched Shen Zechuan attentively, his gaze sliding from his brow to his lips as he said in a hoarse voice, “Oh, how I love you so.”

Shen Zechuan felt a shiver rise through him—that was a tremble of defeat. He was like the captured night in the dim light, a pervading darkness that would still entwine Xiao Chiye. The grip on him was too tight, so much so that all that lay in his eyes was fully bared to Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye inched closer in a confrontation that was almost a kiss. He murmured, maliciously and wickedly, “I love you so much.”

Shen Zechuan felt like he was about to be driven astray by Xiao Chiye’s words; this line ended him over and over again. He could not keep up an ounce of pretense, and what remained of “Shen Zechuan” lay fully exposed before Xiao Chiye. This was a side of him that Shen Zechuan himself could not bring himself to face. All that had to do with hypocrisy, deceit, and hostility was swept up into the tidal waves of desire.

Shen Zechuan was panting.

The word ‘love’ signified holding nothing back.

Xiao Chiye made Shen Zechuan’s eyes wet. That feeling of being filled surged through Shen Zechuan’s body while he was pressed against the edge of the table, causing him to cry out softly as he clung on to Xiao Chiye’s warmth without reservations.

Xiao Chiye restrained both of Shen Zechuan’s wrists. Leading up from the curve of his waist was a crescent moon. He seized on the opportunity his height afforded him to press against this lustrous smoothness, thrusting in and out with overwhelming force. It was as though he wanted to nail the words “I love you so much” into Shen Zechuan’s body, and then brand it deep into his bones and blood.

The jade earring was polished until it gleamed with a watery shine.

There were still the sounds of the patrol squad on their rounds outside the military tent, of someone chatting a short distance away, and of the sighing of the wind as it roamed. But all of that belonged to another universe; none of them belonged to Shen Zechuan. He could only hear the

table being bumped out of place, the climax of their union, and Xiao Chiye's heartbeat.

Every single thrust spelled "I love you so much."

This was too much to bear for Shen Zechuan; he was about to come undone, be it his voice or another part of him. He trembled, unable to stand firm on his feet, and as his cries unraveled, he extended a finger on his restrained hands to hook it on the hem of Xiao Chiye's clothes.

This one hook melted Xiao Chiye's heart into a puddle of mush.

Xiao Chiye kissed Shen Zechuan on his nape, as though he was holding him in his mouth. He was clearly so fierce, and yet he was also this tender. Shen Zechuan leaned back against Xiao Chiye, intimately joined in unison from the cavity of their chests to every single part of them.

A beautiful line extended from the small of his back, accentuating it.

Xiao Chiye undid the restraints, but Shen Zechuan gave up reaching for the edge of the table. Nothing in this world could be relied on, nothing except Xiao Chiye. Xiao Chiye murmured something into Shen Zechuan's ear; it was as if he was egging him on, and at the same time, showering him with praises.

Shen Zechuan was *the* jade.

Xiao Chiye kissed him.

Water droplets fell from the corners of Shen Zechuan's eyes; he closed his eyes, damp with tears, and with all the self-restraint he could muster, he called out in a soft, trembling voice, "A-Ye."

Xiao Chiye buried his face in the side of Shen Zechuan's neck; he was intoxicated, taunted all day by this evil man who called his name as he pleased, his every word an invitation. He dawdled, as if he had woken up from a nap, and naturally responded, "Hm?"

"Ce'an," Shen Zechuan turned his head to face Xiao Chiye, their breaths intertwining. In a show of near innocence, he called out, like a toddler learning to speak, "oh, how I, love, you, so."

Xiao Chiye lost his hold on Shen Zechuan's waist. His mouth was parched as he pulled out with difficulty. He quickly picked his Lanzhou off the ground and took a few steps to the edge of the couch, where he turned him over.

Xiao Chiye pulled up Shen Zechuan's hands and kissed him deeply. They had to do it face-to-face so that they could take in all the worst and the best of each other's expressions into their eyes. Xiao Chiye pushed aside

Shen Zechuan's damp hair. Even their imperfections were congruent with one another. All that was abominable, eccentric, and even ruthless of them could leave no chasm between them.

They entangled intimately in secret, indulging to their hearts' content.

Sweating in never-ending torrents amidst the howling winds on the battlefield.



At the third quarter of the hour of mao, Xiao Chiye carried Shen Zechuan on his back and made his way to the frost-covered grasslands.

"It's taking so long." Shen Zechuan gathered the fur collar around him and buried himself into Xiao Chiye's back. He said in a muffled voice, "Start running."

"Exhausting me to death?" Xiao Chiye jolted him once.

Shen Zechuan grasped the little braid concealed under Xiao Chiye's collar with his fingers and said, "I'm already exhausted to death."

The day was still early, and the eastern mountain ranges blocked some of the views in their field of visions. Both men were covered under the same cloak under the strong wind. Before the day broke, they had already walked out of Shayi camp. There was a small watchtower to the north that had already fallen into disuse, and it was here that Xiao Chiye was heading to.

Both men huddled under the cloak together and sat atop the old watchtower, facing the east as they waited for sunrise.

"I thought you came to propose marriage." Xiao Chiye moved Shen Zechuan's inclined head onto his own shoulder. "I'm getting old from all this waiting."

Shen Zechuan was sensitive to the cold, and the wind was strong. He stretched out half a finger to lift up the overcoat and burrowed his way inside, wanting so much to bury all of himself into Xiao Chiye's bosom to seek refuge from the wind.

"I'll come again when you're eighty." Shen Zechuan said. "By then, your father won't be able to hack me."

Xiao Chiye planted his chin on top of Shen Zechuan's head with the overcoat between them. "At the very least, you're the prefectural lord, so you still ought to possess the audacity to elope." He thought about it, then continued, "The old man does admire you so."

Was the reason Shen Zechuan wanted a light cavalry of assassins truly to place them along the Chashi River? A squad like that required inhuman self-restraint, because they were simply too good to utilize. How long of a preparation time would Shen Zechuan need to put together such a squad? If he went to all the efforts and succeeded, the problem would bring them back to square one—could this squad continue to be placed along the Chashi River? Did Shen Zechuan truly only want to deploy them along the Chashi River? This was a blade that would kill without restraint. It had a darkness that mirrored another side of Shen Zechuan.

If he did not have Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye pulled the cloak down a little to reveal Shen Zechuan and said, “Here it comes.”

With his eyes peeking out, Shen Zechuan looked towards the east. Xiao Chiye lifted him directly by the chin.

Thick clouds rolled on the horizon, while the wind ran rampant amidst the dim world. Shortly afterward, golden rays of light broke through the gaps, like countless arrows of light piercing through the layers of clouds. The sun, which seemed to bear the load of immense weight, launched out from the waves of clouds, pulverizing the floating clouds into foam as it rose magnificently in all its majesty. The vast expanse of grasslands was instantaneously illuminated, igniting the thin frost such that they sparkled as they paved the earth. Withered grass roared to life, its billowy surge in the wind clear and distinct to the ears.

“Xiao Ce’an.” Shen Zechuan inexplicably called out.

Xiao Chiye poked him in the cheek.

Shen Zechuan grabbed hold of his finger, revealing the redness between his wrists. He seemed to be considering something.

Golden waves of brilliant rays rippled out of the sky, and in no time, blue spread out like ink on a piece of rice paper<sup>1</sup> to paint the entire canvas of sky over their head. The vast white snow-capped peaks of Hongyan Mountains stood against the summit of the clouds, where falcons cried out as they hovered. A golden hue washed over Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye in the wind.

The deluge of wind was so swift that Shen Zechuan had the illusion he was about to be blown away.

But Xiao Chiye was like a steady rock shielding him from the back as he gradually moved to grasp his hands in return.

“You can do as your heart desires.” Xiao Chiye whispered into his ear.  
“With me here, you will never fall.”



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Credits: Many thanks to [Tea](#) for proofreading!

### Footnotes

1. 宣纸 *Xuan* paper, or rice paper, is a kind of paper originating in ancient China used for writing and painting. It is renowned for being soft and fine-textured, suitable for conveying the artistic expression of both Chinese calligraphy and painting. Anyway, useless piece of trivia here don't mind me lol.

# QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 165 : SHUANG YI

Translated with: Jia<3



Xiao Chiye gave the horse that Lu Yizhi left behind to Shen Zechuan and accompanied Shen Zechuan horse-riding on the grasslands of the war zone while he still had time to spare. This horse was snow-white all over, with only a small patch of black on its chest. It was both pretty and intelligent, and even more lively than Lang Tao Xue Jin.

There was no war going on today. Xiao Fangxu sat on top of the railing in his armor and watched as Shen Zechuan made rounds on his horse. He said to Zuo Qianqiu, “This habit...”

“This habit?” Zuo Qianqiu squinted his eyes against the sunlight to look at the prescription in his hand. “Complete your sentence, man.”

“Is like A-Ye’s mother.” Xiao Fangxu stretched out a finger and traced Shen Zechuan’s trajectory twice. “Can’t ride straight.”

“He stays in Qudu all year round and isn’t adept at horsemanship. Just let A-Ye take him out riding more often in the future.” Zuo Qianqiu raised his head. “Have you found Yideng?”

“The Venerable Master is an elusive one. His comings and goings are unpredictable. He’s not easy to track down.” Xiao Fangxu was still holding his helmet in his hand as he brushed the dust off it. “Why?”

Zuo Qianqiu said gravely, “We have to get Yideng to take a look at this child’s illness. I saw him in Qudu last year. Although he appeared weak and frail outwardly, there was no major, internal damage. But looking at him now, he’s already showing clear signs of deterioration.”

Xiao Fangxu sized Shen Zechuan up. “That serious?”

“You have to pay the price two-fold for consuming the medicine this long.” Zuo Qianqiu said, “He successively suffered misfortunes thrice in Qudu, and what happened with Qi Huilian was a heavy blow to him. The good thing is that A-Ye and Ji Gang are both paying attention.”

“Can he be treated?” Xiao Fangxu withdrew his gaze and looked at Zuo Qianqiu.



With a slight frown on his face, Zuo Qianqiu folded up the prescription and returned it to his bosom. "... I think it's tough. Let's get him nursed back to health first."



Shen Zechuan's table had an extra bowl of fresh milk during mealtime in the afternoon. He did not understand the distribution of supplies on the battleground, so he merely thought that it was on Xiao Chiye's instruction. But later, when Xiao Chiye entered, he brought with him another bowl of fresh milk for Shen Zechuan to drink his fill.

Xiao Chiye said nothing as he ate his meal, believing the milk to be from Zuo Qianqiu. Just as he was about to go thank his *shifu*, he bumped into Chen Yang, who had come to collect the bowl.

"Is it *shifu*'s?" Xiao Chiye nimbly put on his outer robe. "I'll send it back to him."

Chen Yang set the bowl in the tray and said in a hushed tone, "It's our Lordship's."

Xiao Chiye's movements slowed.

"His Lordship instructed Wu Ziyu in the morning to give his own portion to the Young Master. He even got the Bianbo Camp to send milk-producing cows and sheep to Cizhou." Chen Yang picked up the tray. "Then he made a special point of telling us not to make it public or tell Master about it."

This old man.

Xiao Chiye nodded, "Give mine to my father tomorrow morning to make up for it." After a moment's hesitation, he called out to Chen Yang just before the latter was about to leave the tent, "... Forget it. I understand."



Shen Zechuan could not stay for long in the war zone. The weather in the Hongyan Mountains underwent an abrupt turn, and he had to return after staying for two days. Heavy fog descended on them on the day of departure, and the humid wind in the eastern mountain range blew so hard it sent the military banners flapping.

Xiao Chiye secured the cloak for Shen Zechuan and put the fur collar on him. Seeing as Xiao Chiye was still wearing a single piece of garment, Shen Zechuan asked in a quiet tone, "It's about to be winter here soon. Is there still no word on the winter coats for the military?"

“Eldest sister-in-law is thinking of a way.” Xiao Chiye shielded Shen Zechuan from the wind and propped himself against the carriage door. “After the new year this year, come to Dajing with Ji Gang-*shifu*.”

Shen Zechuan cast a glance behind Xiao Chiye and moved in to whisper, “Can I?”

Xiao Chiye answered in a whisper too, “Hurry up and come marry me to make things clear to my father. Otherwise, we’ll keep looking like we are having a clandestine love affair.”

How would Shen Zechuan know that Xiao Chiye had already laid out his cards on the table to Libei? He actually nodded on hearing him and said, “Eldest sister-in-law even gave me a set of bracelets the last time. I’ll send a gift in return during the new year.”

Xiao Chiye found Lanzhou adorable. He laughed and stroked Shen Zechuan’s cheek again. “The Armored Cavalry will follow along on your way back. Write me a letter when you reach Cizhou. I’ll return to Bianbo Camp in another three or four days. It’s closer.”

“I’ll write you a stack.” Shen Zechuan slowed down his speech, as if that would slow down time.

“The fan isn’t made yet. I was so busy I forgot all about it.” Xiao Chiye touched the jade earring lightly with his fingertip. “I’ll craft a new one for you after the new year.”

Shen Zechuan said, “Then, I’m leaving.”

Xiao Chiye lowered his head to enter, but before he could move closer, Shen Zechuan cupped his cheeks and kissed him. This kiss was brief, a touch lasting just a fleeting moment. Xiao Chiye rose to leave the carriage, then put the curtain down and took a few steps back.

Fei Sheng stood at the side, wanting to say a few words to ingratiate himself with him, but before he could say a word, Xiao Chiye pressed him over.

“Wherever Lanzhou is,” The expression in Xiao Chiye’s eyes was cold and detached. “You better be there.”<sup>1</sup>

Fei Sheng felt as if it was an iron vise gripping him by the nape, suffocating him until he could scarcely breathe. He nodded hastily, and Xiao Chiye let him go.

The horse carriage began to roll. Xiao Chiye stood where he was and watched as the carriage left. Shen Zechuan tugged the curtain open. Half of the Hongyan Mountains behind Xiao Chiye were partially concealed among

the clouds and mist while the wind howled. At this very moment, Xiao Chiye's figure oddly overlapped with the Hongyan Mountains.

Shen Zechuan gazed at him.

Several falcons suddenly circled out of the wind, and the head of the cast of falcons, Meng, let loose a cry that reverberated through the camp. Military tents of all sizes instantly lifted their entrance flaps, while a long whistle sounded from the top of the watchtower.

When Xiao Fangxu stepped out of his tent, his battle steed was already in position. He held his blade and flipped atop the horse, where he said in a deep voice, "Squad Three to guard the camp. Vanguards to move first! Convoy squad, turn around immediately and retreat down to Sha'er camp to protect the military craftsmen!"

As Xiao Chiye stepped back, he put on his helmet and turned to mount Lang Tao Xue Jin, which had just trotted over. The wind was so strong Shen Zechuan could not open his eyes. He clung on to the carriage door, watching as Xiao Chiye receded further and further away amidst the strong wind.

The clouds dispersed, scattering into millions of snowflakes that danced in the skies of Libei.

The first snow of the battlefield had come.



At the third quarter of the hour of yin, Li Jianting opened her eyes right on time. She sat up, and the palace maid in attendance stepped up to pull up the heavy drapes. Fengquan, dressed in the official robes of eunuchs, nimbly and diligently helped Li Jianting to put on her shoes.

Mu Ru assassinated Li Jianheng, and Fengquan found a scapegoat. All this while, he had been hiding in the Xue's residence, and after Li Jianheng's burial, he became Li Jianting's personal eunuch. Now that Li Jianting was living in the palace, Fengquan returned with her. At first, Xue Xiuzhou did not plan to use him again, but Li Jianting insisted, so Fengquan changed his name and continued to stay at Li Jianting's side.

Li Jianting did not sleep well. She did not seem to have adapted to this massive bedchamber as yet. All the palace maids serving the heir apparent to the throne knew that Li Jianting only allowed Fengquan to remain serving in the hall at night. As they waited outside, they would occasionally hear the sound of her being trapped in the throes of a nightmare.

The people in the bedchamber moved lightly and softly as they soundlessly helped Li Jianting dress. When she was all properly presented, Fengquan stepped forth with a bow and lifted his sleeve to carefully affix the flower embellishment<sup>2</sup> on her forehead. The heir apparent to the throne did not suit fair colors; she was best decked out in scarlet red.

By the hour of mao, Li Jianting was already waiting under the eaves for the various officials participating in the classics colloquium to come over for lectures. It was windy today, and Fengquan covered her with a cloak before standing at the side to shield her from the wind. He was so freezing cold that his lips turned purple.

Li Jianting looked at Fengquan and said, "It's already autumn. Didn't the Caps and Kerchiefs Service issue new coats?"

Fengquan was not permitted to look at Li Jianting directly, so he turned slightly to her and answered, "To reply Your Highness, they did."

Li Jianting raised a finger to touch her own cloak, but it promptly dawned on her that every single move of hers as she stood here was being watched. It was indeed inappropriate for her to undress for an eunuch, and it would easily give others grounds for gossip. She looked towards the upturned eaves shrouded in gloom a short distance away and paused for a moment, but in the end, she did not say a word more.

She did not know if there had been a delay on the way here today, but the officials were late to arrive. Li Jianting stood until her legs went numb. She looked at Fengquan again, and this time, she saw Fengquan's ear in the dimness.

Fengquan thought Li Jianting was cold, so he said, "This slave shall send someone over to take a look..."

"You have an ear piercing." Li Jianting gazed fixedly at Fengquan's ear.

Fengquan looked abruptly at Li Jianting and subconsciously thought of blocking his ear. But very quickly, he lowered his eyes and nodded quietly as he cautiously slowed his breathing. He found this tiny hole in his ear a nightmare, one that made him gag indistinctly and amplified his panic under Li Jianting's silence.

After a long interval, Li Jianting saw an eunuch leading the officials over towards the eaves. She nodded her head respectfully and waited for them. As she lowered her head, she said softly, "Looks really nice."

At the same time the officials lifted the curtain, Fengquan threw a swift glance at Li Jianting. But Li Jianting did not look at him. It was as if she had not spoken at all as she bent over and followed the gentlemen in.

The fists that Fengquan had hidden under his sleeves broke out in sweat. He retreated to the side of the door, and after a long period of time, he stealthily looked askance through the gaps in the door curtain where he saw the hem of Li Jianting's skirt, feeling bewildered and uncertain of her words earlier.



Shen Zechuan's return journey was not considered quick; the roads were difficult to maneuver on a rainy and snowy day, and Fei Sheng dared not be careless for fear that Shen Zechuan would fall ill on the way. As such, he attended to everything personally. Even with the Libei Armored Cavalry's accompaniment, the inner sides of the horse carriage continued to be guarded by the Imperial Bodyguards. The daily brewing of medicine was also supervised by Fei Sheng himself.

The horse carriage came to a stop after passing the Bianbo camp. The bridle paths had been damaged by mudslides, and repairs would delay the journey by a day. Consequently, the troops opted to spend the night in the open.

Shen Zechuan stepped off the horse carriage and brought Ding Tao along to walk the horse further ahead.

"Has Young Master given this horse a name yet?" Walking backwards, Ding Tao pillowed his arms at the back of his head and asked.

"Feng Ta Shuang Yi." Leading the horse along, Shen Zechuan stroked its mane.

Ding Tao clenched his fist in understanding, "What a great name; it goes perfectly together with Master's Lang Tao Xue Jin!"<sup>3</sup>

Shen Zechuan looked towards the south, and Ding Tao turned to do the same. He said, "Riding in that direction for eight or nine days will bring you to Dunzhou."

"So close." Shen Zechuan had not expected that. "I don't see any of Libei's relay stations in the vicinity."

"They used to exist, but were deserted afterwards," Ding Tao said. "Now everyone has headed northeast to fight with the Biansha people."

Shen Zechuan let out a breath of hot air, turned his gaze away, and continued strolling for a while more with Ding Tao.

At night, Fei Sheng led his men on overnight duty. He sat alongside the Libei Armored Cavalry and warmed himself by the campfire. He shrank his neck back and said, "Libei is seriously cold; it isn't even winter yet and there is already snow on the battlefields. It's indeed not easy on my fellow brothers. Here, have some meat!"

The accompanying Libei Armored Cavalry was a brigade commander of the mobile corps. He did not stand on ceremony with Fei Sheng and sat around the fire with the rest of them as he gorged on meat. "The snow in Libei always comes early. In previous years, we would be going home around this time, leaving only a few battalions to guard the frontier."

"I don't think this war will stop." Fei Sheng accepted the proffered *On Horseback* and took a few mouthfuls. The resulting burn made him cheer with appreciative satisfaction. "If it wasn't for all of you holding the fort here, all the prefectures down south would have to suffer."

"It can't be helped." The brigade commander ate until he was all ruddy in the face. "We are the Libei Armored Cavalry."

Fei Sheng got emotional in an instant. "Everyone says that the Libei Armored Cavalry is the bastion of iron of the north; all of you are true warriors of iron. I was already in great awe back in Qudu. That old Han dog loved to get all jealous when he saw that Libei was in the emperor's favor and kept spouting bullshit. I couldn't take it lying down and contradicted him multiple times. Now that I've actually arrived in Libei, it turns out that I was right; all my fellow brothers here are men worthy of befriending! In the future, If anyone were to come to Cizhou for work, don't prepare a thing. Once you get off your horse, go to the *yamen* and give them my name, and I'll make the arrangements for everyone here!"

Thrilled, the brigade commander patted Fei Sheng and commended, "A worthy friend indeed!"

Everyone had a merry time chatting and feasting on quite the amount of meat. The fire was not extinguished at night to prevent wolves from being lured in by the aroma. The Libei Armored Cavalry had a night patrol squad which made a few rounds in the vicinity. When they returned, they leaned over and said a few words in the brigade commander's ear.

The brigade commander wiped his mouth and curbed his expression. "Put on your armors!"

Fei Sheng immediately stood up after him. The Imperial Bodyguards in the back were instantly wide awake too.

Shen Zechuan had yet to sleep. He sat in the horse carriage, reading the latest letters from Cizhou under the candlelight. On hearing footsteps, he asked without raising his head, “Someone’s nearby?”

Holding onto his blade, Fei Sheng stood by the carriage and spoke quickly, “Libei’s night patrol squad discovered traces of horse carriage tracks in the south. Master, this place is close to Bianbo Camp. When the Bianbo camp was attacked during the sixth month, it was also from the south that the stone catapult had come around.”

Although Fei Sheng was a chatterbox, his observation skills were impeccable, and his intelligence-gathering was first-rate. While he did not possess Ding Tao’s photographic memory, he could retain everything he had ever transcribed in his mind; he would not miss out on any traces.

“Let the Armored Cavalry lead the way.” Shen Zechuan donned his cloak and disembarked the horse carriage. “Send someone to follow after them first. Don’t alert the enemy.”

Fei Sheng responded with a sound of affirmation.

Shen Zechuan observed the canopy of heaven, then looked towards the south. “The southern side is adjacent to Dunzhou. If we really run into the Biansha Cavalry’s transportation escort squad, then it is very likely that they took a detour around Dunzhou.”

Fei Sheng dredged the mud by his feet and got up. “It just snowed a few days back. The bridle path here has fallen into disrepair, making the path hard to travel. The military supplies they carry are extremely heavy, so they must have arranged for quite the number of people to follow along as guarded escorts.”

“Send someone to follow them first.” Shen Zechuan thought for a moment. “The carriage shall follow after. We can make it in time to Dunzhou for a look.”

The Prince of Jianxing’s residence was in Dunzhou—it was Shen Wei’s former home grounds. Fei Sheng did not dare to make wild guesses. He turned around to instruct the men, then extinguished the campfire to wipe out all traces of them before keeping up pace with the others under the cover of the night.



Credits: Many thanks to [Yu](#), [Alex](#), and [Yuffie](#) for being our sounding board and [Tea](#) for proofreading!

#### Footnotes

1. aka. “he lives, you live.”



- 2.
3. 花钿 known as huadian, these are flower embellishments affixed or painted onto the forehead for cosmetic purposes. Flowers are common patterns, although there may be others.
4. 风踏霜衣 Feng Ta Shuang Yi, i.e., wind treading upon a plumage of frost (literal garment of frost)
5. 浪淘雪襟 Lang Tao Xue Jin, i.e., waves washing over a bosom of snow (literal clothing front/lapel of snow)



## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 166 : LIU’ER

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



Early in the morning, Shen Zechuan stared fixedly at those messy footprints and asked Fei Sheng, “Does it belong to a grain wagon?”

The tracks left by the wheels were very distinct, a clear sign that it had been carrying a heavy load.

“Heavier than a grain wagon.” Fei Sheng dropped to one knee and scrutinized it for a moment. “It looks like it was carrying some kind of heavy weaponry. Master, they went to the trouble of taking a detour to Libei. Could they be thinking of launching another raid?”

“The Shasan Camp is now well-equipped and well-trained. With Guo Weili stationed there and its location so close to Bianbo Camp, it would be difficult to get anything good out of a raid without a large number of troops to back them up.” Shen Zechuan faced the south. “Furthermore, they are coming from Dunzhou; it’s possible that they’re thinking of transporting supplies to the border along the Chashi River.”

But what was there in Dunzhou?

Dunzhou’s granaries had long been squandered clean by the bandits. Furthermore, there were no garrison troops in Dunzhou, so why bother taking an unnecessary detour?

Shen Zechuan thought carefully for a moment, running through everything he remembered about Dunzhou. He recalled that the Biansha Cavalry had used a stone catapult when they raided Bianbo Camp during the sixth month. Taking a few steps along the wheel tracks, he suddenly spoke, “Military supplies, provisions—armaments.” He turned back. “After the defeat of the Zhongbo troops, the Ministry of War didn’t reclaim the armories of the Six Prefectures, intending to leave it for the re-established garrison troops. However, Qudu was later negligent in their inspection rounds, and all of these armories were not mentioned again.

Not bothering with the mud on his knee, Fei Sheng stood up. “Among them are plenty of heavy weaponry meant for sieges. If they fall in the hands of Biansha, then Duanzhou will be in imminent danger.”

“Continue to follow them.” Shen Zechuan said.



The wheels got stuck in the mud, and the horses could not pull them out.

Liu'er, who was wrapped up in a coat and wearing a *biangu* hat,<sup>1</sup> wanted to huddle up into a bundle, but he did not manage to do so. That Biansha man disguised as a traveling merchant yanked him by the ankle and dragged him off the wagon, then lashed at him with the horsewhip to wake him up as he cursed, "Get up. Go push the wagon!"

Liu'er "ow-ed" a few times and hurriedly crawled to his feet before limping over to push the wagon. He was advanced in age, and his hands were shaky. Someone stomped on his feet and nearly made him kneel from the pain. There were many bandits escorting this wagon. All of their blades had been seized by the Biansha men, and they were now toiling as manual labor under the cracks of horsewhips.

The bandits of Mount Luo returned home crestfallen following their defeat in Cizhou, and news that Lei Jingzhe was a spy for the Imperial Army spread like wildfire. Subsequently, Mount Luo split up into over ten small mountain strongholds that fought tooth and nail with one another. Liu'er, Ding Niu, and the others each formed their own band of bandits, wanting to recreate Lei Changming's glory and become the chief of Mount Luo. But who knew that they would be disbanded in Duanzhou by bandits who had the help of the Biansha Cavalry? Not only did they lose their main forces, but they were also recaptured as the Biansha Cavalry's prisoners.

Ding Niu refused to transport grains for the Biansha Cavalry and was killed at the end of the seventh month. Liu'er, cherishing his life, did not dare to resist any further and was now transporting the grain wagons for the Biansha people.

Liu'er hunched over like a monkey, his long, drooping eyebrows quivering along with his movements. He blended in among the crowd, not daring to slack off right under the Biansha men's eyes. But even so, he did not escape a lashing. Liu'er grimaced in pain and tried his best to make himself smaller so that others would block the blows for him.

The road was hard to navigate, and ragged panting filled the chilly night. These bandits who were used to riding roughshod over others could not hold up against the lashings of the Biansha people, and there were quite a number of people who were whipped until their skin was flayed open and their flesh was torn. The horse wagon came to a stop only during the hour

of yin. Several rows of cavalry roved around the surroundings, hollering at the bandits to assemble and stand properly.

Liu'er's coat had been shredded to ribbons by the whips, with wads of cotton spilling out. He held his arms around himself and waded in the muddy marsh with a build-up of a thin layer of ice on it. His robe was already in rags now, and both legs of his trouser fluttered to reveal a pair of legs that looked like hemp stalks. The old man was so freezing cold that he shivered.

The Biansha men wanted to eat, so the bandits could only stand at their sides to shield them from the wind.

Liu'er folded his arms up his sleeves. He was so hungry he was seeing stars. He licked his lips and quietly squatted down to take a rest.

"When will these shitty days come to an end?" A former subordinate before him muttered as he took off the cloth bag stuffed on his back and secured it on his waist. "Goddamnit, they are going to whip me to death this trip! These motherfuckers really don't hold back, whipping people like we are some livestock!"

Liu'er shifted his feet. He was so hungry he could taste bile in his mouth, and yet he was still thinking of taking a smoke. He fumbled in his sleeves for a long time before fishing out some tobacco, whereupon he brought it to his nose and sniffed hard. "They aren't educated; that's why they treated people as livestock, no? Those tattoos on their bodies are all of beasts and birds of prey. Heck, they even drink blood raw."

The former subordinate spat. "If I had known I'd end up this way, I'd have switched camps and joined the Imperial Army back in Cizhou. Damn it. At least it wouldn't have given the Biansha people an advantage."

"Bullocks." Liu'er stuffed the tobacco back and sneakily peeked at the Biansha men through other people's legs. "We are all bandits. What good ends can we come to by defecting over to the Imperial Army? We would still be traitors. These military weapons are being sent over to fight Libei and Zhongbo. Who knows? Maybe even the emperor in Qudu will be taken prisoner when the time comes. We might still even have to kneel to a Biansha emperor."

Liu'er had not even finished his words when his former subordinate suddenly pulled him up. With his legs trembling, Liu'er stuck close to the group and stood straight, not even daring to glance around arbitrarily.

The Biansha man was called Jida. His head was cleanly shaven, and the muscular arms he exposed had a poisonous scorpion tattooed on it. He passed by them while wiping his mouth, the expression in his eyes causing Liu'er's legs to tremble even harder, so much that he was about to pee his pants.

But Jida did not give them any trouble tonight and merely led his man to the front where the supply wagon carrying the mounted crossbow<sup>2</sup> was parked. The Biansha people were very interested in giant siege weapons such as the mounted crossbows.

The bandits remained where they were and rested. All their field rations were soaked and smelled musty. With his yellow tobacco-stained teeth, Liu'er ate the rations. The few of them huddled together to keep warm. Fortunately, it did not rain tonight, or the amount of people who froze to death would be more than just a few. They sat on the ground, not daring to fall asleep.

But Liu'er was old. It gradually became harder for him to hang in there, and he eventually dozed off against the wheel.



"Such a small number of troops following along?" Fei Sheng squatted down once again and examined the footprints. "Most of them are bandits pushing the wagon along. There aren't that many Biansha Cavalry."

The brigade commander put on his helmet and sat on his horse like a statue cast in iron. As he pulled the reins on his horse, he spoke in a deep, muffled voice, "They are in disguise because they don't want to alert others. I'm afraid they still have planted agents in Mount Luo. Otherwise, they wouldn't dare to penetrate this far with these few people. Prefectural Lord, if you want to get to the bottom of who is on the inside collaborating with them, then we have to intercept them before they enter Mount Luo's territory and interrogate them."

There were not that many men from the Libei Armored Cavalry following along, but they were all elites on the battlefields who had fought the Hanshe Tribe with Xiao Fangxu. With the Imperial Bodyguards' assistance in battle on such a dark night where the frost was heavy, intercepting this small batch of people would not be a problem.

Shen Zechuan took a look at the darkness of the night and ordered, "Ding Tao, stay where you are. Fei Sheng, go with the Libei Armored Cavalry."



Liu'er woke up from the freezing cold and rubbed both of his feet, feeling as if he was going to freeze to death. He raised his head and saw the Biansha Cavalry standing a distance ahead, crowding around the mounted crossbow. This crossbow was not something that could be drawn on one man's strength alone. Usually, it would be used to bring up the rear and hold the battle array or to defend cities. It was an absolute heavy-duty weapon in combat and common in the Libei camps. The Biansha Cavalry had suffered and taken quite the beating in its hands.

Liu'er did not call out to anyone. He propped his hands on the ground and used the wagon as a cover to make his way quietly to the back. He crawled under the bottom of the wagon, sticking close to the ground to hide from view. When he crawled to the end, he practically kicked out with his shoes and lunged forward, cutting a sorry figure as he broke into a run.

Jida was wiping an arrow when he caught a flash in his peripheral vision. He bellowed in the Biansha language, "Someone's fleeing!"

The Biansha Cavalry instantly mounted their horses and brandished their whips as they bellowed and chased after him.

How in the world would Liu'er expect Jida to be so sharp-eyed?! To think he could still catch sight of him from such a distance away and in such a dark night too. He thought of stopping and giving them the excuse that he was merely taking a piss, but when he looked back and saw all those scimitars drawn out of their scabbards, he knew he would die if he did not escape tonight!

Liu'er anxiously tightened his waist sash and kicked off his shoes in the mud. He fell, then climbed to his feet. All he could see before him was the way Ding Niu looked when he died.

They were able to rise to prominence on Mount Luo all because of the Biansha Cavalry, and now, it was also all because of the Biansha Cavalry that they had become prisoners on Mount Luo!

Liu'er muttered unintelligibly as he prayed for help and pleaded with all the deities and buddhas he knew of. Sores that had formed on this old man's soles made him scrunch up his face in pain. He was so fearful of death to the extent he even wanted to kneel now and beg for mercy.

But the bellows and cursings of the Biansha Cavalry made it clear that it would not be a simple matter of capturing Liu'er back. They had no lack

of people; what they lacked were chickens they could slaughter in public. Liu'er shivered and fell into a mudhole.

The Biansha Cavalry surrounded him, and Liu'er promptly burst out crying. He raised both hands and felt himself peeing his pants in the icy cold, muddy water. The foul, turbid stench of urine soaked through the legs of his trousers. Liu'er could not understand the Biansha language and could only kowtow to the cavalry in terror.

"I'm at fault." Liu'er wailed hysterically. "Don't kill me!"

The Biansha Cavalry coughed a couple of times and spat thick phlegm on Liu'er's face. They smashed their scabbards down onto Liu'er's back, making him sprawl in the mudhole and drink filthy water. Both of Liu'er's long, drooping brows were lifted by the scimitars, and he drank that water in fear, crying and laughing as snot and tears soiled his face.

Jida stood where he was and watched as the cavalry amused themselves with Liu'er. He propped up a leg and kicked away the fabric cover of the mounted crossbow, then shouted for the men to drag Liu'er further away so that he could use Liu'er to test the crossbow.

Liu'er was scared out of his wits on hearing the sound of the mounted crossbow being shifted. He kneeled on the ground as they dragged him away, slapping himself with both hands while cursing.

Why the heck did he run?!

Liu'er slapped himself until his cheeks were red and swollen. They hoisted him up and hung him a distance away. Liu'er bent over at the waist and took in huge gasps of air as he watched the cavalry load the mounted crossbow with an arrow. That arrow was as thick as a child's arm, and its arrowhead was unusual, with a rounded end cast out of iron. When they rained down from the sky, the impact could send one's brain matter splattering all over. The wheel and axle started turning with a "click". As long as Jida pulled the trigger, Liu'er would be able to see that arrow springing up high in the sky before hurtling down on himself.

Liu'er voicelessly moved his mouth. In an unexpected burst of courage, he bared his yellow-stained teeth and burst out cursing, "Fuck your ancestors! Fuck all of your ancestors!"

Tears streamed down Liu'er's face as he choked with sobs so hard he looked as if he could breathe his last any time.

He used to be a bandit in the past too, but he was not alone. He had a son and daughters back at home, and his wonderful wife was his childhood

sweetheart who had followed him out of the village. It was only when husband and wife were past their prime that they bore three children. Of them, two were daughters who had been matchmade in the third year of Xiande and would have been able to get married once winter that year passed. His son wanted to join the garrison troops, and Liu'er spent a long time buttering up to Lei Changming before he managed to send his son into the Duanzhou Garrison Troops.

But in the end, the entire Duanzhou Garrison Troops perished in the Chashi Sinkhole that year, the year the Biansha Cavalry came to massacre the city.



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Credit to [Tea](#) for proofreading!

#### Footnotes

1. 边鼓帽 *biangu* hat, a round hat with a brim with origins from the Yuan dynasty, commonly used by street youths, commoners, and servants. It was most popular in the reign of Emperor Jiajing of Ming Dynasty and commonly seen in the Qing dynasty.



- 2.
3. Example of a mounted crossbow 床子弩. There are different kinds, like the triple-bowed mounted crossbows, etc.

# QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 167 : GUEST

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



Warning: Violence, Brutality

The sky was dark, and devoid of stars. Liu'er huffed white puffs of air in between gasps; he could no longer tell if he was dead or alive. He hung there, light as a feather, like a piece of cotton wadding in the wind.

Jida could not operate the mounted crossbow. He shoved aside the subordinates by his side to check on it and continued to inquire about it in the Biansha language. As they were unfamiliar with such heavy weaponry, the subordinates called for a few bandits to take a look. Jida unscrewed his canteen to have a drink of water as he stood bare-chested in the chilly night and waited.

Fearing that he would be implicated and face the same outcome as Liu'er, the former subordinate lay prone on the ground, not daring to move an inch. He stared at the trampled mud on the ground and saw the subtle tremors coursing through it. Thinking that it was caused by his own rapid breathing, he used both hands to cover his mouth and nose, but those tremors did not stop; instead, they became even more pronounced.

Jida was the first to sense something amiss. He stopped drinking and listened intently for a moment. Suddenly, he threw his canteen onto the ground and shouted, "The Armored Cavalry is here—!"

But it was too late. The Libei Armored Cavalry that had been creeping forth for half the night in the darkness was like a fierce tiger pouncing with force so great that the wagon by Jida's side overturned with a loud crash. The startled horses neighed as they were dragged to the ground by the wagon that weighed up to a hundred *jin*. That mounted crossbow sent mud splashing, and the wagons beside the former subordinate also shifted along with it. Several of the supply wagons haphazardly collided against one another without warning, and at that moment, chaos erupted as men and horses were thrown off their feet.

Jida retreated swiftly and kept calm as he shouted, "Mount your horses!"

The Libei Armored Cavalry's battle steeds wore a full body of armor, and the sound of their hooves as they drew nearer sounded like muffled



thunder to the ear. The heavily armed armored cavalry held no fear of the scimitars. They were like a dark, swarthy wall that directly cut across and broke the formation of the Biansha's transportation squad. The battle steeds, donned in armors of iron gilded with long and thick spikes at the chest, were unstoppable when they charged straight-on. Unable to run fast enough, the Biansha Cavalry was thrown to the ground and successively trampled to a bloody pulp before they could get back up.

The helmeted brigade commander gestured with his hand to Fei Sheng at the side. Fei Sheng, lightly armored<sup>1</sup> on his horse, circled over into position and lowered his long sword<sup>2</sup> together with the brigade commander, and in one coordinated move, charged towards Jida to flank him in a pincer attack. Jida mounted his horse, as if he had not sensed Fei Sheng approaching. He leaned over, and the pony under his crotch broke into a run like the fearsome wind. Jida stared fixedly at the brigade commander as their horses crossed paths in the blink of an eye. The brigade commander abruptly swung his long sword, intending to hack off Jida's head, but his swing had missed the mark, for Jida seemed to have disappeared into thin air.

In the next instant, a blunt weapon slammed hard into the back of the brigade commander's head. The force of the impact instantaneously made him bleed from the mouth and nose and deafened him. That nearly sealed and airtight iron armor could stand up to blows from all sharp weapons, but had a fatal weakness—it could not withstand the impact of blunt weapons.

The brigade commander tumbled off the back of the horse and fell headlong to the ground. His ears were ringing like crazy, and he even felt sharp, stabbing pain. He tried to crawl to his feet, but his entire body was trembling too violently. Blood trickled out through the gap in his helmet. He could not hear his own voice clearly, but he continued to move his lips, "Take, take off the hel—"

The iron hammer smashed down onto the back of the brigade commander's head once again. Blow after blow rained down on him, crushing that helmet until it was all deformed. Blood plasma spilled all over the ground. The brigade commander went silent.

Jida squatted on the brigade commander's back and wiped off the blood on his scorpion tattoo, then stuck his fingers into his mouth. Contained in those sturdy muscles of his was a shocking amount of explosive strength. He lifted the iron hammer and locked his gaze on Fei Sheng.

Fei Sheng felt his hairs stand on end, while the horse under him tossed its head in fear. Fei Sheng swallowed with difficulty; he had served as an Imperial Bodyguard for so many years, and to think he would be daunted back into a retreat by the expression in the other party's eyes.

This was no ordinary Biansha Cavalryman; this was not even one of the Biansha's elite forces.

They were unlike Hasen's elite troops who carried scimitars and pike daggers; instead, they were equipped with scimitars and iron hammers with protruding spikes. This was a Biansha force that had never made an appearance before on the Libei battlefields.

Too terrifying.

A strangled gasp escaped from Fei Sheng's throat. If such an iron hammer were to be delivered to the battlegrounds, then the Libei Cavalry would become livestock at their mercy. All the advantages they derived from their armors would be rendered useless.

"Retreat." Fei Sheng yanked the reins and suddenly bellowed, "Retreat!"

They had to shake them off!

Fei Sheng turned the horse around and broke into a desperate run. But things did not go as planned. This peculiar, treacherous troop tailed him like shadows; it was clear that Jida had locked on to him as a target as he relentlessly followed hot on his trail. Both parties engaged in a cat-and-mouse chase in the darkness of the night. Fei Sheng had finally gotten his taste of the Biansha Cavalry that rumors were made of. The horse beneath him was a fine steed too, but it could not throw them off and widen the distance between them at all; Jida remained close on his heels.

Jida's iron hammer came swinging at the back of Fei Sheng's head, and Fei Sheng, on sensing it, dodged by the skin of his teeth. The horse was running too fast, and all those jolts and bumps nearly caused Fei Sheng to slip off. He was far from being as adept at horsemanship as the Biansha Cavalry. At this moment, both parties were hundreds of paces away from the convoy squad. Fei Sheng came to the realization that he would not be able to shake off the other party. Likewise, the other man did not give Fei Sheng another chance to retreat either—Jida had already caught up with him.

Fei Sheng was not one of the Libei Armored Cavalry. The iron hammer was not that much of a threat to him; thus, Jida swapped back to his

scimitar. That crescent moon-like blade caught on to Fei Sheng's Xiuchun Blade.<sup>3</sup> The squads behind, having already converged together, began to fight at close quarters. Both men were still galloping on their horses as they barged headlong into the sparse forest.

Withered branches lashed hard against his face. Fei Sheng could not draw back his ensnared blade at all. Jida revealed a cruel smile as he said to Fei Sheng in the Dazhou language with perfect enunciation, "You are welcome to be our guest."

Fei Sheng wanted to retort back, but he was too preoccupied to speak. At the same time Jida leaned forward, he yanked his scimitar back, and Fei Sheng's Xiuchun Blade promptly slipped from his hand and went flying. Following right after, his horse was rammed from the side, which knocked Fei Sheng off it. In the instant he rolled to the ground, he reached for the short blade from the side of his waist and brought it up before his face to parry the blow.

Jida's scimitar slipped from his hand along with the Xiuchun blade. He relaxed his entire right arm and swung the hammer up into Fei Sheng's face. The blade Fei Sheng used to ward off the blow caved in from the impact, and his forearm went numb. He reacted swiftly and rolled away, then cast away the ruined blade. Unarmed, he maintained a certain distance away from Jida.

Stooping over at his waist, Fei Sheng continued his retreat. He adjusted his breathing, then made a "shoo" sound at Jida as if to drive him away.

Enraged now, Jida gripped his hammer tightly, but at the very moment he swung it up, he felt a sudden weight on his back. Ding Tao strangled Jida's burly neck with an arm from behind and strained to call out, "Daxiong—"

Before Ding Tao could finish his words, Jida grabbed him by the arm and yanked, intending to fling Ding Tao over the side of his shoulder to the ground, but a figure sprinted out from the side and lunged headlong at him, slamming his head into the side of Jida's waist.

The impact from Li Xiong caused Jida to stagger, and Ding Tao seized the opportunity to break free. Li Xiong had been hiding in the horse carriage these days, having the time of his life eating. He stretched out both arms at once to wrap them around Jida's waist, then assumed the horse stance<sup>4</sup> with the intent to lift Jida like he would a tree trunk.

Jida swung the hammer and slammed it into Li Xiong's back. Li Xiong cried out in pain and shouted, "Taozi, that hurts!"

Ding Tao rubbed his numbed arm and said quickly, "Hit him with the Ji clan's fist!"

Thus, Li Xiong loosened his grip and bellowed as he threw out a fist at Jida's chest. Surprisingly enough, the force knocked Jida back two steps. Happy, Li Xiong followed up with several consecutive punches, every blow of his striking flesh. He remembered all that Ji Gang had taught clearly. With the air of one unrivaled, he looked back and said, "He can't fight—"

Li Xiong had yet to finish his words when Jida backhandedly smashed him with the hammer and knocked him over to the ground. Even if this lad was a sturdy one, he could not withstand the blow. Fortunately, he reacted extremely swiftly and bent his arms to shield his head. But even so, the force of the blow knocked a tooth out. With blood in his mouth, he spat the tooth to the ground and felt the first spark of anger.

"Blockhead! Get up!" Ding Tao yelled anxiously.

Unable to get to his feet in time, Li Xiong could only roll out of the way for all he was worth. That hammer scraped past his cheek and slammed into the ground. Mud splashed Li Xiong full in the head. He repeatedly spat out the muddy water in his mouth. Ding Tao hit upon an idea in a display of quick thinking and stirred the mud with his brush. Treading on Li Xiong's shoulder, he said, "Go!"

With a sudden flick of the brush, muddy water splashed into Jida's eyes. Jida hastily wiped it away. Taking advantage of the opportunity Ding Tao accorded him, Li Xiong propped both hands against the ground and slid over in an attempt to slip through under Jida's crotch. But he was too sturdy, and he had only just slid halfway when he got stuck. This lad had a one-track mind. He just *had* to go this way, and as he lifted himself with brute force, he knocked Jida over instead of sliding his way out.

Ding Tao wanted to praise Li Xiong. Unexpectedly, Jida wiped away the muddy water and hauled Ding Tao by the ankle that Ding Tao had yet to retract. Ding Tao had come to grief many times in the past with this move, so he had long since learned to play it smart. The instant he felt the grip on his ankle, he promptly lifted both arms to protect the back of his head and closed his eyes as he plummeted to the ground. Immediately right after the fall, he shouted, "It doesn't hurt! I'm fine!"

Li Xiong climbed to his feet from the mud and tried to lunge over to hold Jida's neck in a chokehold, but he had only just pounced when Jida, who was already on guard, bent his elbow and slammed it into the bridge of Li Xiong's nose. Li Xiong instantly felt a stinging ache on the bridge of his nose. Jida followed up with another blow and sent Li Xiong flipping over into the mud, using so much force that blood spurted out of Li Xiong's mouth and nose.

Jida moved his shoulders and arms about, the "creak" of which indicated that the fight earlier was just a joke in which he had been merely fooling around. His arms were far more thick and burly than Li Xiong's. As Li Xiong lay in the mud covering his nose and mouth, he caught a vague glimpse of the poisonous scorpion on Jida's arm.

Ding Tao was lifted upside down, and the brush and notebook in his bosom slipped out along with the poisonous needles and secret weapons on him when Jida swung him up with all his might. Ding Tao reached out with both hands to grab them, failing which he yelled, "My candies!"

But before he could bat an eyelash, Ding Tao saw his oilpaper-wrapped candies fall into a hand. Wind swept past their ears, and in this very instant, Jida saw a flutter of white sleeves descend onto the muddy surface, like a piece of drifting snow that arrived with the wind and then took off into the air again. The cold glint of Yang Shan Xue was like the crystal clear ripples of autumn waters as it suddenly shot right towards Jida's chest.

Jida could not retreat, so he cast Ding Tao aside in an attempt to free a hand to grab hold of Yang Shan Xue's tip.

However, Yang Shan Xue was too fast. It took just an instant for the blade to make its way before his chest. Jida failed to grab hold of it, and Yang Shan Xue flicked up in tandem with the white sleeve to slash towards Jida's throat. This time, Jida swung his shoulder over to dodge it, using his shoulder to take the blow in the flesh instead.

An expert!

Jida's alarm bells went off.

But then, it instantly dawned on Jida. Even though Shen Zechuan was as swift as a thunderbolt, that one blow of his earlier had also exposed the frailty of his constitution. Jida let loose a sardonic smile and struck out towards the side of Shen Zechuan's neck with a lightning move of his hand. As the white robe withdrew and seamlessly dodged out of the way like

clouds and mist, he closed in and balled his fists to counter Shen Zechuan's attacks, then grabbed hold of Yang Shan Xue with a turn of his hand.

With Yang Shan Xue held down, Shen Zechuan's arm also ended up being grabbed by Jida.

Jida knew the other man was not an easy one to capture. With the latter's leg movements coincidentally restricted, Jida seized this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and turned around so that his back was pressed up against Shen Zechuan, then lowered his shoulder to fling Shen Zechuan over to the ground.

Shen Zechuan almost coughed out blood from the force of it. He did not manage to break free when he got up, and sharp cracks rang out as he traded two blows with Jida with his hands. Jida, however, warded off his blows with sheer brute force.

Jida was not that meticulous in his study of martial arts, and he did not want to waste too much effort on Shen Zechuan over this. As he parried the blows, he sensed Shen Zechuan abandoning the use of Yang Shan Xue, so when Shen Zechuan rose with a lift of his waist, he swung his hammer over.

This strike sent the hammer smashing into the tree trunk, and as he had expended too much force, Jida could not pull it out.

Shen Zechuan was relatively shorter, and as his pitch-black eyes locked onto Jida, Jida heard the crack of something snapping. While he could not figure out what this sound was at the moment, he could acutely sense the danger he was in. Almost immediately, he abandoned his hammer. But before Jida could make a move, Shen Zechuan had already struck out at him. He was much faster than before this time, as though he had been planning for this moment since the start, waiting and luring Jida in until the latter was accustomed to the rhythm of his movements. Jida even went as far as to suspect that Shen Zechuan was not injured at all, that his frailness from before was all an act.

But Jida did not have the chance anymore. Fresh blood spewed from his neck, spraying all over Shen Zechuan's face. His throat bobbed; he could not believe he would be defeated in this place. He shifted his gaze sluggishly and saw a pair of deep, unfathomable eyes.

Shen Zechuan seemed to finally remember to say his greetings. With his expressive eyes half-closed, he said amicably to Jida, "You are welcome to be our guest."

The moment the words left his mouth, Jida fell over on his back to the ground.

With half a brush sticking out of his neck.

Ding Tao was still badly shaken when Shen Zechuan let his fingers drop to toss the candies into his arms. Ding Tao caught it in a daze and saw the oilpaper red with blood—blood that had already seeped all the way in.



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#### **Footnotes**

1. Heavy Cavalry: heavily armed and armored men on equally armored horses. Their primary role was to engage in direct combat with enemy forces, e.g., the Libei Armored Cavalry.
2. Light Cavalry: lightly armed and lightly armored men on horses. Their missions were primarily reconnaissance, skirmishing, and communications. Though it refers to Fei Sheng here, since he's not all decked out in heavy armor like the Libei Armored Cavalry in comparison.



- 3.
4. Specifically a changdao, or a two-handed, single-edged Chinese sword.



5.

6. 绣春刀 Xiuchun Blade is the blade of the Imperial Bodyguards during the Ming Dynasty.



7.

8. 马步 horse stance, a common posture in Chinese martial arts and takes its name from the position assumed when horse-riding.



## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 168 : SCORPION

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



All at once, Fei Sheng calmed down. He promptly propped himself up and came over to pick up Yang Shan Xue for Shen Zechuan. But when he bent over, he noticed something odd about Shen Zechuan's right arm. As his gaze glided up from the opening of Shen Zechuan's sleeve, he realized Shen Zechuan's entire right arm was trembling.

Thick, sticky blood coated the tips of Shen Zechuan's fingers. Jida had almost broken off his fingers when they traded blows earlier, and this kind of trembling was not something he could control now that the combat had suddenly come to a halt. But he could not reveal the slightest hint of pain, given that the armored cavalry had just suffered heavy casualties. Jida had hammered the brigade commander until the latter's brain matter had splattered right before everyone's eyes. Shen Zechuan had to stabilize their morale so that it would not continue to plummet.

"M, Master..." Fei Sheng called out in apprehension.

"They are already assembling the bandits in the back to reorganize the convoy squad." Shen Zechuan always brought along the blue handkerchief on him, but he could not bear to use it to wipe the blood; this was something he had taken from Xiao Chiye. He continued, "Tell the Libei Armored Cavalry to take off their helmets. Don't panic. With the mounted crossbow bringing up the rear, the foes will be merely sitting ducks."



Both of Liu'er hands were shivering. He had already been released and lowered. The blowing wind was so cold it gave him a chill between the legs. The former subordinate took advantage of the chaos to drag him along, pushing and shoving as he urged, "Run! Run!"

Liu'er looked stiffly at the convoy squad that had been thrown into confusion and asked feebly, "Who, who came?"

"The Libei Armored Cavalry!" The former subordinate tore off the cloth bag on his waist and threw it away along with the chains he had been fitted with. "Let them fight. Let's go!" But the former subordinate failed to

move Liu'er, so he pinched him and cried out in anxiety, "Old Man Liu, what are you doing?!"

Liu'er's feet scraped across the ground as he stooped over and refused to leave. With a savage expression, he said, "We'll leave. But we also have to give these bastards a stab before leaving!" He pushed the former subordinate away and staggered forward. "Son of a bitch aimed at me with the crossbow. Those bastards." He fell onto the ground, then got up again and muttered, "I want to smash them to death. Smash them all to death!"

The men in Shen Zechuan's retinue who had arrived after Shen Zechuan summoned the bandits together to work as one and pull up the overturned wagon. The mounted crossbow was stained with mud, and Liu'er hastily wiped it clean with his sleeve. He squeezed among the crowd, exerting force in regular bursts along with the shouts as they hoisted the long arrows up and pulled.

A hundred paces away, Fei Sheng scrambled out and blew a quick whistle at the Imperial Bodyguards still engaged in battle with the Biansha Cavalry. The Imperial Bodyguards promptly pulled back and retreated as they held up against the remaining Libei Armored Cavalry. The Biansha Cavalry who still remained in the clearing waited but never got Jida's commands, and by the time they realized it, it was already too late.

The very moment the "click" of the trigger sounded, Liu'er felt intense pain in both arms. He watched those long arrows shoot into the sky before plunging, their impact slamming the Biansha Cavalrymen who had nowhere to hide onto the ground along with their horses. It was almost instant death for the men.

Liu'er raised both arms and burst out laughing madly. He stood on tiptoe, finding this moment to be the most gratifying time in his life. Very quickly, the arrows were depleted, and the Biansha Cavalry who had been dealt severe blows were too powerless to resist. Their small numbers prevented them from getting into formation, and it just took a couple of rounds from the mounted crossbow for them to break up and scatter.

The former subordinate pulled Liu'er by the collar and shouted over the din, "Old Man Liu, we should run now!"

Although they were captives, they had escorted the transportation of military supplies for the Biansha people. What's more, they even led them towards Zhongbo. The Libei Armored Cavalry and the Biansha Cavalry

were sworn enemies with a blood feud between them. So if they were to fall into the Libei Armored Cavalry's hands, they would still have to die!

Liu'er hurriedly leaped off the wagon and limped along. "Go, go, go! Move!"

As if in tacit agreement, the bandits wanted to take to their heels and flee the moment they saw the cavalry retreating. But the squad behind them was long prepared for this and drew their blades to surround them, blocking off their paths so that they had no choice but to return to their original spot. Thrown into disarray, the bandits crowded together within the ring of horses' hooves. They wanted to break through the encirclement, but they had no blades. Gradually, they all squatted down amid the shouts at them and held their heads, not daring to make a ruckus again.

Fei Sheng and a few of them sent Shen Zechuan back to the horse carriage. The moment the curtain fell, they heard the dull, muffled sound of coughing. Gripping his candies, Ding Tao's eyes reddened. He was at a loss as he tugged on Fei Sheng's sleeve and said in a teary tone, "My, my Young Master..."

Fei Sheng covered Ding Tao's mouth with his palm and gestured around him to have the Imperial Bodyguards surround the horse carriage, thus setting the carriage apart from the armored cavalry and bandits.

Shen Zechuan bent over the seat. On his open palm was blood that he had just coughed out. The index and middle fingers on his right hand were racked with hot searing pain, as if they were being ripped apart. He had not bent over to pick Yang Shan Xue up earlier because he could not lift it. He lowered his head, pressing against his forehead, and forcibly swallowed down the blood that still wanted to gush up his throat.

A long time passed.

Shen Zechuan's voice sounded particularly low and deep across the curtain. "Do a headcount of the bandits and get them to continue pushing the wagon. Send someone to rush posthaste to Bianbo Camp and convey the news about this squad to Ce'an. Then send someone to hurry to Cizhou and inform Yuanzhuo to reassure Zhou Gui before my return. As long as King Yi has not dispatched his troops, Cizhou must not make the first move, no matter what King Yi says."

"Then, the Biansha captives..." Fei Sheng moved close to the curtain and asked carefully, "Are we to keep them?"

“Remove their blades and hammers.” Shen Zechuan clenched his palm and shifted his gaze under the darkness. “Execute them on the spot.”

The sky cleared up the next day.

Li Xiong crouched beside Jida’s corpse, looking as if there was something he could not figure out. He kept fiddling with Jida’s arm and looking at that poisonous scorpion over and over again.

Fei Sheng came over to boot Li Xiong and said, “Master had the others clear away the bodies. Why aren’t you allowing them to?”

Li Xiong was still angry. He pulled Jida’s arm up and pointed to the scorpion. “Why does he have the scorpion too? He can’t have a scorpion.”

Fei Sheng initially wanted to make fun of this silly lad, but the gears started turning in his mind, and he crouched down as well to ask Li Xiong, “Why can’t he have a scorpion? Have you seen this before?”

Li Xiong pointed to the back of his neck and answered, “My big bro has one lying here.”

Fei Sheng felt a chill run down his spine. With his heart in his mouth and sweat trickling down, he said, “When did Lei Jingzhe have it tattooed? Why has there never been a word of it on Mount Luo?”

Li Xiong tried his best to think as he pulled at his hair. “I don’t remember either. He had it a long time back—he already had it when he raised me! Gedale has a lot of scorpions. My big bro took me there at that time and even wanted to have it tattooed on me.”

Gedale!

Fei Sheng stood up at once and turned around to hurry towards the horse carriage.

Shen Zechuan was still resting. He drained the medical decoction from the morning like it was water. Ding Tao, who was keeping guard outside the carriage, heard Shen Zechuan cough several times. The medicinal smell wafted out from within, but no one dared to lift the curtains.

Fei Sheng did not dare to either, but this was a matter of great importance, so he placed a hand on the carriage for support and called out in a soft voice, “Master, master.”

Shen Zechuan was sleeping lightly; in fact, he had been semi-conscious the entire time. He leaned on his side against the pillow. The delayed onset of pain of the injuries on his back was taking hold now, and he was in so much pain that he could not lie flat. He removed the jade earring and wiped

it for a long time before it was clean. Only then did he open his eyes and make a sound of acknowledgement.

Fei Sheng, even more cautious now, reported what he had heard earlier.

There was only silence from the interior of the carriage for a long time before Fei Sheng heard the rustling sound of sliding sleeves. After another moment, the curtain was lifted by a folding fan. With the fan in his left hand, and earring on his right ear, the expression in Shen Zechuan's eyes was much more piercing than ever.



The situation last night had been so critical that no one had paid any attention. With Li Xiong now standing beside Jida, the one thing that they had overlooked had become all the more apparent. Physique-wise, Jida was essentially what Li Xiong would grow up to become as an adult. They were both powerfully built, far more than the average man; their shoulders and arms were broad, their muscles rippling with astonishing explosive power.

Shen Zechuan lowered his folding fan and moved Jida's arm over. "Is it exactly the same?"

Li Xiong squatted and nodded sullenly. "Big bro's scorpion is a little smaller."

Shen Zechuan said to Fei Sheng, "Strip these corpses of their clothes."

Not long after, the Biansha Cavalry who perished last night lay stark naked across the ground. Fei Sheng examined them one at a time and found that all of them had scorpion tattoos. It was just that the scorpions were all freely positioned and hidden at locations that were hard to discover, such as the nape, pit of the stomach, side of the waist, and even behind the ear, but they were all on the upper body.

Shen Zechuan asked the Libei Armored Cavalry, "Are there scorpions like this on the battlefields?"

The remaining squad commander of the armored cavalry looked carefully at the tattoos and solemnly shook his head. "Never seen them before... The Twelve Tribes of Biansha indeed have the habit of tattooing their bodies, but those are either tribal totems or symbols of meritorious service. There are no scorpions in the Twelve Tribes."

Shen Zechuan had an ill sense of foreboding.

This was a squad that could deal a heavy blow and inflict heavy casualties on the Libei Armored Cavalry. Once they became a prevalent force in the war, the standoff on the battlegrounds would take a sudden turn

for the worse. It would catch the generals of Libei off-guard and put them at a disadvantage. If they were really establishing a squad based on standards that Li Xiong exemplified, then it would not matter even if they were to lose their battle steeds. As long as they could breach Libei, all of Dazhou would be in imminent danger, let alone Zhongbo.

“Scorpions are everywhere in Gedale. Big bro called them brothers; they are our friends!” As Li Xiong spoke, he looked at Shen Zechuan. “They have many small scorpions too. They are very young and never come out to play.”

“Fei Sheng.” Shen Zechuan said immediately. “Copy down this scorpion and bring it to Libei together. Not just Libei, but also Cizhou and Chazhou. Tell Zhou Gui and Luo Mu to start checking the commoners in the territories immediately.” He paused for a moment, then emphasized his words. “Especially the garrison troops.”

Lei Jingzhe was a native of Dazhou. In the years that Zhongbo was out of control, anyone could freely get in and out of Zhongbo as he did. They could let in the Scorpions, and even send the Scorpions deeper into Dazhou.

What Shen Zechuan had thought of at this moment was not just the war, but also of the decaying of government administration since the reign of Yongyi. From the Zhongbo troops’ defeat to Xiao Jiming’s poisoning, and Feng Yisheng’s death in battle to Lu Guangbai’s desertion. They used to focus their attention on Qudu and the noble clans, but it had all become rather odd starting from the military grain case onward.

Xue Xiuzhuo wanted to resurge Dazhou. Forcing Lu Guangbai into desertion would not do him any good. Why would Qudu make light of Qidong military provisions when they knew full well that there was ill will between them and Libei at the same time? Shen Zechuan’s memories swiftly went backward in time. Watching scene after scene of the past flash away felt like he was once again standing in the summer heat of Qudu.

Who exactly had delivered the relay report to Wei Huaigu’s desk and subsequently forced him to his death?

Shen Zechuan suddenly broke out coughing. He clutched the blue handkerchief and covered his mouth and nose. But this cough was so violent that it not only startled Ding Tao; even Fei Sheng’s face turned pale.

“Master!” Fei Sheng made to support Shen Zechuan by the arm.

“Escort the military supplies back to Cizhou.” Shen Zechuan said behind the handkerchief. “There’s no need for the armored cavalry to follow

any further. Leaving a few men behind will suffice. We'll head for Dunzhou today in disguise."

Gedale had Bai Cha's portrait, while Dunzhou had Shen Wei's Prince of Jianxing's Manor. These were the two key locations where it all began, along with the two blood kin with inextricable ties to Shen Zechuan.

"I want Lei Jingzhe as well." Shen Zechuan's expression was cold and detached as he enunciated each word. "Alive."



Author's Notes:

I know all of you have no doubt forgotten about the scorpion tattoo. Please refer to [chapter 114](#).

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## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 169 : DUNZHOU

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



The military supply wagons were placed under the guard of the Libei Armored Cavalry and manually transported back to Cizhou by the bandits. Shen Zechuan only brought a dozen or so Imperial Bodyguards and some goods with him as he disguised himself as a traveling merchant heading north. They did not head down to Dunzhou directly, but took a detour to the public route leading from Fanzhou to Dunzhou and entered through the west gate.

Liu'er, with his *biangu* hat, followed behind Fei Sheng with his butt sticking out. As long as his eyes started roving, the Imperial Bodyguards would sandwich him in the middle so that he felt suffocated and could not move. He used to be Lei Jingzhe's messenger, so he was well-informed and the most familiar with the ongoings in Dunzhou. They would save a lot of trouble by getting him to lead the way. But this old man was a very crafty one. At first, in order to escape, he had smeared his face until it was all dark and swarthy, causing Fei Sheng to nearly miss him when he blended in with the group of bandits.

Shen Zechuan's medicine never stopped coming, and after being on the road for five days, his cough gradually subsided. However, he was still unable to apply too much pressure on the two fingers on his right hand. Given that he could not even pen letters these days, the messages to Libei and Cizhou were all written by Ding Tao on his behalf.

"When we enter the city, we have to first go to a pawnshop to register the goods." Liu'er tugged on the side of his *biangu* hat to hide his face, then folded his arms under his sleeves and craned his neck to say, "It's very chaotic now in Dunzhou. Only merchants who are registered and listed at the pawnshop can enter the city and stay at the inns. All the parties are playing it cautious. This is an unspoken rule. Anyone who doesn't know the rules is most certainly fishy."

Shen Zechuan rested his folding fan on his knee. He remained concealed from view in the carriage, revealing only a vague silhouette. "Who owns this pawnshop?"



“The Yan clan of Hezhou.” Liu’er lowered his voice and moved closer to the side of the carriage curtain. “When Lei Changming still had the Yan Clan to fund him, this place was a terrible mess. While it was said that Lei Changming was the one in charge, he was, after all, not the Provincial Administration Commissioner. Bandits like us don’t have that many staff and runners either, so we turned a blind eye when it came to what’s happening down there. But there were too many merchants coming and going. Who knows if they are spies? So Young Master Yan suggested Lei Changming set up a pawnshop here and hang up the words, ‘Tongming’. Brothers who conduct business deals with the Mount Luo bandits naturally know how to answer upon entering the shop. The Yan Clan later fell out with us, but Lei Changming kept this pawnshop as a show of respect for Young Master Yan.”

The corner of Shen Zechuan’s lips shifted ever so slightly. “And with that, the Yan Clan has the comings and goings in Dunzhou firmly in their grasp, with records of every business transaction Lei Changming has ever made. This Young Master Yan must no doubt be better acquainted with these years’ accounts than Lei Changming himself, right?”

“He’s a child prodigy, yes?” Liu’er smacked his lips. “Not one business deal Yan Heru conducted himself has ever been unprofitable. This person may be young, but he’s a mercenary man who loves money very, very much! There is no business he doesn’t dare to dip his fingers into.”

“Lei Changming saved his life. There must be a reason that caused them to fall out with one another.” Shen Zechuan recalled the incident regarding the lawful grandson of the Shao clan and asked in passing.

Throughout the journey here, Liu’er had been going all out to ingratiate himself with Shen Zechuan for fear that Shen Zechuan would kill him off once he outlived his usefulness. He immediately weighed up the stakes and sold Lei Changming out. “Lei Changming had an addiction... and it grew progressively worse in recent years. The commoners in the two prefectures of Dunzhou and Duanzhou were very much afraid and did not dare to keep their children at home around for fear that we would carry them off and give them to Lei Changming. At first, Lei Changming kept the Yan clan in the dark and did not dare to bring it up. But later, he asked the brothels in Fanzhou for some young ones, and the children the procuress came over to deliver were recorded in the pawnshop as rice flour. This was uncovered by the Yan Clan’s audits, and Young Master Yan flew into a terrible rage. Lei

Changming promised Yan Heru that he would turn over a new leaf, but how could he change something like this? With Cai Yu fanning the flames on his end, it didn't take long for them to fall out for real. Yan Heru cut off the monthly funds to Mount Luo, and grains stopped heading our way."

Having said to this point, Liu'er faced the carriage curtain.

"It was because of this that we were starving so badly on Mount Luo. Lei Jingzhe had Lei Changming demand grains from Cizhou. Zhou Gui had no troops and power then, and he gave in time and time again. It just so happened that the emperor in Qudu passed away. When the marquis rebelled, the uncle and nephew pair plotted to use Han Jin to exchange for noble titles. In any case, no one's keeping Zhongbo under control. If it really worked out and they get conferred with the title of a prince or something, then we would transform into a regular local army!"

Shen Zechuan tapped with his fingertips and said, "Lei Jingzhe is truly a good child."

Lei Jingzhe was the brains behind Lei Changming. How could he have let Lei Changming take a tumble over such a simple matter like Fanzhou's delivery of children? It was because the Yan clan cut off Lei Changming's monthly funds that Lei Changming would turn his main forces on Cizhou. He marched his troops to Cizhou in such an ostentatious display and ended up being targeted and killed by Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan—he was indeed a target set up to be a scapegoat.

In all probability, Lei Jingzhe had long wanted to usurp and take over his position. They might have gone to Han Cheng in an attempt to exchange for noble titles, but Han Cheng might not necessarily be willing to acquiesce to both men's presumptuous demands. Throw in Lei Changming's insatiable greed into the mix, and it remained to be seen whether they could even reach an agreement. So, Lei Jingzhe took Lei Changming, his kin maternal uncle, out of the equation and let him die conveniently in the strife without ever tying himself directly to it.

This suggested two possibilities. The first was that Han Cheng was not a Scorpion, and the Scorpions were far less capable than Shen Zechuan feared. The second was that they were all pawns and did not need to mutually know each other; they just had to stay in their place and do what they ought to do to complete the mission.

Shen Zechuan had his own theory regarding both of these conjectures. He lost himself in his thoughts and did not speak again.



It was already the hour of hai when the horse carriage entered the city, and as its name suggested, Tongming Pawnshop was indeed brightly lit. Fei Sheng brought Liu'er along to register themselves and saw horse carriages of all styles and colors outside the pawnshop. There were the *Longyou* merchants that had come around from Juexi as well as human traffickers from Fanzhou. A hubbub of abacus beads being flicked and all sorts of shouts filled the place, where every imaginable ware was on sale. It was already such a late hour, and yet the place was still bustling with activity.

As the hub, Tongming Pawnshop sat in the center with large lanterns hung up on both sides of it. Wine taverns and stores operated all night, with the hustle and bustle keeping up until dawn. There were plenty of beggars, but they were all being bossed around. Prostitutes of all ages drew close to the coming and going wealthy men and pulled them to the inns so that they had a place to sleep for free for a night, relying on this to earn some money for food. Amidst the surge of crowd, Fei Sheng noticed a few Biansha faces.

This place did not seem to have been once defeated in war. The stench of wine and meat gone sour permeated the air along with the fragrance of perfumes and spices from Juexi and the Chashi River; they jostled against one another for prominence, subsequently turning into a fusion of smells that made one's knees weak. This street was like a milky way reflected from the vault of heavens that converged the remaining bright lights in Zhongbo together, making the surroundings look pitch-dark in comparison.

There were so many people around that Fei Sheng did not dare to be too conceited and careless. Armed with the tips Liu'er had given, he headed inside the pawnshop and looked around for someone to submit his registration. The goods were miscellaneous grains from Huaizhou. The store clerk busily and methodically checked them one at a time according to the sequence of the hanging tags. He moved quickly, and the younger assistant following behind him was even quicker in noting it all down.

When the shop clerk came before the horse carriage, he did not presumptuously reach out to lift the curtains, but bowed at it in all earnestness. "You sirs come from the west and are all-powerful connoisseurs of the trade, and since you have made your way to our Dunzhou, we dare not be poor hosts, so we will just lay it all out here first.

You must be fatigued from the journey, so treat it as some entertainment tidbits to relieve your boredom.”

Shen Zechuan did not answer.

This shop clerk had seen his fair share of traveling merchants, and he had prior dealings with both magnates and bandits before, so he knew that some of these customers had terrible tempers. He remained firmly on his feet with a neutral expression and said, “Once you have entered the city, it’s all entirely up to you whoever you decide to have business dealings with; no one can interfere, for it’s nobody else’s business. As fleeting as our encounters are, we are all fellow travelers whose paths have crossed. Our coming here for the same purpose makes us acquaintances who should mutually get along and help each other. Dunzhou is remote and out of the way, so let’s all look out for one another. If you require mediation for any issues, feel free to send someone to the shop to let us know. No matter where these people are from, the assistants will always be standing ready to assist without delay as long as you so command. However, there is one rule that must be made clear to you. Any goods that are meant for purchase and sales have to be recorded down on file in the shop, and every good on record in the shop has to be a genuine product. By having yourself registered for business in our shop, you can be considered as having received the nod from the Yan clan. In Dunzhou, we share prestige and wealth together.” After the shop clerk was done speaking, he bowed once more to the horse carriage, then turned aside and lifted his arm to guide them. “A courtyard has been especially prepared in the back for you. Please choose the attendants as you please. We have all kinds of fresh, seasonal fruits available for your enjoyment. As long as you stay in Dunzhou, you can ask for anything you would like to eat or enjoy. Our Yan Clan will take care of it all for you!”

Fei Sheng was secretly rendered speechless. The Xi Clan was wealthy, but they were nowhere as generous as this. This Yan Heru was truly incredible. Rumor had it that he loved money as much as he treasured his life, but he also spent money like water. He was an ostentatious man who loved gold. He invested all of his capital into Dunzhou and won over the hearts of all the traveling merchants. It was no wonder that the Xi Clan’s chain of shops could not make their foray into the market in the east at all!

The shop clerk did not waste any more time on superfluous talk and shouted, “The Sixteenth Courtyard of Tianji welcomes its distinguished

guests!”

The horse carriage started moving with a rumble, guided into the courtyard by a specially deployed errand-runner.

With his face to the carriage window, Shen Zechuan heard the melody that drifted from the upper floors of the wine tavern in the darkness. The dazzling display of lanterns in a kaleidoscope of colors through the carriage drapes looked like multi-colored waves of shimmering water so gorgeous that one was left mesmerized and captivated.



The moment Liu'er entered the courtyard, he clicked his tongue in wonder. He took his shoes off before stepping on the porch and held them in his bosom as he followed behind Fei Sheng and cast glances all around. He thought out loud, “Hot damn... just how much silver would you need to spend on all these...”

Fei Sheng took a look at the hallway. “Not unless you have a million to splurge.”

Liu'er had never before seen this much money, and neither had Fei Sheng. It had to be known that during the reign of Xiande, the military budget allocated to Libei and Qidong totaled to merely two million, tops. The imperial court officials had to reduce their salaries and scrimp and save to provide for the Libei Armored Cavalry and Qidong Garrison Troops. The imperial court was so ridiculously poor it was driving all of them insane, and yet here Yan Heru was, splurging hundreds of thousands of taels at a mere wave of his hand, all just for the sake of entertaining his guests.

The journey had truly been difficult. Fei Sheng did not dare to make Shen Zechuan endure it for any longer and attended to him as he drank the medicine. He then called for a subordinate to prepare water and make the bed. He did not dare to urge Shen Zechuan to take a rest, and so he quietly instructed Ding Tao to do so.

Fei Sheng did not call for any of the attendants from the Yan Clan to serve in the yard. The courtyard was guarded by rank after rank of Imperial Bodyguards, with Fei Sheng staying in the innermost layer to stand guard under the eaves of Shen Zechuan's room. Not only were the Imperial Bodyguards on guard duty on the ground, but they were also stationed on the ridge of the upturned eaves. Ding Tao, having slept his fill in the carriage during the daytime, was now sitting up there writing and drawing with Li Xiong. The words that Xiao Chiye had said before they had set off

would pop up from time to time in Fei Sheng's mind, so much so that Fei Sheng's heart would leap into his mouth if Shen Zechuan so much as let out a cough in the night.

Shen Zechuan was not familiar with Dunzhou, yet for some reason, the nightmares hit him hard that night. Chashi Sinkhole had disappeared, and the Prince of Jianxing's Manor had replaced it in its place.

The deaf and mute aunty sat under those dark and gloomy eaves, while Shen Zechuan stood in the dimly lit room, feeling thirsty. As the table was so very tall, he stood on tiptoe to reach for the teacup, but ended up brushing it onto the ground. Broken fragments of porcelain that had shattered by his foot went flying all over, cutting his finger.

Shen Zechuan started to sob.

He felt inexplicably upset, as if he had broken something precious.

But no matter how much Shen Zechuan sobbed, the aunty merely continued to focus on her embroidery with her back to him. She extended her arm and pressed it down, which subsequently elongated her shadow all the way to Shen Zechuan's foot and turned it into a grotesque, long-limbed creature. She repeated this one action over and over again, her surroundings shrouded in dead silence.

Shen Zechuan's finger was burning with searing pain. He clutched his robes in his anxiety and bandaged the wounded finger. Blood very quickly bloomed through his robe, like a camellia that had broken apart upon falling onto the snowfield—red and vivid.



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Special thanks to [Alex](#) for sparing brain cells and to [Tea](#) for proofreading!

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 170 : CREATURE

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



The two fingers on Shen Zechuan's right hands trembled violently, the blazing pain jolting him awake in a split second. He wearily raised his right arm and spread his palm open, only to realize that he could not move his two fingers freely. The window paper glowed indistinctly with light—to think he had slept until this hour.

Shen Zechuan set down his arm and let the sweat trickle down along his temples. After a moment, he rolled over and got up, his two fingers slightly curled as he put on his clothes.

On hearing the sound of movements, Fei Sheng turned back and beckoned to the subordinate bearing the medicine to come over and attend to Shen Zechuan. The door opened, and Fei Sheng lifted the hem of his robe and strode in. Shen Zechuan was standing and washing up by the copper basin.

“Master.” Fei Sheng went around to the side and said softly, “We called for a physician early in the morning. He’s waiting out there. Shall we summon him in to take a look?”

Shen Zechuan placed the handkerchief back into the basin and, in a rare moment in which he did not refute him, said, “Call him in.”

Delighted, Fei Sheng immediately shouted for the physician. In the interim, he said to Shen Zechuan, “We released the men last night. With Liu’er’s connections with his old acquaintances, the news came in pretty fast. Master, Lei Jingzhe is right here in the city!”

Shen Zechuan stood by the door and looked back pensively at Fei Sheng.

The fact that Lei Jingzhe reacted so quickly illustrated that they had committed the transportation route of the military supply firmly to mind, with even the possibility of a delay taken into account. Thus, Lei Jingzhe immediately headed down to Dunzhou when the squad did not arrive these couple of days. It was likely that he wanted to get to the bottom of who had robbed the Scorpions.

“The military supply wagons to Cizhou have the Libei Armored Cavalry keeping watch over them along the way. The news can’t have spread that fast. They should have entered Cizhou by now. Whether or not Lei Jingzhe can get to the bottom of the matter, the stuff and men are ours now.” Fei Sheng stepped aside and watched as Shen Zechuan drank his medicine. “But it’s too tough to catch Lei Jingzhe alive in the city. Master. There are still four hundred Scorpions watching over the bandits they took captive, and these men could also be considered as Lei Jingzhe’s soldiers. Our numbers are far too low.”

The medicine was so bitter it put a slight frown on Shen Zechuan’s face. “To date, Lei Jingzhe still has yet to put Mount Luo and Duanzhou in order. This indicates that he doesn’t have enough soldiers under his command to deploy. He likely smuggled the armaments to ingratiate himself with Biansha. So, the four hundred Scorpions in the city of Dunzhou might not necessarily be willing to listen to his orders. Besides, we came to Dunzhou to make money on amicable terms, not to seize what’s others by force. We can take our time.” He handed the empty bowl to Fei Sheng. “Cizhou has nothing of importance to attend to lately. I have all the time in the world to have my fun with him.”

When Fei Sheng took the bowl, he saw Shen Zechuan’s hand dangling from the opening of his sleeve. The color drained from his face, and he lifted the hem of his robe and kneeled. “That hand’s broken, isn’t it, Master?! We were in such a rush during our journey... I’m really blind. To think I never—”

“Time was of the essence then, and it’s not like we could find a decent physician midway into our journey.” Seeing how panicked Fei Sheng was, Shen Zechuan said, “It’s just two fingers that are broken, not severed. Let the physician set them with steel needles and have them bandaged later. They’ll be fine after half a year of healing.”

Shen Zechuan downplayed his injuries and responded in such a nonchalant manner, but listening to him filled Fei Sheng with fear and trepidation. In an act of either genuine sentiment or feigned sincerity, Fei Sheng’s eyes reddened as he braced himself against the ground with his hands and said in a trembling voice, “When the master is wounded, his subject deserves death for letting it happen. It doesn’t stand to reason for a guard to be right by his master’s side and still let his master get injured.” As he spoke, he raised a hand and slapped himself several times on the cheeks.



“It’s all because we are so useless that Master even has to come personally to our rescue! Master, I beseech Master to bestow our deserved punishments on us!”

Fei Sheng was now leading the Imperial Bodyguards, and by kneeling here to slap himself without the slightest trace of hesitation, he was also effectively slapping the faces of those men outside. He was lowering himself to let everyone in here and out there understand that this incident was a wake-up call. Such an oversight could not be made ever again; Shen Zechuan must never get hurt. From the moment they arrived in Zhongbo after being forsaken by Han Cheng and were rejected by Xiao Chiye, Shen Zechuan was the only candidate left to be their master.

Qiao Tianya had a knack for managing his subordinates too. In fact, he was even more well-liked by the subordinates than Fei Sheng was, but he was much too uninhibited. At times, he seemed to treat Shen Zechuan more like a friend than a master. Fei Sheng had already garnered much from Shen Zechuan’s act of deploying Qiao Tianya over to Yao Wenyu’s side.

Could Yao Wenyu’s body heal soon? If not, then Qiao Tianya would stay by Yao Wenyu’s side for as long as several years. The vacated position beside Shen Zechuan was given to Fei Sheng, which in Fei Sheng’s view was a hint that he had to accomplish what Qiao Tianya would not do while in the same position. He had to make it clear to the current Imperial Bodyguards that it was out of respect for Ji Gang that Shen Zechuan did not pursue their dereliction of duty. But they must never, ever repeat the same mistake again.

As long as Shen Zechuan had not given the nod, Fei Sheng would never take action. Likewise, as long as Shen Zechuan gave the command – good or bad – Fei Sheng would execute it and see it through to the very end. He was far more aware of his own place than Qiao Tianya was—he was Shen Zechuan’s guard, not Shen Zechuan’s friend. As such, he would not privately report Shen Zechuan’s injury to Xiao Chiye.

The Imperial Bodyguards followed suit and kneeled too, their faces burning with pain as they listened to the sounds of Fei Sheng’s slaps. Fei Sheng smacked himself until his cheeks turned red, and even so, he was still lifting his hand for another slap when a folding fan suddenly intercepted his hand.

“There can be no progress without pain. As long as you don’t repeat the same mistake, it’s alright.” Shen Zechuan shifted the fan in his left hand

away. "All the people in the courtyard are good men. Punishments will come to those who have done wrong. I naturally have my own arrangements for when we return to Cizhou. You may rise now."

The fact that Shen Zechuan did not let Fei Sheng continue to slap himself meant that he had no intention to humiliate them. He gave scholars their due respects, but he did not treat the Imperial Bodyguards shabbily either. Their monthly salaries were issued in a timely manner and converted to ready silver based on Qudu's standard, and the Imperial Bodyguards' residences were all spacious, well-lit rooms. What's more, there was Ji Gang to give them martial arts pointers at all times. At first, they all thought Shen Zechuan to be a capricious man who was a tough one to serve, but over time, they realized that Shen Zechuan was pretty much set in his preferences. He duly meted out rewards and punishments as needed, and his commands were all decisive and straightforward; there had never been an incident in which he took out his anger on his subordinates.

Fei Sheng wiped his tears and kowtowed a few more times to Shen Zechuan before rising to his feet and taking his position at the side. Ding Tao stared blankly at the scene unfolding before him and felt a great wave of guilt wash over him. The physician outside happened to arrive just then, so Fei Sheng lifted the curtains and invited the physician in.

Both of Shen Zechuan's fingers had indeed been broken, but they were fortunately not severed. As he expected, the physician had them set and secured with steel needles. With half a year of recuperation, they should be more or less healed.

"My lord should not wield a blade or draw a bow these days." The physician was an old man. As the fee they paid him was generous, he made a special point of giving further instructions when he got up. "You've been putting off having this injury treated for quite a few days. Fortunately, you didn't delay it past today. Otherwise, it couldn't be set back into place even with the steel needles. My lord seems to me to be in poor health, and it's now coincidentally the eighth month where sudden fluctuations in weather temperature are a common occurrence. Pay more attention to your meals and attire. Don't fall ill again."

The physician lifted his sleeves to pack his medical case when he remembered something else.

"Is my lord always having trouble sleeping?" He said. "Business has to be conducted, but it's taxing on the mind and body. No human will be able

to take it if they keep getting haunted by nightmares over a long period of time. I'll get you a brocade pouch later and fill it with some incense to help you sleep. You can put it under your pillow at night and see if it works."

Fei Sheng bent over to help the physician carry his medical case and saw him out.



Shen Zechuan sat on the chair and sized up his right hand in the momentary silence that followed. Two of his fingers were bound together so securely that it proved inconvenient for him to stretch them. He could forget about grasping his blade now. It was really by a stroke of good fortune that they were not severed.

But why would he dream of the Prince of Jianxing's residence?

Last night's dream played out on what seemed to be a yellowish worn-out rag, where only the back of the aunty was visible because Shen Zechuan no longer remembered how she looked. He cried so sadly for that cup of water—but had it been really for that cup of water?

Shen Zechuan rested his elbow on the chair handle and leaned back slowly. His gaze shifted along the half-lowered bamboo blinds to the eaves shrouded under the shadow of a tree. He slowed the dream in his mind in an attempt to lay every scene out for deeper scrutiny.

The deaf and mute aunty sat under the eaves.

The courtyard was tiny, and the direction in which the house was facing was terrible; once dusk fell, the interior would get dim rather quickly. Shen Zechuan was still short, so short that he did not have to bend over to look into the inner chamber. He wanted so much to drink that cup of water; his entire throat seemed to be on fire. But he could not reach it. Thus, he stood on tiptoe.

Shen Zechuan tilted his head up slightly.

He stood on tiptoe—this was not the first time this had happened. He knew it was possible that the teacup might fall onto the ground. So at the same time he stood on tiptoe, he looked inside. The inner chamber was too dark. The windows were all unopened, and that half-lowered beaded curtain was bereft of life. It remained still and unmoving, a tint of white in the darkness.

Shen Zechuan frowned and continued to pry further as if in a trance.

Why did he have to look in?

The young Shen Zechuan stood on tiptoe and leaned over the edge of the table to look at that mass of darkness. He blinked several times and did not withdraw his gaze, but he could not help but reach his fingers out to touch the rim of the teacup. Someone stirred in the darkness, and at the moment his attention was diverted, Shen Zechuan accidentally brushed the teacup aside and dropped it. The sound of the teacup shattering was so crystal clear it was as if it had been smashed right beside his ear. It startled the person in the inner chamber into turning around. The strange shadow of the aunty who kept lifting her arm soundlessly grabbed Shen Zechuan by the foot, and it was at this very moment Shen Zechuan saw a terror-stricken face.

Shen Zechuan suddenly sucked in a breath as he snapped back to his senses and found that he had subconsciously clenched his right hand into a fist. Intense pain throbbed in those two fingers. The weather was hot today, but Shen Zechuan's back was all drenched in a cold sweat.

He had seen Shen Wei.

Shen Wei's face that was all contorted with terror was so jarring on the eyes that it jolted Shen Zechuan to his feet. He irritably relaxed his right hand and faced the shadow of the tree under the eaves, but he could not recall exactly what Shen Wei had been doing.

Why was Shen Wei so panic-stricken?

The inner chamber was too dark; Shen Zechuan could not see a thing at all. Even Shen Wei's face seemed to be lodged in a thick black mass of shadows. He kept thinking back to it, but still made no progress. His memory seemed to have been stuck in time, frozen upon the frame of Shen Wei's face.

Damn.

Shen Zechuan knew how to restrain his irascibility firmly under an icy demeanor, but not this time. The abhorrence his expression exposed was a clear indicator that he was already standing on the brink of the precipice. He was just like a trapped beast as he shut his eyes in the sunlight, the sweat oozing from his temples.

Blood oozed out from his cut finger, staining his robe. Once again, pale white juxtaposed with vivid red. The beaded curtain was clearly dead, but it swung violently as it came back to life again in the scenes that flashed by. The strange shadow grabbed hold of Shen Zechuan, whose finger was still bleeding. Meanwhile, the aunty kept up with her never-ending embroidery

as her arms stretched longer and longer until the expanding shadow mutated into a scorpion swinging its tail.

“Thud!”

Shen Zechuan abruptly shifted his gaze over.

Ding Tao’s legs gave way, and he fell onto his butt on the ground, looking as though he was looking at a stranger. All the hair on his body was standing on end. His candy tumbled out and rolled on the ground, where it bumped into Shen Zechuan’s snapped fan.

Shen Zechuan leaned over to pick up the candy off the ground and handed it to Ding Tao, but Ding Tao did not reach out for it. Instead, he shifted back a little in fear and trepidation to flee from Shen Zechuan’s shadow.

Shen Zechuan’s throat bobbed. It was as if he was a demonic creature stripped of its skin to be thoroughly exposed under the stinging sunlight. The pale sides of his neck revealed his vulnerability, and as the wind huffed at his sleeves, he let loose a laugh into the long, endless stillness and gently tossed the candy away.



# QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 171 : TATTOO

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



Ding Tao was petrified. In that instant when their eyes met, he thought that he would die like Jida had. He could still remember the expression in Shen Zechuan's eyes when the latter killed Jida, and the same expression had been in those eyes as they locked on him just a moment ago. He wanted nothing more than to run, and when Shen Zechuan handed him the candy, he lost the courage to raise his arm.

It was silent under the eaves. Shen Zechuan had already retreated back into the room. The harsh sunlight blazed upon Ding Tao's frame. He had yet to recover his wits. That kind of feeling was indescribable, but one thing was for sure—this was not the young master he was familiar with.

Ding Tao lifted both arms and wiped haphazardly at his eyes. He wanted to pick up the candy, but it had long melted from the heat of the sun. The delicate sweetness of osmanthus attracted a colony of ants. Ding Tao remained kneeling in place. He did not know why, but the tears had begun to pitter-patter down from his eyes.



Shen Zechuan's interrupted memories could no longer be strung together into a coherent whole. It had been too dark in the dream; he simply could not remember any more details. He stood behind the bamboo blinds and heard Ding Tao sobbing beneath the eaves.

Shen Zechuan told himself:

He must not dwell too deeply on this dream.

He had to sieve the truth from falsehood as soon as possible and decipher if the contents of this dream were real scenes he had genuinely seen before or if they had been a figment of his imagination. For six years, he had been subjected to the compulsion of nightmares; he knew best that such dreams were sometimes a mixed bag of reality and fiction. It was just like how he used to dream of the Chashi Sinkhole in the past, although the sight that greeted him in the sinkhole would change according to his state of mind.

After Shen Zechuan had gotten injured during his trip to Chazhou, he dreamed of himself lying in the sinkhole. That was the prelude to his

mistrust of his own body and his realization that he had begun to fear death. Frequent nightmares could mess with memories, and in truth, Shen Zechuan could no longer be certain of the words that Ji Mu had said to him before his death.

How dangerous.

Shen Zechuan thought self-deprecatingly to himself.

It was just one Shen Wei.



Liu'er's network of connections came in very handy. They hid all over the city in every street and alley, and as long as they were paid enough, they could become "eyes" of varying sizes. By capitalizing on these informants, Fei Sheng could snoop into every nook and cranny of Dunzhou without even stepping foot outside. However, Lei Jingzhe's movements were intriguing, to say the least.

"Lei Jingzhe has been brazenly carrying out his search for three consecutive days. He's checked through all the goods entering and exiting." Fei Sheng said in a hushed tone behind Shen Zechuan. "Master, could it be that he already knows that we're in the city?"

Shen Zechuan was wearing a *zheyang* hat<sup>1</sup> that was common in Qudu. "If that's the case, he should be checking the wagons and carriages of the merchants coming and going rather than the goods themselves."

This batch of military supplies was very important to Lei Jingzhe; otherwise, he would not have promptly rushed over to Dunzhou to check on it personally. Based on Shen Zechuan's guess, Lei Jingzhe wanted to exchange this batch of supplies for something else of equivalent value from the Twelve Tribes of Biansha. Yet, he did not search to the west immediately when he arrived in Dunzhou; instead, he wandered around the city of Dunzhou.

Shen Zechuan lifted his arms to lean over the edge of the railing and surveyed the restaurant from top to bottom through the sheer fabric. He took his time organizing his thoughts, then said, "Checking the goods shows that Lei Jingzhe thinks those supply wagons will still return to Dunzhou."

How strange.

Shen Zechuan tapped his fingertips on the railing.

How could Lei Jingzhe be so sure that the supply wagons would return to Dunzhou? The numbers of powers in Zhongbo who could devour this

batch of provisions were few and far between. Cizhou was one of the primary suspects. Shen Zechuan was even prepared to challenge Lei Jingzhe openly, but as it turned out, Lei Jingzhe had not suspected him at all.

“Master, even if Lei Jingzhe thought someone else robbed the supplies, who would resend them back to Dunzhou?” Fei Sheng could make neither head nor tail of it. “There are still Scorpions stationed here. Transporting the supplies back would be walking right into the trap.”

“You’re right.” Shen Zechuan, who had been having difficulty sleeping these days, wearily massaged the center of his brows. “Who in the world would rob the goods and send them back later...”

This made no sense at all.

“The informants we have successively planted in Dunzhou turned out to be of no use precisely because it’s too chaotic over here.” Fei Sheng plucked up his courage and said, “Could it be a bandit who is unwilling to defect to the Biansha people scheming against Lei Jingzhe?”

Shen Zechuan thought about it carefully and gave a slight shake of his head. “After the split of the Mount Luo bandits, there has never been a leader who could win over the masses. Ding Niu and Liu’er were taken captive because they never thought of joining forces to oppose Lei Jingzhe. It’s possible for them to be small-time bandits based on their current size, but they would never have the courage to lay their hands on such a big batch of supplies. “

Military armament was not like other things. They could not be taken apart and hidden like grains. Given that this batch of supply wagons required hundreds of bandits to push it, it was easy to imagine just how heavy it was. Those small-time bandits could not have swallowed it at all. Shen Zechuan’s ability to transfer them hinged on the fact that he did not kill off that batch of bandits, along with the fact there was also the Libei Armored Cavalry tagging along to hold the bandits in check. Otherwise, he would not have easily gotten his hands on this batch of stuff.

This matter was so bizarre it was a little ludicrous.

Fei Sheng did not dare to laugh. He thought about it for a moment. If only Mister Chengfeng or Yuanzhuo were here, he would not have needed to speak up. But there was no one beside Shen Zechuan at present, and Fei Sheng would look like a blockhead if he just stood there without moving, so he thought hard about it for a moment and said, “Could it be—”



A sudden stir of commotion downstairs cut off Fei Sheng's words. Shen Zechuan lifted the veil of his hat and squinted his eyes at the main hall. Being on the fifth floor, they had a full view of the situation in the main hall.

This restaurant belonged to the Yan clan. Shen Zechuan was here because Lei Jingzhe would be here tonight to entertain a certain someone. The identity of said person was unknown for the time being. His informants were not good enough to pull off that level of information, but Shen Zechuan more or less had a guess who it was.

"The scorpions." Fei Sheng lowered his voice. "Lei Jingzhe brought the scorpions."

Shen Zechuan looked down at Lei Jingzhe. The latter had just recovered from his injuries, and his hair had been cropped short. One could hardly distinguish him from the Biansha Scorpions crowding around him. Due to the distance, Shen Zechuan was unable to get a clear look at the tattoo on Lei Jingzhe's nape.

Lei Jingzhe apparently had matters to attend to. He stepped across the hall and hurried up the stairs.

"If he's here for the feast," Fei Sheng slowly furrowed his brow, "then that's quite the number of people he has brought along with him, isn't it?"

There were plenty of merchants in this building, but no one dared to stand in Lei Jingzhe's way. He had indeed brought a lot of men with him; there were at least thirty of them. A few of them followed him up the stairs while the rest took their seats in the main hall. The Imperial Bodyguards in their various disguises kept their composure and watched Lei Jingzhe as they drank, made merry, and even brushed past him.

Shen Zechuan picked his teacup up and watched Lei Jingzhe head up the fifth floor to the area across from him. He sipped his tea and said, "When you get back, give Liu'er some monetary reward for his accuracy in pinpointing the location."

Fei Sheng acknowledged the order.

The party on the opposite end lowered the bamboo blinds to keep out prying eyes. The few men Lei Jingzhe brought along stood guard outside. Fei Sheng, who had great eyesight, carefully searched for the scorpion tattoos on these men's bodies with the help of the lit lanterns.

A little less than an hour later, the lanterns in the building were all raised. The party on the other side called for their food to be served, and

waiters weaved in and out of the area. Fei Sheng attempted to shift his position, but the screen at the other end had been so cleverly erected that he could not find the chance to snoop.

Lei Jingzhe's feast stretched on for a very long time from the hour of you to the hour of hai, and they still had yet to call it a day. Shen Zechuan had already finished an entire pot of tea and was leaning sleepily against his chair. Another two hours passed, and the vibrancy in the atmosphere in the building turned up a notch instead of evaporating.

"It's the Yan Clan's show now." Fei Sheng reminded Shen Zechuan in a whisper. "Master, this is a signal for the various merchants to have fun among themselves."

Shen Zechuan breathed an acknowledgement and tiredly opened his eyes to look downstairs for a while from his seemingly drab seat. "A free market it is. The Yan clan profits from playing the mediator between the various parties here. What they collect is privilege money. Tell them in a while to sell the grains we brought over as well."

"Human traffickers." Fei Sheng looked attentively at the people below. "That's the procuress from Fanzhou."

The procuress of Fanzhou was a rotund, heavily made-up woman ostentatiously decked out in loud, showy apparel. When she came here in the past, it was for the specific purpose of bringing children for Lei Changming; she had never carried out any transactions with the other merchants. But her business in Dunzhou was impeded when the Yan clan fell out with Lei Changming, so she reluctantly switched to selling women, whom she took in from the various prefectures in Zhongbo. In those few years where the starvation among the people was at its worst, a *dou* of grains could be exchanged for an entire family of young and old.

"Master." Fei Sheng half-bent over and began to introduce in detail. "This procuress's name is Cuiqing. We dug into her background in passing while we were monitoring the prices of commodities in Fanzhou. She and Lei Changming have a shared past. She was initially a native of Duanzhou, and before the defeat of the Zhongbo's troops, she worked as a procuress too. Later, she went to Fanzhou and continued to ply her old trade there. Lei Changming was the one who forked out the deposit. That was why she was willing to take the risk and deliver the children to Lei Changming."

Grasping her handkerchief in hand, Cuiqing twisted her body to squeeze through the group of merchants. No one dared to take advantage of

her in this place. On the contrary, however, she would think of ways to get her hands on whoever she occasionally took a fancy to. As an old-timer in the three prefectures of Dunzhou, Duanzhou, and Fanzhou who had dabbled for a long time in the trade, she had some involvement with Lei Changming and Cai Yu, although she had yet to board a big ship like the Yan clan.

Cuiqing was so obese that she squeezed a few men out of the way when she sat down. She crossed her legs and reclined against the side of the table. The fair-faced man following behind her kneeled to light her pipe for her. She tilted her head to suck in a few mouthfuls, then blew out puffs of smoke.

“My eldest nephew hasn’t come down yet?” Cuiqing cast a few glances up. “They are taking such a long time. He should’ve been done by now even if he was messing under the sheets, let alone having a meal.”

The merchant sitting by her side said, “What good stuff has the madam brought along this time? Take them out while you can and show them to us. We’d be keen too if there’s one suitable!”

“Bah.” Cuiqing examined the gold and jade bracelets on her right hand. “Are you even worthy of the good stuff? The ones we brought along this time are not salacious goods worth a mere few dozens of silvers. Those are all young virgins in the prime of their youth! In Qudu, you can forget about taking them away without at least a few hundred taels.”

“How is a virgin worth this sum? Whores are all temptresses, so it’s only natural for them to be more expensive the more seasoned they are!”

“You guys are only worthy of fooling around in those lousy brothels.” Cuiqing stroked the fair-faced man’s cheeks with her manicured finger that had been painted with nail polish and cackled. “Back in the old days when Duanzhou was still the money-spinner of Dazhou, all the girls in my stable were unrivaled beauties. Which of the cheap sluts from other brothels has even been able to beat my girls in all the years the establishment has been ranking them?”

Cuiqing generally did not bring up the past given how pathetically she had fled during the defeat of the Zhongbo’s troops, but the atmosphere was great tonight, with flattery freely thrown around left and right. She smoked her pipe, looking very pleased with herself as the others clustered around her.

“Not to boast of my high standards, but if it had been in the past, the goods I brought along today would only be worthy enough to serve tea in

my establishment.” The rouge on Cuiqing’s lips was bright red, and her thick make-up concealed much of her wrinkles. From the contours of her face, it was visibly apparent that this one had also been a great beauty several decades back.

“Come on, give us names!”

With a contemptuous smile, Cuiqing said, “The top three in the ranks were all girls from my establishment, and each one of them married well. Today, prostitutes and performers are inseparable from one another,<sup>2</sup> but back then, they were as different as the waters of the Jing and Wei Rivers.<sup>3</sup> All of you have to spend gold just to catch a glimpse of those who sell their arts, and they can simply refuse to see you when they were in business. They were even more precious than the young missies from rich, prominent families. My eldest nephew’s mother was also a girl of mine, the famous Xiaoyinlei<sup>4</sup> of the Chashi riverside who married into the Zhu clan in Duanzhou.”

As Cuiqing spoke, she pinched the man’s face and blew smoke into his face.

“These were all small potatoes. The one I doted on the most was the number one in the establishment. Ever heard of ‘pure as white jade, as if made of porcelain’? Back then, just putting up her name alone would have the whole city of Duanzhou turning up in full force. Even the emperor himself who was faraway in Qudu wanted a glimpse of her ravishing appearance!”

The surrounding merchants clapped their hands and said in delight. “That’s Bai Cha!”

Under the spiraling wisps of smoke, an entranced Cuiqing put up her hand, looking as if she was still reveling in her past as she snorted and murmured, “Bai Cha huh... do you people really think ‘pure as white jade’ is a fabrication? She was what it truly meant to be like jade and porcelain. If all of you were to see her, I’m sure all of you would no doubt kneel down to be her footrest if she so much as furrowed her brows. No one could bear to let her get sullied by the dust on the ground...”

The hall reeked of smoke so thick that several courtesans who were sitting with them coughed. But girls like them who earn a living by prostituting themselves did not dare to cover their noses and mouths for fear that the patrons beside them thought that they were being disdained, so every one of them held it in until their powdered cheeks flushed red as they

remained squeezed in the middle, all drenched in sweat. Cuiqing got someone to set up the cards with the intention to play a couple of games that were all the rage in Qudu. The handsome man she brought along remained kneeling by the side to massage her legs.

Not a few moments later, one of the courtesans simply could not stand it anymore and knitted her brows as she covered her mouth with a handkerchief and let out a light cough. The smell seemed off to her, so she took a couple more sniffs, then jerked to her feet with a cry of surprise and exclaimed, "Fire!"

The merchants and courtesans in the hall instantly panicked. Everyone watched as billows of smoke rose. Those few attendants who had been serving them had long died. Cries of alarm echoed from all directions as everyone swept up the silvers in a fluster and tucked the money into their bosoms without even knowing if the money was even rightfully theirs. The cards had fallen and scattered all over the ground. Cuiqing, being too obese, tottered on her feet from being jostled against. Even the hairpiece by her temple had fallen out.

"Open the door!" Those who had made it to the door first pounded on it, shouting, "Why is the door locked?!"

Tables and chairs tipped over. Some people even attempted to climb out of the windows, but the windows were sealed too.

Lei Jingzhe abruptly popped his head out and looked down.

When Cuiqing saw him, she quickly waved a handkerchief at him and shouted, "My dear nephew! Hurry up and think of a way to open the door. The back hall is on fire!"

Fei Sheng's hand was already on the hilt of his blade. All it took was for Shen Zechuan to give the command, and the Imperial Bodyguards would immediately swarm the building. But Shen Zechuan continued to drink his tea without saying a word.

Fei Sheng could not help but call out, "Master—"

As Fei Sheng spoke, a hand suddenly grabbed onto the railing in front of Lei Jingzhe, and from there, a man heaved himself up and leaped over. Lei Jingzhe's countenance instantly changed. He moved backward to dodge the other party's incoming scimitar and ended up knocking the screen over with a loud crash, exposing the table and chairs in the middle. To their surprise, there was only Lei Jingzhe himself.

Fei Sheng blurted out in shock, “He didn’t invite anyone at all; this was a bait meant to lure a snake out of its hole!”<sup>5</sup>

Shen Zechuan felt for his folding fan, but belatedly remembered that he had broken it. He drained the tea and watched the men that Lei Jingzhe had left downstairs rush up the stairs. Oddly enough, other than the area Lei Jingzhe was in, the rest of the place was very quiet.

Fei Sheng, with his sharp eyes, suddenly stuck his head out and stared fixedly at the fight across them. He watched them carefully without missing a single of their moves and exclaimed in bewilderment, “Master, this man is also a ‘scorpion’!”

The man who came to assassinate Lei Jingzhe had, in the thick of the action, inadvertently exposed the side of his neck, where a tattoo of an impressive scorpion identical to Jida’s was inked!



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### Footnotes

1. 遮阳帽 zheyang hat; a ‘sunshade’ hat typically worn by the literati or scholar-official.
2. 买艺 performer-courtesans who sell “arts” like music, dancing, and literary skills in painting and poems, etc as opposed to those who simply sold their bodies. Sometimes they did both, but there were also those who didn’t sell their bodies and only entertained patrons with their crafts.



3.

4. 泾渭分明 as different as the waters of the Jing River (clear) and the Wei River (muddy), i.e., distinctly poles apart from one another
5. Literally, Little Silver Bud
6. i.e. To lure someone into the open or into taking action openly.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 172 : HERU

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



Internal strife!

Fei Sheng subconsciously thought. They were already fighting tooth and nail on the other side. Lei Jingzhe's old injuries had yet to heal, and he was presently having difficulty parrying the other man's savage attacks. All he could do was to keep dodging. In the midst of blows being traded by the two opposing teams of scorpions in the cramped private room, Shen Zechuan saw scimitars and piked daggers.

Fei Sheng was itching to take action. He wanted to make up for the humiliation suffered earlier today and reclaim the dignity of the Imperial Bodyguards who had been making mistakes after mistakes. Heaven did not fail him; it arranged such a dog-eat-dog scene to give him a helping hand. He drew out his Xiuchun blade and said, "Master, let's take this opportunity to take down Lei Jingzhe and put him on trial!"

"What's the hurry?" Shen Zechuan said at his own pace. "They're giving us a monkey show."

Fei Sheng originally did not understand, but he saw how nervous Lei Jingzhe looked, and the latter did not seem like the person who planned this. Both sides were equal in numbers, and the sound of things shattering during their fight persisted as glazed lamps and jade vases were smashed to pieces. He observed carefully and noticed that Lei Jingzhe was already showing signs of intention to retreat.

It was pandemonium downstairs, but after the thick smoke dispersed, all was still and quiet again. The lanterns were raised as usual, with huge, glazed palace lanterns of various dazzling patterns hanging in the center of the main hall. The dead maidservants and attendants were all disposed of, and even the bloodstains on the ground were wiped clean. With a lift of the curtain at the back, a new batch of maidservants came pouring in bearing trays in their hands. They picked up those overturned tables and chairs and pulled the various merchants back into position with smiles and chatters.

A bronze *gong*<sup>1</sup> suddenly sounded, and the attendant they had initially seen in the pawnshop stepped onto the stage in his new robe. He struck the *gong* he was carrying in his hand a few more times and announced in a



loud, clear voice, “Mount Luo’s Chief of Bandits, Lei Jingzhe, versus, Dunzhou’s Little Scorpion, Hairigu. Tonight, when martial arts expert meets martial arts expert, who will live and who will die? Gentlemen, place your bets!”

Fei Sheng did not expect such a turn in the course of events. Even though he was used to seeing all kinds of unpredictable and tumultuous situations in Qudu, he still blurted out in shock, “They are betting on lives?”

The bamboo blinds in the fifth-floor rooms were promptly lifted to reveal the wealthy merchants relaxing in their seats, drinking their tea, waving their fans, and smoking their pipes. Lei Jingzhe wanted to leap out of the window to make his escape, only to realize that the window in particular had been nailed shut.

“I’ve long heard that the young master of the Yan clan doesn’t do anything that doesn’t profit him.” Shen Zechuan said, “To think he could do such roaring business too when it comes to such a trade.”

The screen in the private room was cleared aside, and the swift sounds of abacus beads being flicked rang out like the pelting of rain. The other man grinned. “Men flock together and part ways for the sake of their own interests;<sup>2</sup> even blood brothers still have to settle their accounts clearly. One ought to make the most of things at their disposal!” Having said that, he stopped what he was doing and hold on to the windows to poke his head over and give Fei Sheng the once-over. He winked at Shen Zechuan and said with a smile, “It’s not easy to find an Imperial Bodyguard. This gentleman seems to me to be dignified in appearance and of the right stature. I can take him to Madam Cuiqing later as an apology. My lordship, sell him to me, will you?”

On hearing him point out Shen Zechuan’s identity with just one sentence, Fei Sheng could not help but tighten his grip on his blade and stand before Shen Zechuan to shield him. This man was three or four years older than Ding Tao. He had a childish air about him, and he was fair-skinned and exquisite-looking, with eyes that seemed to be soaked in honey. He looked particularly likable.

Lei Jingzhe, who was on the opposite end, saw him and flew into a rage. Holding himself back with great difficulty, he said, “Why did the Young Master deceive me? You’d rather offend Gedale for the sake of a couple of scorpions?!”

“Gedale is far away on the eastern side of the Chashi River.” Yan Heru retracted his head and said, “Your maternal uncle owes me 580,000 taels of silver, while you owe me 340,000 taels of silver. Isn’t it only right and proper for you to pay off your debts?”

Lei Jingzhe snapped the chair’s leg broken and did his utmost to dodge the sudden glint from the blade. He suffered a setback in Xiao Chiye’s hands the last time and had to rely on Li Xiong to escape by the skin of his teeth, and now he found himself encircled once again, except this time he had played right into the hands of his own people!

Yan Heru leaned over the railings and swung his legs as he watched Lei Jingzhe fight for his life. He shouted towards those downstairs, “A battle between formidable foes of equal strength is a rare sight to behold, so put up your names to register yourselves and take your hands off after placing your bets. Double your profit if you win, and if you make a loss—heh, treat it as post-meal entertainment! As long as you’re in Dunzhou, I, Yan Heru, will not let anyone walk out of here a broke man without even a pair of pants to cover his ass.”

Lei Jingzhe was trapped in a deadly battle for his life. He had only brought along thirty men because he had been a fool to believe Yan Heru’s lies! Now that Lei Jingzhe had the support of the Biansha Cavalry along with four hundred Scorpions stationed in Dunzhou, Yan Heru would have to show him due respect as long as he still intended to run his business in the east. But for all his machinations, Lei Jingzhe had never expected Shen Zechuan to be the person who had seized the military supplies.

The iron cage in the hall was already up by now. Both Lei Jingzhe and the Scorpions in the other camp had suffered heavy casualties, with more than half of their men wounded and dead. Lei Jingzhe spoke to the man that had come to assassinate him in Biansha tongue, “Hairigu, we are all brothers from Gedale, so why fight each other to the death here? Join forces with me to get out of this predicament tonight, and I will not pursue what happened to that batch of military supplies!”

But the other man did not respond and swept his seaweed-like hair back before pulling out his piked dagger to pounce on Lei Jingzhe.

Yan Heru spoke as he poured the wine, “Is your lordship not curious how I knew you’d come?”

“Liu’er’s informants all come with their own prices.” Shen Zechuan peeled an orange and brought it to his mouth. “As long as the money is

enough, any news can change hands and be resold.”

Yan Heru laughed again. “It sounds like I’m not smart enough when you put it this way, but I actually got an inkling right away. Huaizhou’s miscellaneous grains other than rice and wheat to the east have all gone into Cizhou’s granaries. There’s no one else capable of taking them out in such large quantities other than you, Shen Zechuan.”

“What a coincidence then,” Shen Zechuan said, “to be meeting you here.”

“Don’t be so modest,” Yan Heru spoke. “Your lordship is here to lie in wait for the opportunity to present itself, aren’t you? I truly find it strange. How did you know that the person Lei Jingzhe invited tonight was me?”

Shen Zechuan finished up the orange before continuing. “Lei Jingzhe’s trip to Dunzhou this time to search through the goods surely offended all the merchants, yet the Yan Clan didn’t step forth to obstruct him. This suggests that both parties have been keeping each other in the loop. In that case, he would have to invite you over for a drink, wouldn’t he? He can also seize the opportunity to mend his relationship with the Yan Clan; what’s not to like about that? For that purpose, he even went as far as to select a restaurant owned by the Yan Clan as a show of sincerity to you.”

Delighted, Yan Heru commended, “You’re so smart!”

Yan Heru placed his interests first and foremost in everything he did, yet he appeared to be especially innocent and naïve as he held that heavy golden abacus in his bosom, looking all like a child god of wealth. If it weren’t for him being adorned with gold and jade from head to toe, Fei Sheng would never have been able to guess that he was the current head of the Yan Clan had he been walking down a street.

On the other side, Lei Jingzhe was already fatigued from the fight when he saw yet another wave of men rushing up from below. They were vastly outnumbered and trapped in this private room. Lei Jingzhe was unwilling to yield, and the Scorpions in the back smashed the window panels with their elbows.

The night breeze immediately drifted in from the outside. Lei Jingzhe did not make the first move. He merely watched as the scorpion who had created the opening stuck his head out, only to meet with calamity right in the face. In the blink of an eye, his head had been decapitated.

Yan Heru grunted. “This is my restaurant. You leave when I tell you to leave, and you stay when I tell you to stay!”

It was teeming with people both inside and out!

The circle of men surrounding Lei Jingzhe shrunk as they closed in on him. All the merchants at the foot of the building were men who acted depending on the individual in question. So when they saw that Lei Jingzhe was no longer in the position to turn the tables, they hurried to follow in Yan Heru's footsteps and place their bets against Lei Jingzhe. All of them were waiting for him to die. The atmosphere started to heat up with restlessness. Cuiqing clutched at her handkerchief, not bashful in the slightest as she removed all the bracelets on her arms and bet it all on Hairigu. She had long forgotten about her eldest nephew, Lei Jingzhe.

Shen Zechuan abruptly asked. "Did you scheme to kill Lei Jingzhe because you knew I was in Dunzhou?"

A bored stiff Yan Heru answered, "That's right. I have to go where the wind blows. The trade route between Huaizhou, Cizhou, and Chazhou is kind of interesting. There's even the Libei Armored Cavalry for added security, and you can get a ride up to the frontier trade market if you head up. Imagine if we join forces; the three territories in the northeast of Dazhou will be as good as ours, yes? I can keep a chokehold on Qidong's military provisions for you, and you can take me along for the ride. Each with our own needs." As he spoke, he switched his posture. "The way I see it, you are gunning for Qudu. You have a bright future full of limitless possibilities ahead of you."

"So I see." Shen Zechuan rose to his feet and motioned for Fei Sheng to get his cloak.

"Aye." Yan Heru rocked his chair as he looked at the shadows and wondered in puzzlement. "The show isn't over yet, and the man has yet to be slaughtered, so why are you leaving already? Don't you want Lei Jingzhe's head?"

Shen Zechuan secured his cloak and looked back. "There's no one to mind those four hundred scorpions, is there?"

Yan Heru answered, "Your lordship is here. Get your Cizhou Garrison Troops to annihilate them."

"Then I'll have to apologize." Shen Zechuan said with a smile. "I brought only a dozen or so people with me."

The words had only just left Shen Zechuan's mouth when the doors to the main hall suddenly crashed open. Yan Heru craned his neck for a look.

Scorpions filled the area outside, and they had even taken out the last remaining head cart<sup>3</sup> in the armory.

Lei Jingzhe leaped onto the railing and let loose a short whistle to signal the scorpions to attack. The men outside the building were all martial pugilists Yan Heru bought over with money, but pitting them against the scorpions who were specifically trained to fight battles with the Libei Armored Cavalry was no different from throwing an egg against a rock. In no time, their broadswords and daggers were all flung away by the hammers.

A crash rang out from the private room as a chair overturned. Yan Heru bunched up his robe and climbed to his feet with the golden abacus in his arms, intending to flee. The moment he opened the door, he bumped into Fei Sheng. Fei Sheng lifted him up by the back of his collar, and as both of his legs left the ground, Yan Heru cried out, “What the hell?! We’re on the same side!”

Yan Heru’s guards tried to seize him back, but the Imperial Bodyguards had already risen with their blades drawn.

Shen Zechuan said, “Let’s leave together. We can get to know each other on the way.”

Unable to break free, Yan Heru could only let Fei Sheng carry him downstairs like a quail, although he did not forget to yell, “Hairigu, we’re leaving! Come on!”

Chaos descended upon the hall once again. The Biansha scorpions did not give a damn about anything else and simply swung their hammers to smash anyone they came across. Cuiqing watched as blood and brain matter spurted out of the head before her and splattered her all over. Rattled, she held onto the table for support and recalled the savagery of the Biansha Cavalry as they massacred the city several years ago. She could not help but shriek as she scrambled backward in an attempt to dodge. “Eldest nephew, save me!”

There was complete mayhem at the foot of the building, and the exit was completely blocked off. With Yan Heru in tow, Fei Sheng stopped on the third floor and kicked the window of the private room open before stuffing Yan Heru out.

Yan Heru shut his eyes and yelled in the wind, “Stop—! I’m your master—!”

The martial pugilists who were still standing guard outside the building hurriedly kept away their blades. The wind whistled past. Yan Heru opened his eyes with some difficulty and said resentfully, "What the heck did you come here for when you didn't bring your troops?!"

Fei Sheng said to Shen Zechuan, "Master, there is a shop down from this place, and our carriage lies across the street from it."

The moment Yan Heru heard it, he clung on to the window and shook his head hard. "I'm not going this way! I don't know martial arts—"

Shen Zechuan could not be bothered to waste his breath on him, and so with a lift of his leg, he kicked Yan Heru down.

Wind filled Yan Heru's wide-open mouth as he plummeted down with his arms and legs flailing and watched himself plunging right towards the ground. The fabric tarp at the top of the shop suddenly sank from the weight, but it did not rip apart. With one hand lifting Yan Heru, Fei Sheng climbed the ledges of the building with an arm and swung in the air for an instant before leaping off with Yan Heru and landing on his feet.

The Imperial Bodyguards were all lithe and dexterous men, and this move did not take them much effort to execute. The moment Fei Sheng landed, he tossed Yan Heru to his subordinate, took two swift steps back, and shouted, "Master!"

Shen Zechuan landed deftly on the eaves and stepped on Fei Sheng's shoulder with help from the fabric tarp before landing on the ground as well. All hell broke loose as the sound of slaughter in the building rose through the roof. Fei Sheng did not dare to confront the scorpions head-on, so the moment Shen Zechuan was sent into the carriage, he waved his hand in a signal to retreat.

The Imperial Bodyguards moved swiftly and drove into the busy streets in the blink of an eye.

Lei Jingzhe pushed the windows open, but there was already no trace of Yan Heru to be seen. He pounded his fist against the window in a fury and turned around to continue speaking in Biansha tongue, "Don't let these traitors go."



It was silent all around when the horse carriage came to a stop.

Yan Heru clung close to the wall of the carriage, covering his chest with his hands as he pleaded. "If nothing else, we can talk it over, and the prices are all negotiable. My lordship, don't get mad!"

Shen Zechuan took off his *zheyang* hat and tossed it aside, then said to Fei Sheng, who stood outside. "Lift the curtain."

Fei Sheng lifted the carriage's curtains, and a turbid smell immediately drifted out of the carriage. Fei Sheng thought there was something wrong with this scent, and Yan Heru followed up with a shy, embarrassed smile, "Whenever I get anxious, I'll feel like farting."

The Imperial Bodyguards outside immediately started coughing.

Shen Zechuan let loose a laugh, and Yan Heru promptly felt a chill run down his spine. He pedaled his legs to squeeze against the wall of the carriage, and heard Shen Zechuan say in a gentle tone, "Strip him."

"My mother was right!" Yan Heru was now anxious. "Good-looking men are all beasts! Don't, don't do this! I don't swing that way!"

Fei Sheng held down the back of Yan Heru's head and stripped him in no time, although he fortunately left his pair of pants untouched. The nights in the eighth month of Dunzhou were chilly, and Yan Heru, being such a delicate and fair-skinned lad, was so freezing cold that his teeth chattered and caused him to stutter.

Fei Sheng said, "Master, there's no scorpion on him."

Shen Zechuan slowly folded his arms and went straight to the point as he looked at Yan Heru. "What's your relationship to the scorpions?"

Yan Heru rubbed his arm and blinked his pair of doe eyes hard. "Why are you asking me this? Your lordship, that's not right. You should be asking what *your* relationship to the scorpions is."

Shen Zechuan's eyes were unfathomably deep as he asked, "What's my relationship to the scorpions?"

After a few moments of silence in the carriage, Yan Heru answered innocently, "I have no idea."

Shen Zechuan continued, "Fei Sheng."

Fei Sheng reached out to drag Yan Heru out. On seeing this, Yan Heru started to struggle to get up. "I really don't know! Hairigu, Hairigu! You tell him!"

A man tumbled out from behind the horse carriage and fell to the ground panting. It was the man who first attempted to assassinate Lei Jingzhe earlier. With his prominent nose and deep-set eyes, he had the distinct appearance of a Biansha native, but he had black hair and black eyes, and the contours of his face were much softer than Huhelu's and

Hasen's. As he turned over, he revealed the scorpion tattoo at the side of his neck.

Hairigu was wounded. At the same time he covered his wound, he looked at Shen Zechuan behind the flashes of swords and answered in a low, deep voice, "Son of Gedale."



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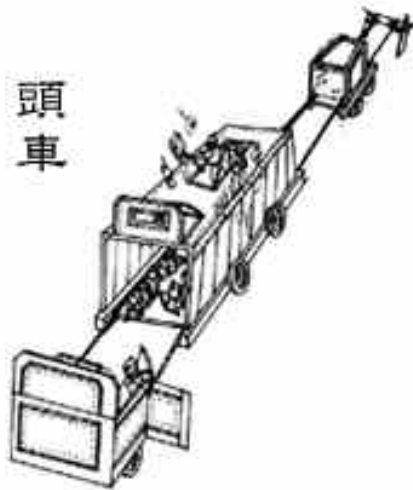
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Footnotes



- 1.
2. 锣 The Chinese gong is a musical percussion instrument that takes the form of a flat, circular metal disc that is hit with a mallet. Also used to call for attention.
3. From 天下熙熙,皆为利来 ; 天下攘攘,皆为利往。 i.e.. people do things for their own interests





- 4.
5. 头车 literally head cart according to sources; a complex siege weapon used for mining which can also be used as a protective cover during a siege.

# QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 173 : BLACK & WHITE

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



This was the second time Shen Zechuan heard of “Gedale”.

Gedale was located to the east of Chashi River, and it fell under the jurisdiction of Biansha’s territory. It was initially the temporary site of residence for the Zhongbo bandits. Shen Zechuan was pretty sure he had never been there before. His understanding of Gedale was limited to the Bai Cha portrait that Li Xiong had once mentioned. Going by the way Hairigu meant it, Shen Zechuan could also call himself a “son of Zhongbo”.

“We are all sons of Gedale.” Hairigu stood up, his eyes alert as his gaze wandered among the Imperial Bodyguards. He lifted a hand gently and said, “We have a reason to sit down for a chat.”

“My brother died on the battlefield.” Shen Zechuan was unmoved. “Before you make yourself clear, we are enemies.”

“Your enemy is the Biansha Cavalry.” Hairigu tightened the bandage around his wound. “I’m the enemy of your enemy. We can be friends.”

“Sure, friend.” Shen Zechuan said. “What do you want to talk to me about?”

Hairigu pursed his pale lips and paused for a moment before saying, “We can join forces to kill Lei Jingzhe.”

Moonlight streaked across the shadow of the carriage. Shen Zechuan’s expression was cold and detached. He could not even be bothered to answer, but his meaning was clear. If Hairigu continued to beat about the bush without explaining himself clearly, then he would not deign to give him any response.

“I know that the emperor of Dazhou is dead and that it’s the emperor’s mother who is managing governmental affairs now. You were driven out of Qudu, and then you fled back to Zhongbo. You want to exact revenge, and you hope you can stage a comeback.” Hairigu looked at Shen Zechuan with a complicated expression. “You are swallowing up Zhongbo right now.”

With his elbows propped on his knees, Shen Zechuan stuck his face out from the shadows and looked down from above at Hairigu. “Your information is too detailed.”

Hairigu kept his hands raised as though he was pacifying some kind of beast and said, "This is information I have to dig out if I am to survive in Zhongbo. Please do not take offense. You have already erected your own city walls in the west, and now you want to head east and take back Dunzhou, Duanzhou, and even the Chashi Sinkhole. But Lei Jingzhe is standing in your way, and it will be very troublesome for you if you can't kill him. Brother, I want to kill him too, so we can join forces."

Shen Zechuan raised a finger and pointed to the side of his neck. "You both have the same tattoo."

"Because we are all sons of Gedale." Hairigu repeated this phrase. "Lei Jingzhe is a white scorpion. They are all men from Dazhou who have defected to Amu'er." As Hairigu spoke, he spread his upper garment open to reveal the scorpion tattoo on the side of his neck. "I'm a black scorpion."

Fei Sheng observed it carefully and said, "There's no difference at all between your tattoos."

"We don't tell each other apart by our tattoos." Hairigu explained. "The tattoos are just markers the Biansha people used to distinguish those from Gedale with the others."

"Gedale lies within Biansha's borders, and it falls under the control of the Liaoying Tribe in its early days." Shen Zechuan said. "So what's the difference between you people and the Biansha people?"

"If you understand the Liaoying Tribe in its former times, then it will occur to you why we are being differentiated from the others." Hairigu put on his clothes. "Before the Liaoying Tribe had Amu'er, they were eagle slaves from the various major tribes. The Gedale that was under their control was even more lowly. The bandits of Zhongbo did business in Gedale by selling women, and these women were very popular with the various major tribes—the noble Hanshe Tribe, in particular, was very fond of women from Dazhou."

"But they were besieged." Fei Sheng tossed a water canteen to Hairigu. "These bandits ran rampant along the Chashi River, and the women from decent families in Duanzhou suffered greatly. The Zhu clan, unable to deal with the disturbance, reported it to Shen Wei and requested for Dunzhou to deploy troops for assistance. The commander of the Dunzhou Garrison Troops, Tantai Long, promptly sent his troops to fight their way to Gedale and crush these bandits."

“But the respite was temporary.” Hairigu took the canteen. “Those bandits had the protection of the Liaoying Tribe. They threw in their lots with the Liaoying Tribe and became the Liaoying Tribe’s slaves, but they were never respected. They became the lowest class of people among the Twelve Tribes of Biansha and continued to round up women for the people of Biansha. These women were sent to the various tribes, where they became exchangeable commodities.”

Tantai Long failed to eradicate the bandits completely, and it did not take long for them to return to Gedale, where they established their base.

“The children born to the women from Dazhou were called ‘*wumengyun*’.” Hairigu tugged at his black hair. “That is, ‘bastard’ in Dazhou tongue. These bastards could not exist in the various major tribes; they would carve out a portion of the purebred cattle and sheep when they grew up. So, the various tribes drown them in the Chashi River, or throw them back to Gedale.”

Fei Sheng, having been born of the Fei clan, was unable to comprehend the rationale behind this move. “These children all carry the blood of the various tribes. Even if their mothers are not honorable enough, there’s no need to go to the extent of drowning them, is there?”

“Do you know Hasen? That’s the son Amu’er truly acknowledged. The Twelve Tribes are different from Dazhou. In the desert, women take charge of child-bearing in the tribe and even the distribution of cattle and sheep. They are an indispensable aid to tribal survival and are capable of standing on an equal footing with men. It takes an honorable mother to decide the future direction of a child. Amu’er has so many sons, and there are plenty of smart ones among them, but the moment they were born, they all lost the qualification to fight for power with Hasen, and this is precisely because Hasen’s mother is the most honored and respectable woman in the Hanshe Tribe. Her role in Amu’er’s formation of the elite forces in the north is indispensable.” Hairigu took a few sips of water. “Bastards are unworthy of taking on the surnames of the tribes, and so we were branded with a tattoo along with the bandits.”

Shen Zechuan made some inferences from the timeline and said, “Since you are distinguished between black and white, then you must each have your own uses.”

“You have to understand one thing first. The so-called scorpions is a form of address that came about after Amu’er’s rise to prominence. Before

Amu'er's time, Gedale was a place where the bastards lived together. It was only after the rise of Amu'er that Gedale was really put to use. White scorpions, with their appearance resembling those of Dazhou, could infiltrate deep into Dazhou." Hairigu screwed the canteen shut and made a crawling motion with two fingers. "They can penetrate deep within, and they have played their roles to unimaginable effect in the last ten years or so. Meanwhile, the black scorpions are left behind in Gedale, where Amu'er gives us the best teachers to train us to be strong enough to stand up to the Libei Armored Cavalry."

"Mutual assistance between black and white—you were helping each other." Realization dawned on Shen Zechuan. "There are no iron mines in the desert. To equip yourselves with that kind of hammer, you'd have to steal it from Dazhou."

"That's right." Hairigu tossed the canteen back. "The white scorpions secured equipment and grains for us from within Dazhou. Other than those, there were military maps too."

The military map of the six prefectures of Zhongbo!

"Whose information did Amu'er act on six years ago when he attacked Zhongbo?"

Hairigu spread his hands apart and said, "I don't know. I wasn't involved. But I can tell you that Amu'er has countless inextricable links to Qudu. The defeat of the Zhongbo troops was merely a trial run to test the waters, and it proved to be remarkably effective—Libei was held in check, and the repercussions are still being felt a few years later with the subsequent disintegration of Dazhou."

Fei Sheng inwardly drew in a breath and looked at Shen Zechuan in shock.

"Why do you call me a son of Gedale?" The jade earring on Shen Zechuan's right ear glinted.

Hairigu inclined his head and said, "Because Bai Cha split—"

Hairigu had yet to finish his words when an arrow fired in secret pierced through the wind with a "swoosh" and stabbed into the carriage. Yan Heru, who had been too afraid to make a sound and who had been hanging in mid-air playing dead, promptly yelled, "They are here!"

Fei Sheng immediately yanked the curtains down and commanded, "Get on the horses!"

The carriage charged into the darkness of the night under the escort of the Imperial Bodyguards, while Yan Heru was thrown back into the carriage. The downtown streets of Dunzhou were wide and spacious. The Yan clan had expanded it to facilitate the smooth passage of the various merchants' carriages. At present, the streets were bustling with activity, with carriages coming and going in never-ending streams.

Yan Heru tripped all over the place as he put on his robe and said in a hurry, "Head for the Prince of Jianxing's manor! I tore down the former site of the Prince of Jianxing's manor and reconstructed a private residence in its place. There are a hundred or so compound guards in there!"

Fei Sheng promptly turned the horses around.



The glazed tiles of the Prince of Jianxing's manor had long been torn down. After Shen Wei's self-immolation, all that was left of this place was its dilapidated ruins. Yan Heru loved the place, so he had reconstructed it into a private residence modeled in the style of those in Qudu. A tall building with double-eaved roofs had been built within this residence, and if one were to stand on top of it, they would get a panoramic view of Dunzhou.

Fei Sheng carefully surveyed the manor before he entered. He found Yan Heru rather strange. The latter had actually built a wall of bricks on the outer layer and knocked down a hole in the wall to install bows and arrows, with the mechanism connected to the parapet. Looking at just how thick the wall was, it could even stand up to an assault from a stone catapult.

"As businessmen, we fear being targeted in the dark and stabbed in the back. There are plenty of unscrupulous people who would do these kind of asshole deeds. I cherish my life. It surely stands to reason for me to have a safe haven in Dunzhou, and I won't feel at ease if I don't construct an impregnable fortress." Yan Heru invited Shen Zechuan upstairs. "This place is known as 'Fuxian Peak'. Aye, it's a tall one. Your lordship, please come with me upstairs to have some drinks and enjoy ourselves. We'll see how that silly fool Lei Jingzhe gets all distraught with anxiety and frustration outside."

Fei Sheng could not hold back from asking, "Aren't you scared he'll fight his way in to hack your head off?"

Yan Heru turned his head back from atop the stairs and looked at Fei Sheng with a brilliant smile. "What do I have to fear? A real man isn't

afraid of a big scar. At most, my head will roll, but I'd still be a hero again in eighteen years!"<sup>1</sup>

Yan Heru might have been exceedingly flippant with his words, but he was genuinely unafraid. He was pertinent to the businesses of the merchants from the two prefectures of Zhongbo. So many people depended on him for their livelihoods. Despite having suffered such a massive humiliation tonight, Lei Jingzhe would not dare to kill him for real, for Yan Heru still had Hezhou as his shield. In reality, Lei Jingzhe's relentless pursuit was directed at Hairigu.

This little brat was an extremely crafty one.

Shen Zechuan guessed that the reason Lei Jingzhe and Hairigu were embroiled in such a fierce fight with each other in Dunzhou was likely because Yan Heru had been adding fuel to the flame. His past support of Lei Changming failed to reap any results, and it was only due to Lei Changming's respect for him that he could retain the store in Dunzhou. If it had been anyone else, this piece of business would have been long gone. For this reason, he was apprehensive about the monopoly on power Lei Jingzhe's party possessed. As such, he secretly funded Hairigu's batch of scorpions to let them mutually hold each other in check until they both eventually had to rely on the Yan clan.

The maidservants entered in a single file and lit up the lights in successive order. Thick and heavy draperies were lifted, while pearl-white sheer fabrics were let down to take its place. There was even a small covered veranda hanging with climbing figs and devils' ivy, surrounded by a murmuring stream the width of an arm. An open-air pavilion was erected in the middle of it, adorned with a refined rock garden that sat at an angle. The entire sky of stars seemed to be within reach if one were to just gaze out into the distance from here, along with an unobstructed view of the lantern displays in Dunzhou.

"This building was built for the purpose of ascending high enough to appreciate the view. If you stand here and look far out into the east, you'll be able to marvel at the Chashi River, which mirrors a jade belt<sup>2</sup> in Heaven and on Earth. This is a magnificent view you cannot find anywhere else." Yan Heru leaned against the railings and said to Shen Zechuan, "It's impossible to leave Dunzhou for the time being. Your lordship can go ahead and stay here, and we can discuss business."

Shen Zechuan's cloak fluttered in the wind as he held onto the railing and looked down. He could see Lei Jingzhe's forces coming through the streets. "You sure are a dauntless one."

Yan Heru flicked the beads on the golden abacus. "Money is king. Lei Jingzhe himself has to call me granddaddy. I have nothing to fear. On the other hand, your lordship will be in danger if the Cizhou Garrison Troops are really not coming."

"I come and go silently." Shen Zechuan said. "It's easy for me to leave if I want to."

"Bai Cha is the reason you came to Dunzhou this time." Yan Heru said to Shen Zechuan with a smile. "Hairigu knows everything. You almost got a glimpse of the whole story, so you must be burning with anxiety now, right? Bai Cha's exact relationship to the scorpions is something Hairigu knows best. Your lordship, I'm sincere in discussing business with you. As long as you agree, Hairigu will be at your disposal. If we join forces to get rid of Lei Jingzhe, occupy the territories in the north and east, and develop the trade route, the silver will come flowing in like water, no? What happened in Chazhou will be written off immediately; I will not blame you for Cai Yu's death."

Shen Zechuan bent over to lean against the railing too and laughed.

Yan Heru's smile gradually vanished, and he asked unhappily, "What are you laughing at?"

"Lei Jingzhe came here today for Hairigu. If you don't hand Hairigu over, Lei Jingzhe will settle the score with you. You are now thinking of using a forfeited pawn to trick me into doing business with you. Such a good deal doesn't exist in this world." Shen Zechuan looked out at the far end of Dunzhou in the direction of Duanzhou. "The trade route between Huaizhou, Cizhou, and Chazhou belongs to me. If you want a share of the pie, you have to first convince me."

Yan Heru fell silent for a moment as he faced the wide expanse of the night, then laughed again. "Is your lordship still trying to deceive me at such a juncture? Without your troops now, you are merely a trapped beast. I won't hand over Hairigu, but I can hand you over."

"You plotted to butcher Lei Jingzhe tonight. Going by Lei Jingzhe's character, this feud is as good as already inked in blood. Even if he can tolerate you for a moment for the sake of money, he will never let you off in the future. Moreover, you've already shown your card that is Hairigu



tonight.” Shen Zechuan tilted his chin up slightly to bathe in the breeze. “Even if Lei Jingzhe is willing to bury the hatchet with you, the same can’t be said of the Twelve Tribes of Biansha backing him.”

Hairigu was not one man. He had also brought along a bunch of scorpions who were similarly living a vagabond life in Zhongbo. These people hid themselves all over the place, and most of them had defected from Gedale. Yan Heru had provided them with financial assistance in order to keep Lei Jingzhe in check, and there was no doubt that the Twelve Tribes of Biansha would be settling this score as well.

“At least I won’t die tonight.” Yan Heru said softly.

“Then let us just perish together.” Shen Zechuan tapped his icy fingers on the railings. “Hand me over to Lei Jingzhe tonight. Once I die, I can wait for you down there in the underworld.”

“After tonight, I have plenty of ways to leave Dunzhou.” Yan Heru snorted childishly in a loud voice.

“Then let me tell you this.” Shen Zechuan looked at him out of the corner of his pitch-black eyes. “If I die, Dunzhou and Duanzhou will die with me. No one will remember Zhongbo’s lost territories. Qudu is too preoccupied with its own affairs, and Libei and Qidong can’t be in two places at once. This place is a wide-opened strategic gateway of Dazhou that can provide the Biansha Cavalry with direct access in. They did not launch an assault in the past six years because the granaries in Zhongbo had yet to be fattened up. The time is now ripe, and Dazhou is already torn asunder by disunity. Sooner or later, this place will become the territory of the Biansha people.”

“Xiao Fangxu will not sit and do nothing. This place has a bearing on Libei’s battlegrounds in the southeast.” Yan Heru said quickly. “Qi Zhuyin has a well-trained and powerful army too. You’re just trying to scare me! Shen Zechuan, without you, Zhongbo will have just a few more random self-proclaimed kings. The overall situation won’t change at all!”

“In that case,” Shen Zechuan raised his eyebrows slightly. “What makes you go to such lengths to discuss with me?”

*Oh shit.* Yan Heru bemoaned to himself. To think he had been led by Shen Zechuan’s words!

As they spoke, they heard a thunderous noise beneath them. Yan Heru shifted his gaze over to look and could not help but freeze, “Why are there so many people...”

“Ever since stepping foot into Dunzhou, I’ve been puzzled by a question. There is clearly a bridle path leading right to Duanzhou, so why did Lei Jingzhe still forgo what is close at hand and seek what is far afield instead? Then, there is his proficient way of searching the goods in the city. My guess is that this isn’t the first time he has been robbed. The people hiding here are the thorns in his side.” Shen Zechuan smiled slightly. “Even I could guess that you are the one funding Hairigu, so do you really think Lei Jingzhe won’t be able to make the same guess? He came prepared this time. That invitation was indeed to lure a snake out of its hole, but the one who took the bait was you.”

The lanterns on the streets were knocked over as the sounds of horses’ hooves flooded in from outside, while the cavalry with no end in sight resembled dark clouds that completely devoured the river of lights from view. The troops Lei Jingzhe had brought over had been hiding outside the city, all for the purpose of getting rid of the mortal malady that was Hairigu once and for all. Fei Sheng saw the saker falcons in the night sky. He briskly walked around the railing and realized that those dark clouds were presently steamrolling across the entire city of Dunzhou.

“He doesn’t dare to kill me.” Yan Heru involuntarily exposed his panic as he hugged his golden abacus to his bosom and took several steps back. “Hezhou...”

The head cart<sup>3</sup> Lei Jingzhe brought along crashed heavily into the front gates. Unable to withstand such a violent impact, the iron sheet-covered latch on the other end of the door let loose a shrill shriek in protest. Horses snorted and grunted urgently, while circling saker falcons stirred up the overcast clouds. The starry sky earlier had dimmed, leaving only the wind to continue howling in never-ending torrents.

There was no use for scheming in the face of a strong army.

These iron hooves had no qualms trampling over the heart of Zhongbo once before. What’s not to say they couldn’t do it again this time?



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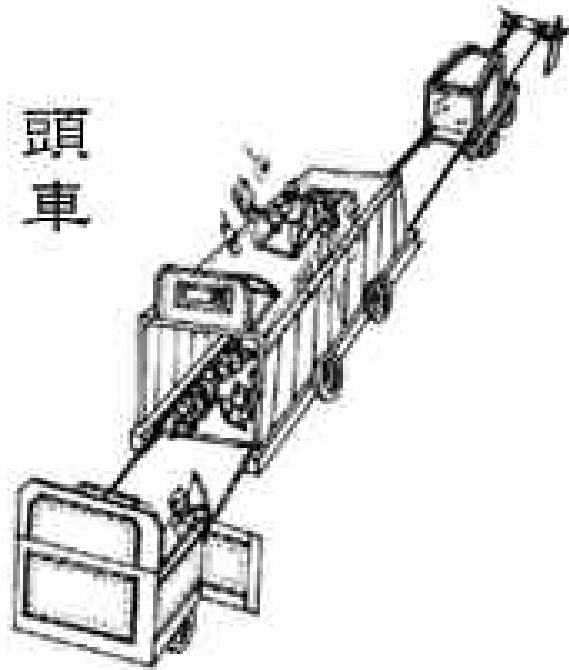
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### Footnotes

1. 十八年后还是(又是一)条好汉 i.e., reincarnate again as a hero after death.
2. 玉带 literally jade belt, or belts made of jade worn by high-level government officials in the course of duty. It's also a term in Fengshui where the road surrounds the building, much like how the jade belt embraces the waist of the wealthy in graceful semicircular arcs.



- 3.
4. 头车 literally head cart according to sources; a complex siege weapon used for mining which can also be used as a protective cover during a siege.

# QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 174 : MAD DOG

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



With Lei Jingzhe having opened up the Dunzhou armory, no matter how solid Yan Heru built this mansion to be, it could not stand up to a single blow in the face of military weapons built specifically for sieges. Those arrows simply could not penetrate through the shield of the head cart,<sup>1</sup> and the door latch broke from the impact of the crash. Before the crossbow arrows could be reloaded, the Biansha Cavalry entered.

Fei Sheng stepped forward in a move to support Shen Zechuan and said in an urgent voice, “Master, let’s evacuate from the back and find a way to leave the city under cover of the night!”

“Lei Jingzhe wants to round up Hairigu and his people in one fell swoop.” Shen Zechuan stood against the wind. “He meticulously prepared for this, as evident in his use of a massive force to besiege the city; he won’t leave any openings. It’s already too late to be thinking of leaving the city now.”

Fei Sheng watched as the compound was surrounded. He knew escape was impossible tonight. But as he had made it clear before, he had to risk his life to ensure that Shen Zechuan remained safe and sound, so he clenched his blade and stood motionless at the side like a nail fixed in place beside Shen Zechuan. The Imperial Bodyguards behind him all looked as if they were about to come face to face with a formidable foe. For a moment, the atmosphere was particularly somber.

The crescent moon at present looked like a thread concealed away among the dark clouds. Heavy fog hung overhead in the sky, bearing down on them. There was already no stopping the destructive force in motion. Shen Zechuan was still leaning against the railing, letting his gaze roam to take in the lights in Dunzhou—this was the first time he got a clear look at Dunzhou.

Fei Sheng stood in silence. Together with the Imperial Bodyguards, he watched Shen Zechuan attentively amid the deafening sound of the melee below. Strangely enough, they were no longer nervous, even at such a critical juncture of life and death.

Fei Sheng had only wanted to follow under Xiao Chiye's command in the past because Xiao Chiye had the unprecedented spirit of a groundbreaking pioneer. On the day they rebelled and fled from Qudu, Fei Sheng had done so willingly and wholeheartedly. But Xiao Chiye refused to accept him, so he could only step back to work under Shen Zechuan instead.

Shen Zechuan wasn't likable.

His appearance made him a controversial figure who was the subject of condemnation in Qudu. Shen Wei was a threshold. Many people would rather stand on the outside to scrutinize him, as if the verdict of his life and death all lay in those sprays of spittle. When he left Zhao Zui Temple, everyone treated him as a noble clan blade that had replaced Shen Wei, an imperial dog under the empress dowager's command. However, the subsequent happenings deviated far from everyone's expectations. In that struggle for power, he quietly and steadily rose his way to the top. By the time everyone realized it, he was already standing in the heart of the political storm. He did not seem to possess that imposing air of vim and vigor, and yet his thin and frail back *was* the protective barrier in all the times he stood in front. Even if the storm raged and left a trail of destruction in its wake, it would be a rainless picture of calm and silence behind him for as long as he remained standing.

Fei Sheng closed his eyes to clear his mind of distracting thoughts. His heart felt calm and at ease at present—this was a kind of tranquility that had no need for words of encouragement. He had abandoned Ji Lei and forsaken Han Cheng; whoever he followed had always been based on the opportunity availed to him at that time. All along, he had never been able to understand the trust Chen Yang and Gu Jin had in Xiao Chiye, but at this very moment, as he stood in the wind and opened his eyes once again, he possessed that trust.

Everyone in this world wants to be Xiao Chiye.

But there can be no other Shen Lanzhou!

Horses' hooves broke through the doors beneath them, while dark clouds rolled overhead. Fei Sheng, who had been plotting to seek personal gains by currying favors all his life, grabbed his blade with one hand and kicked over the wooden chair beside him to send it crashing into the Biansha Cavalry at the stairway. He ripped his outer robe open and secured the blade in his palm, then lifted the wine on the table and said to the

various Imperial Bodyguards, “Even if Heaven and Earth were to collapse today, we must ensure Master remains safe and unharmed. Here we are, chatting and drinking with a smile even as we are encircled by powerful troops—this is a sight and honor we have never had while serving the emperor.”

Fei Sheng raised his head back and gulped down the wine, letting it trickle down and soak through the front of his clothes. He smashed the bowl, then wiped his mouth and burst into wild laughter.

“This battle is going to make legends out of us men. Brothers, time to make a name for ourselves—!”

Xiuchun blades<sup>2</sup> all left their sheaths in unison, and booming laughter reverberated through the clouds. Blood splattered all over the stairway as more than a dozen Imperial Bodyguards climbed over the railings and brandished their blades to cut down the Biansha Cavalry who were swarming towards them with sweeping force. Heads rolled all over the narrow and cramped stairs. With every rise of his hand and fall of his blade, Fei Sheng decisively and efficiently hacked away at his opponents’ necks without the slightest hesitation.

Lei Jingzhe did not dare to set the building on fire. He wanted to catch Yan Heru alive, so he could only force his way up the stairs in an attack. The Imperial Bodyguards were all at the top of their game tonight. Those scorpions, who were unshakeable when they turned out in full force, were unable to swing their hammers freely after stepping onto the stairway, and this subsequently greatly reduced the strain on the Imperial Bodyguards. Unable to ascend the stairs, Lei Jingzhe sought out another way. Fuxian Peak towered over the double-eaved roofs like a crane standing head and shoulders among a flock of chickens, and so they used the cloud ladder.<sup>3</sup>

Yan Heru watched as the Biansha Cavalry swarmed up towards them en masse. Fuxian Peak seemed to be a relic pillar standing alone between Heaven and Earth. He retreated to Shen Zechuan’s side, shivering from the wind. “Since you dared to enter the tiger’s den,<sup>4</sup> then you must have prepared for it.”

Shen Zechuan did not answer. Yan Heru was about to say something further when a hand suddenly grasped the railing beside him, and a Biansha Cavalryman climbed his way up. Without even thinking, Yan Heru raised his golden abacus and slammed it down on the Biansha Cavalryman, knocking the latter out. But there were still several men following close

behind the other man, and they made a sudden grab to hold up Yan Heru's abacus in place before flipping their way up.

Yan Heru lived by the maxim that "*as valuable as the abacus may be, life is worth even more*", so he promptly let go of his hand, abandoning the abacus. He took several steps back, but tripped over the small table and toppled over to the ground. That cavalryman was a tall, strapping man, and he looked just like a mountain when he stood before Yan Heru. On seeing him lift his blade, Yan Heru hastened to yell, "Your lordship, save me! My dear *gege*! The price is always negotiable!"

A saker falcon swooped past, and before the cavalryman could lift his blade, a figure suddenly leaped up from behind. Hairigu came pouncing from the air, taking out the cavalryman in one slash. After he landed, he rolled on the ground and grabbed hold of Yan Heru.

Yan Heru lifted his head, intending to gripe at Shen Zechuan for being such an unrighteous one. But before he could open his mouth, he saw a black shadow spring over the railing to land heavily on top of it. Hairigu pressed Yan Heru's head down and bent over backward to dodge the iron hammer sweeping towards them.

The man's bare upper body was just as muscularly sculpted as Jida, whom they had encountered a few days prior. The iron hammer swooshed past in mid-air, causing a break in the flow of the wind. When he stood up, Yan Heru had to raise his head to look at him. The scorpion tattoo took up his entire back. He rolled his shoulders as a warm-up, then proceeded to jump down the railing.

Hairigu pushed Yan Heru aside and fished out a piked dagger from the back of his waist. The two of them did not even bother with greetings as they immediately traded a flurry of blows with one another.

There was nowhere for Yan Heru to hide in this chaos. He was used to a life of lavish luxury, and the martial arts he used to learn were merely all show but no substance. In any case, he had already forgotten all of it. Afraid of being pecked with the saker falcons hovering overhead, Yan Heru crouched low and scrambled with both hands on the ground through any openings he could find amid the mayhem. He managed with great difficulty to make his way to the side, only to see a person squatting on the railing.

Yan Heru lifted his gaze, and his eyes promptly curved into crescents as he revealed a smile and called out warmly, "Eldest nephew!"

Lei Jingzhe sneered and reached his arm out to grab him.

Disregarding his dignity and image, Yan Heru rolled on the ground to one side like a slippery loach. He reached for the railing with the intention to climb up when he felt a grip on his collar. Thinking it to be Lei Jingzhe, he hurriedly turned his head to plead, “Lei-gege—”

But it turned out to be Shen Zechuan!

Shen Zechuan exerted force with his left hand and yanked Yan Heru off the railing before tossing him in front of him. Before Yan Heru had his chance to roll, Shen Zechuan pressed his foot against the back of his waist to make him kneel. Yan Heru was stuck between a rock and a hard place, with a wolf before him and a tiger behind him. He wanted to cry as he kneeled in the middle, but no tears came, so he put his palms together and said as though he was paying religious homage, “I was merely jesting around with my dear *geges*. Put the loss this time on my account. Let’s not brandish our weapons anymore! Say, the three of us should join forces and cooperate, then we’d be invincible in the world, agree?!”

Lei Jingzhe motioned for Yan Heru to shut up. He leaped off the railing and stared at Shen Zechuan as he moved over with unhurried steps. After a while, he said, “How have you been since we parted, Vice Commander?” Without even waiting for Shen Zechuan to answer, he continued after coming to a stop. “Guess I should call you Prefectural Lord now.”

Everyone was locked in battle near and far, and the sounds of tables and chairs being smashed resounded clearly in their ears. Thick gloomy clouds hung over their heads as both of them stood in the strong wind facing each other in a confrontation with Yan Heru between them. The raging wind in the distance surged and receded amid the backdrop of tens of thousands of lights in Dunzhou.

Lei Jingzhe raised his hand to slap his nape and said in a mocking tone, “I sure have excellent luck tonight. To think I could catch such a big fish from this sewer. What? There’s no Xiao Chiye to escort and protect you this time?”

Shen Zechuan raised a finger to remove the cloak on his shoulder and inclined his head to say with a smile, “My husband is up to his neck in military affairs. It’s inappropriate for him to go on a long journey these days. We can discuss it ourselves if there are any matters of concern.”

Lei Jingzhe’s eyes gradually darkened to conceal a sly glint within. “Did you come to Dunzhou—oh, wrong. Did you return to Dunzhou to hold a memorial service for Shen Wei?”



“I’m here on Young Master Yan’s invitation,” Shen Zechuan said without batting an eyelid, “to discuss a plan to kill you.”

Yan Heru’s face blanched. He wanted to explain and defend himself when he met Lei Jingzhe’s gaze, but on feeling the chill on his nape, he did not dare to speak up. *Shen Zechuan is truly a ruthless one!* He thought to himself. With just one word, the latter had severed his route of retreat. Whether or not he survived this night, Lei Jingzhe would no longer believe him!

“No wonder I could sense that the person who saved Yan Heru back in the restaurant was no ordinary talent.” The expression in Lei Jingzhe’s gaze was malevolent. “I initially meant to be magnanimous and not lower myself to the level of a child. But I never expected him to be so malicious to invite you over to work out a scheme to kill me.”

“He’s a child at heart.” Shen Zechuan shifted his foot away from Yan Heru. “He doesn’t know when to stop pushing it and inevitably ends up angering you. It’s rather embarrassing.”

“You have been colluding in secret for a long time.” As expected, Lei Jingzhe fell for the trap and contemplated it. “No wonder I couldn’t find the supply wagons this time.”

“But you one-upped him tonight.” Shen Zechuan said as if he conceded defeat. His eyes followed Lei Jingzhe. “I can switch allegiances, seeing how it’s a matter of life and death now.”

Lei Jingzhe feared Shen Zechuan. He knew Shen Zechuan was the most proficient in this kind of offensive and defensive warfare. The moment he fell for Shen Zechuan’s words, he would be irrevocably doomed. So Lei Jingzhe lowered his arms and sneered, “Xiao Chiye ruined my base on Mount Luo. This is a score that can’t be forgotten.”

“If you kill Yan Heru tonight, you will completely sever all your contacts and dealings with Hezhou. But occupying both the prefectures of Dunzhou and Duanzhou means that you have to sustain the grains and military expenses alone in the future.” Shen Zechuan attempted to coax him. “Cizhou’s granaries are currently in abundance of grains. I can give you a helping hand.”

Lei Jingzhe threw his head back and roared with laughter. Suddenly, he spoke, “Since you have been colluding with Yan Heru for a long time, then you must have seen Hairigu. My guess is that you came to Cizhou this time

to take in these traitors by capitalizing on Bai Cha's name and reputation, right?!"

"Looks like the game is as good as lost for me tonight. I can't hide it from you." Shen Zechuan sighed with a pang of regret. "That's right. I came here this time for precisely this matter. Lei Jingzhe, we are all sons of Gedale. When it really comes down to it, we are all fellow brothers too. So why draw our swords on each other?"

"As long as you can hack off Xiao Chiye's head, we can be brothers." Lei Jingzhe still bore a grudge against Xiao Chiye. He said in a frosty tone, "You are deceiving me with such words only because you saw how heavily besieged the city is now and you know you can't escape death."

"Are you really going to kill me?"

"Setting an enemy free is like letting a tiger return to its mountain—it will set the stage for future calamities." Lei Jingzhe said, "You took two months to devour Cizhou and Chazhou and take Zhou Gui and Luo Mu under your command. I was initially worried you would become the dominant power in Zhongbo in the future the longer you live, and by then, it would be hard to remove you. I didn't expect you to deliver yourself to my doorstep. No matter how you try to convince me with your glib tongue and honeyed words, my killing you is a foregone conclusion!"

The wind flooded into Shen Zechuan's sleeves, sending it billowing and revealing his wrist bone. The bandage on his right hand was visible as he gripped the blue handkerchief between his fingers. He covered his mouth and coughed as though he could not bear the cold on this tower. After the coughing stopped, he said, "Can't you give me a way out on account of the name Bai Cha?"

As soon as the words left his mouth, it clicked in Lei Jingzhe's mind, and he promptly bellowed, "You deceived me. You don't know the specifics of the scorpions at all!"

With that, his fist went sailing through the wind right towards Shen Zechuan's face. Shen Zechuan had long been on his guard, and he slid aside to dodge the punch. On missing his target, Lei Jingzhe did not retract his fist but made use of the momentum to grab Shen Zechuan by the arm. White robe fluttered gently in the wind as Shen Zechuan moved away with elegant grace, causing Lei Jingzhe to turn up empty-handed once again. Lei Jingzhe squatted next and swept his leg out in a circle, and Shen Zechuan sprang back against that wave of strong wind to land on the railing.

The sound of killing beneath them boiled over like a seething cauldron. Lei Jingzhe was determined to send Shen Zechuan to his death tonight. On seeing Shen Zechuan standing perilously on the edge, he grabbed his hammer and sent it swinging into the wind with the intent to force Shen Zechuan off the tower. Shen Zechuan balanced himself steadily on the railing. The strong wind roared behind him, sending his sleeves billowing like a swan goose<sup>5</sup> by the railing. His right hand remained still; he was already in a disadvantaged position.

Deciding that a psychological offensive was the best tactic, Lei Jingzhe said in between movements, “Well, then! Shen Zechuan, don’t you want to know Bai Cha’s relationship to the scorpions? I will tell you tonight!”

He soared into the air and somersaulted onto the railing, where he followed close in Shen Zechuan’s footsteps and attempted to force Shen Zechuan into the corner.

“Bai Cha was a whore in a brothel in Duanzhou who worked specifically for the Liaoying Tribe. She was a dog Amu’er planted beside Shen Wei. She was a needle Biansha hid in Zhongbo!”

Shen Zechuan seemed to lose his balance as he teetered at the edge for a bit. His sleeves suddenly danced backward. Fei Sheng, who was deep among the horde of people, could not help but panic when he saw this sight in his peripheral vision. “Master!”

However, in the next moment, Shen Zechuan braced himself against the wind and swung back to stabilize himself.

On seeing this, Lei Jingzhe struck out at him suddenly, forcing Shen Zechuan to retreat in order to evade the blow again. He continued speaking, “Don’t you think you’re really a wretched one? Being Shen Wei’s son caused you so much physical and mental suffering! I shall pull you out of this abyss of misery. Shen Zechuan, you’re a bastard child of Biansha. Bai Cha was a promiscuous woman of loose morals—”

Lei Jingzhe felt the impact at the side of his neck, and this blow nearly made him bite off his tongue. He hurriedly took a few steps back and held himself steady at this high altitude, then turned his head to the side and spat out the blood from the blow Shen Zechuan had dealt him with.

Shen Zechuan had his left hand lifted in a martial arts stance, his eyes freezing over with frostiness. His complexion looked particularly pale under this faint veil of moonlight, as if he was a piece of cold, bloodless jade. Slowly, he warned, “Watch your tongue.”

Lei Jingzhe threw his hammer aside and gradually put some distance between them. He said in a low voice, "Every word I say is the truth." He continued with a pitying gaze, "You're really the world's most pitiful child. Do you know how Bai Cha died? Shen Wei found out her real identity, then strangled her to death with his very own hands. You were born of abhorrence. Why did Shen Wei raise you? Did you think you were regaining lost grounds when you crawled your way out of the Chashi Sinkhole and returned to Zhongbo after experiencing all that hatred and sorrows?" He let out a dreary laugh and said cruelly, "You made it all out to be so incredibly touching, but you didn't expect it, did you? No one will accept you for how you are. If Libei were to find out who Bai Cha is, Xiao Chiye's blade would turn on you."

A jolt suddenly vibrated through the railing. At the same instant Shen Zechuan sprang, Lei Jingzhe crossed his arms before him to block the blow. The kick nearly made him lean over backward. With both of them locked in fierce combat, Yan Heru did not dare to remain close by and scrambled his way to the other end. Lei Jingzhe nearly could not hold his own against the blows, and as he retreated to evade the blows, he scraped against the wooden frame for vines, knocking it over along with the glazed lamps nearby. Flames pounced onto the woolen carpet, setting it ablaze in the blink of an eye.

Lei Jingzhe was sure that Shen Zechuan had already lost his measure of control. As both of them duke it out on the railing, the flames behind them intensified.

Fei Sheng was all bathed in blood from the killing. He flipped out of the stairway and shouted, "Master, it's on fire. It's inadvisable to remain here for long!"

Lei Jingzhe felt a gush of wind at his back, and he spared whatever remaining strength he had to dodge the Imperial Bodyguards. "Dunzhou is my territory tonight. You have no way out of here alive even if you fight to the death!"

In the midst of his proclamation, Lei Jingzhe saw white sleeves rushing right towards him with a move so sudden it caught him off-guard and caused him to stumble. Shen Zechuan grabbed Lei Jingzhe by his collar, and in this heart-stopping moment, Lei Jingzhe got a clear look at Shen Zechuan's face. Even before Fei Sheng could lend a hand, the sound of

fabric tearing rang out, and in a flash, a feather-like white figure plunged down together with Lei Jingzhe!

Fei Sheng was seized with terror as he made a sudden grab for him with a lightning move of his hand, but his hand merely brushed past the corner of Lei Jingzhe's clothes. Panic-stricken, he cried out in a trembling voice, "Master!"

The instant Lei Jingzhe plummeted down, he came to the conclusion that Shen Zechuan was gambling on his life with him! During the drop, he swiftly stretched out his right hand. His back slammed into the upturned eaves on Fuxian Peak. At the same time the corner broke off from the impact, he grabbed hold of the eaves and hung on, his feet swinging in the empty air. The blazing flames looked as though they were engulfing the world, and in spite of himself, Lei Jingzhe broke out in a sweat. Lei Jingzhe did not dare to be negligent. His right hand was burning with pain as he attempted to climb up the damaged eaves onto the protruding tiles.

But Shen Zechuan had already climbed up from the other end. He stepped down on Lei Jingzhe's raised hand, and several tiles tumbled off all at once and smashed into smithereens below.

Shaken, Lei Jingzhe spat out the blood in his mouth in the wind. "Fuck!"

Shen Zechuan looked down at Lei Jingzhe, his badly torn sleeves revealing his right hand while towering flames blazed behind him. He removed the bandage and threw away the steel needle that had been secured with it, then clenched his five pale fingers into a fist to test his strength.

Lei Jingzhe's fingers were hurting from being stepped on. He had pulled the muscles on his arm earlier, and right now, he was hanging on for dear life with all his might, his feet stepping in empty air as he forced himself to cling on to the damaged eaves. He saw that steel needle fall before his very eyes.

"Even if you kill me, you won't survive this." Lei Jingzhe looked up and squeezed out a laugh. "You're too pitiful. You've been molded into a monster! After tonight, Zhongbo will be your nightmare. You will toss and turn night after night, and you will be on tenterhooks day after day. The land under your feet..."

Shen Zechuan squatted down. The light of the flames made a clean sweep of his gloominess and pallor, replacing it with an exotic allure and a

bloodthirsty ruthlessness. He let out a quiet laugh. “How very naïve of you.”

Lei Jingzhe’s throat bobbed. He did not understand why—a strained gasp escaped as Shen Zechuan’s right hand clutched his throat tightly. Never had he imagined that the seemingly frail and sickly Shen Zechuan would have such great strength!

Shen Zechuan tightened his grip, using Lei Jingzhe’s momentum in climbing up to haul him up some. As he watched Lei Jingzhe’s face flush red, he said in a soft voice, “You are really a hilarious one, Lei Jingzhe. Why would you think that Bai Cha is enough to sway me?”

Unable to catch his breath, Lei Jingzhe’s eyes darted all over as fear engulfed him whole.

Shen Zechuan scrutinized him and said kindly, “I came to Dunzhou for the specific purpose of capturing you.”

Lei Jingzhe’s breathing hitched in his throat.

“You did me a great favor.” Shen Zechuan turned his eyes to look at Dunzhou. “I want to annex both the prefectures of Dunzhou and Duanzhou, but I didn’t dare to make a move because of Qi Zhuyin. All I could do was to make use of King Yi of Fanzhou as a cover. You could have lived a little longer. If you hadn’t brought the Biansha people over this time, I might have had to wait a year or two, or even longer, to find an opportunity, but you brought the Biansha Cavalry.”

The sparks crackled and spluttered.

“Now I have enough reason to deploy troops to Dunzhou.” Shen Zechuan shifted his gaze back to Lei Jingzhe’s face. “Thanks to you for chatting with me for this long so that I could buy time for the Cizhou Garrison Troops.”

Lei Jingzhe could not believe it. How could Shen Zechuan have plotted his moves to such an extent and anticipated every step Lei Jingzhe himself would take?! He raised his head, the world before him was already a blur. With some difficulty, he gasped, “You, you s-scorpion...”

“Regardless of who my parents are,” Shen Zechuan turned his head to the side and whispered into his ear, “I am Shen Zechuan. Whether your word is the truth or a lie is of no significance to me at all. I am my own nightmare.”

The land under his feet?

Zhongbo could not tie down Shen Zechuan at all. He was not as attached to his native land as Xiao Chiye was. On the day he fell into the Chashi Sinkhole, he became a man without a hometown. Ever since then, he severed all attachment he held towards the land. He could never gallop in the grasslands; his wings were born out of the darkness of the night. If Xiao Chiye was Hongyan Mountains, then Shen Zechuan was the frigid wind coursing through the territories of Zhongbo.

Shen Wei, Bai Cha.

He did not care for them at all.

The two fingers on his right hand made a noise of protest, but Shen Zechuan could no longer feel the pain. He gripped Lei Jingzhe's throat just like how he had choked Ji Lei a year ago. This made it clear to all that he was no longer trapped under the control of others. Perhaps Lei Jingzhe was right. All these years of suffering and hatred had molded him into a monster. When Qi Huilian died as well in that heavy downpour, Shen Zechuan completely forsook all of those obsolete conventions. He would no longer be anyone's prisoner.

He loved Xiao Chiye, and he still had Ji Gang. He could not imagine a day when Xiao Chiye and Ji Gang would become a thing of the past, transformed into pain he had no remedy for. He had enough of enduring it in silence; he was fed up of being chained. He wanted to tear apart not just this world, but also all the shackles imposed on him in the past!

Lei Jingzhe could hardly hang on anymore. He was finally able to raise his hands to grab Shen Zechuan's arm, and it was at this moment he remembered the rumors in Qudu.

"Mad, mad..." Lei Jingzhe squeezed the words out.

The angry flames that stretched like a fiery dragon roared among the double-eaved roofs and pavilion, and the building let loose a series of dangerous-sounding noises amidst the burning. Broken wood went smashing with a thunderous crash, and the tiles under their feet followed suit and slid off. Fuxian Peak, which Yan Heru had spent big bucks to construct, was in the process of collapsing. The damaged eaves cracked apart again, as if it could not bear the weight of two people.

It was here Shen Zechuan stood, yet he remembered the abyss in his dream. He had always stood at the brink of the abyss without taking that one step forward, because he did not know what kind of change that one step would usher in. But then, he heard the sound of horses' hooves.

That was the wind that came from Libei.

Shen Zechuan released his hand. At that very instant the eaves collapsed, Shen Zechuan strode a step out. His white robe went fluttering in the wind as he plunged down like a bird with its wings folded. The wind swept past his ears. He felt as if he had experienced a dream.

Still, stagnant waters lay at the bottom of the abyss, and it was here Shen Zechuan fell and stirred up waves of ripples. But the breathing in his ear was so, so intense. A vibrant life force brimming with vitality dispelled the darkness as strong arms held Shen Zechuan tight. In that split second, the lifeless waters seemed to have brushed off its extraneous dust to metamorphose into Xiao Chiye's chest.

Xiao Chiye had caught hold of him.

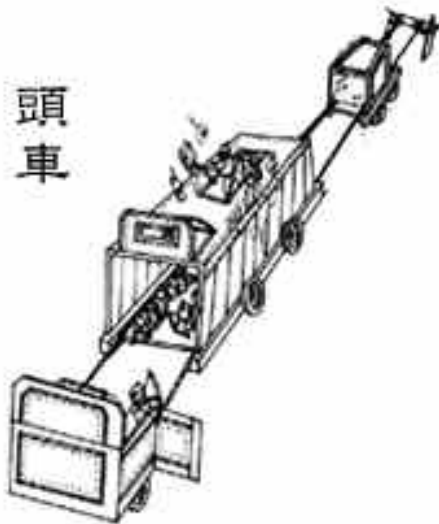


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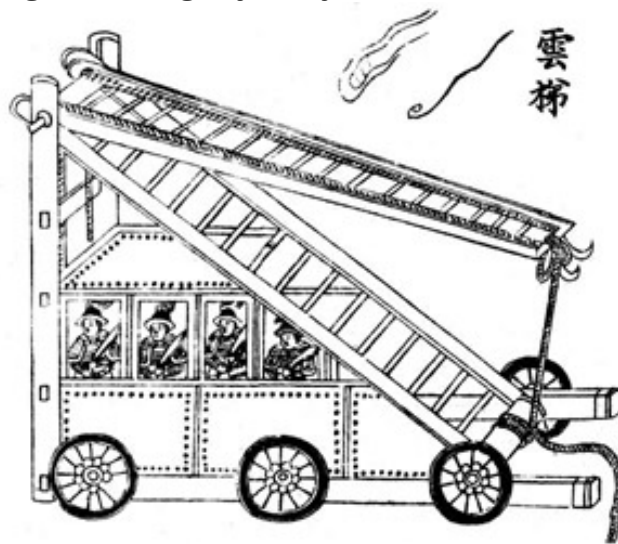


- 1.
2. 头车 literally head cart according to sources; a complex siege weapon used for mining which can also be used as a protective cover during a siege.





- 3.
4. 绣春刀 Xiuchun Blade is the blade of the Imperial Bodyguards during the Ming Dynasty.



- 5.
6. (攀)云梯 a hinged folding ladder known as the “cloud ladder” used for sieges
7. i.e. a dangerous place
8. Swan Goose is also the same 鸿雁 in Hongyan Mountains

# QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 175 : KITTEN

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



Fuxian Peak was in the midst of collapsing, and Xiao Chiye's soul was about to take leave of his body at the exact moment he looked up. He grabbed onto the eaves with an arm and stepped on somebody's head to clamber up the double-eaved roof, then ran for what his life was worth. He caught Shen Zechuan in his arms as he leaped, and the impact careened him off-course. He immediately covered Shen Zechuan with his arms as his back struck heavily against the ridge of the roof, causing the tiles to topple off.

Chen Yang reined in his horse and brandished his whip to point towards the eaves as he shouted urgently, "Laohu, catch them!"

Xiao Chiye panted heavily as his sore arms braced his body. Sweat trickled along his neck. As the falling objects went crashing, he haphazardly brushed aside the hair on Shen Zechuan's cheek with his trembling fingers and confirmed that Shen Zechuan was still gasping for breath. He let loose a vague curse and held Shen Zechuan so tightly with such force that Shen Zechuan coughed intermittently amid the smoke and dust.

Tantai Hu had already chased all the way to the front of the building. He released Lang Tao Xue Jin's reins and shouted, "Master!"

Xiao Chiye stepped on the tiles and leaped down. Gu Jin wanted to give him a helping hand, but Xiao Chiye raised his arm to block the former, unwilling to hand Shen Zechuan over to anyone else. As he mounted his horse, Xiao Chiye took the cloak from Chen Yang and covered Shen Zechuan with it.

The contours of Xiao Chiye's side profile were cold and hard. He patted Tantai Hu on the back with his freed hand, making Tantai Hu stick out his chest, then said in a cold voice, "This place was your elder brother's battlefield."

Tantai Hu wiped away the blood on his cheek in silence.

With eyes grave and solemn, Xiao Chiye said. "Tantai Hu, time to go home."



Once again, the Prince of Jianxing's manor was burned and razed to the ground. Flames accompanied the sound of killing as the fire blazed until dawn. The dark red blood on the downtown streets of Dunzhou had converged into a trickling stream. Meanwhile, the commoners all hid themselves at home, not daring to even sneak a peek. At the third quarter of the hour of chen, the Cizhou Garrison Troops and Imperial Army started to clean up the battlefield. They dragged the corpses to an open, flat area to be disposed of at a later time.

Tantai Hu was presently having his meal. He had just returned from the battlefield, and without even washing his face, he squatted with the guards on the veranda to gobble down his food. Chen Yang called for the chef in the Yan clan's pleasure house to prepare meals for the soldiers of the garrison troops and Imperial Army, who were all famished after having marched through the night and fighting until the break of day.

"Street fights are still the most thrilling." Tantai Hu wiped his mouth. "Field operations are thrilling too, but not nearly as thrilling."

"Master has the foresight..." Gu Jin bit down on a steamed bun before continuing, "not to get the Imperial Army to put on armor. Otherwise, we would have suffered from those hammers last night."

The curtains of the main hall remained down all the time they rested up here. Chen Yang was a little worried. Clutching at the register of names, he questioned Ding Tao, "Why did you let Young Master go up that tower? You didn't even go with him."

Ding Tao hung his head down, not daring to say a word. Fei Sheng and several others who had been injured had hastily bandaged their wounds, and their upper garments were uncovered as they all kneeled in the courtyard and waited to be reprimanded. However, the Imperial Bodyguards put up a beautiful defense last night. They had not allowed Lei Jingzhe to force his way up from the stairs. Two of their own had died. As Fei Sheng had shouted, they had made a name for themselves with this one battle! No one could belittle them in the future. They had real capabilities to speak of, and they could hold their heads high even when they stood before the guards from Libei, for they were no less inferior.

Kong Ling stood in the hall and let his sleeves fall as he waited deferentially at the side. He knew Xiao Chiye was feeding Shen Zechuan medicine when he heard the clinks of the porcelain bowl in the inner

chamber. After a while, the maidservant came out with the bowl and curtsied to Kong Ling before leaving the room.

Xiao Chiye lifted the curtain and stepped out. He wiped his hands with a handkerchief and said to Kong Ling, "It's nothing serious... he hurt his hand. Last time, it was his left hand, and now it's his right hand. In any case, he's taking turns to injure them. Sooner or later, he's going to be the death of me."

Kong Ling remained calm and unruffled as he lowered his head and listened; he knew the words were not meant for him. The inner chamber was not soundproof, and the way Xiao Chiye mentioned it so casually made the man lying within turn over soundlessly.

Xiao Chiye set the handkerchief to one side, then made way and gestured for Kong Ling to enter. Once Kong Ling lifted the curtains and went in, he strode out of the door to stand under the eaves and whistled to the guards.

"Let Gu Jin dispose of the corpses. Settle it by tonight at the latest. Get whatever cleansing agents needed like vinegar and water from the Yan clan." Xiao Chiye cast a glance at the weather. "While it's not that hot in autumn, I noticed last night that the public ditches in Dunzhou are all clogged as well. It's all too easy for an epidemic to start if they aren't unclogged. Keep an eye on it."

Dunzhou had no *yamen* to manage its affairs, and its network of public ditches was all in a mess. There were plenty of people who built their houses over the ditches, and the clogage was far worse than it had been in Qudu. It was the reason for the blood pooling into puddles this morning instead of flowing freely like a river.<sup>1</sup> Autumn was not as hot as summer, but it was too dry. The fire had raged for so long last night partially because the houses in the residential district were all clustered together, eaves to eaves.

As he stood at the doorway and gave his instructions, Shen Zechuan was also discussing affairs with Kong Ling in the inner chamber.

Kong Ling sat on the small chair by the side of the bed and said, "Once we received your lordship's letter in Cizhou, we immediately began to check the garrison troops. Yuanzhuo wanted the garrison troops to leave the city right at once and head east to wait for the Imperial Army at the southern border of the Bianbo Camp. He said if the Imperial Army came, they could head south as one. If not, they should remain there and wait." He

smiled when he spoke to this point. “I initially objected to it, because your lordship instructed us in the letter not to act arbitrarily without orders. It’s a good thing Yuanzhuo insisted.”

Shen Zechuan leaned partially against the pillow and read the letter Kong Ling brought along. “Yuanzhuo understood the message behind that letter.”

Shen Zechuan, unable to write a letter then, had to orally dictate many points for inclusion in the letter. At that time, there were still captured bandits around the horse carriage, and many among them were former subordinates of Liu’er. What’s more, Liu’er was Lei Jingzhe’s messenger. Shen Zechuan could not trust all these people, so when he issued his command to Cizhou, he said “do not act arbitrarily without orders”. But then, he followed up right after with the order to head for Dunzhou. He was playing with words here, and Yao Wenyu got the hint right at once.

“Your lordship is circumspect and farsighted. A few days back when we were discussing Dunzhou, we still thought we would only be able to come after spring next year. Who would have expected your lordship to have already worked out the appropriate strategy?” Kong Ling said.

“It was a coincidence this time.” Shen Zechuan was clear-headed. “When I seized those supply wagons, I only knew that there were four hundred scorpions still in Dunzhou. I gave Cizhou a hint to deploy troops initially because I wanted to use this reason to let the Garrison Troops probe into just how deep the waters in Dunzhou run. It would have been enough to capture Lei Jingzhe alive. But who knew, he even brought along more than ten thousand cavalymen and delivered them right into my hands.”

During their discussion back in Cizhou, they had agreed to first keep King Yi’s small imperial court in Fanzhou under control before attempting to obtain Dunzhou. This was because King Yi could obstruct Qi Zhuyin of Qidong on Shen Zechuan’s behalf. Shen Zechuan now had the two Prefectures of Cizhou and Chazhou in his hands, and he relied on the trade route to rise to power. In Zhongbo, he could only be considered the master of a small plot of land. The various prefectures of Dunzhou, Duanzhou, Fanzhou, and Dengzhou to the east all had their own masters. If Shen Zechuan wanted to remove them from the equation, he needed a logical reason. Otherwise, Qi Zhuyin would have a reason to launch an assault on him the moment he deployed his troops.

In all probability, Lei Jingzhe did not expect himself to come for the sole reason of eliminating Hairigu, only to end up being the perfect reason for Shen Zechuan to attack Dunzhou. But this also illustrated one thing from the side, and that was, Lei Jingzhe had been around Duanzhou for so long that he had already forgotten that Zhongbo was still land that was part of Dazhou. It was brazen and dauntless of him to lead ten thousand cavalymen deep into Dunzhou. He thought nothing of King Yi of Fanzhou and Dengzhou at all, and even less of Shen Zechuan of Cizhou.

Kong Ling initially still had other matters to report, but then he heard the wind starting to rise outside the window. In no time at all, it started to drizzle. He hurriedly stood up and closed the windows for Shen Zechuan. "This has truly been a dangerous trip for your lordship. Some words ought to have been conveyed to you by Yuanzhuo himself, but it is inconvenient for him to travel long-distance, so I shall be so bold as to do it on his behalf."

Shen Zechuan seemed to know what Kong Ling was going to say. He set the letter on the blanket and looked at Kong Ling.

Kong Ling took two steps and said, "As the saying goes, a wise man does not put himself in harm's way;<sup>2</sup> for your lordship to repeatedly place yourself in dangerous situations is simply not appropriate. The development of Cizhou's foundation is still in its fledgling stage, and the system for the registration of Chazhou's citizens has yet to be perfected. Libei's mutual trade market has not started either. Your lordship is the head of the household. In doing this, you are hanging in the balance the loyalty of all those who stand behind you."

Kong Ling's meaning could not be any clearer. Now that Shen Zechuan was the 'Prefectural Lord', he had in his hands the lifeblood of the two prefectures of Cizhou and Chazhou, along with the tiger that was Libei crouching behind him. As the saying goes, embarking on a great undertaking is only the tip of the iceberg. There would be many affairs in the future where he would be the one holding the sole decision-making power. Nothing untoward must happen to him.

Shen Zechuan's countenance was pleasant as he bowed slightly towards Kong Ling. "Mister is right to lecture me. I will sincerely reflect on it and not take any unnecessary risks again."

After Kong Ling had taken his leave, Shen Zechuan folded up the letter and put it away on the small table at the head of the bed. His right hand had

been bandaged again. His two fingers had been bent out of shape from the pressure he inflicted on them, and when the physician set his fingers right earlier, he had sweated profusely. Even now, he was still in pain.

Rain poured outside, as though it were cleansing the streets on behalf of Dunzhou. There were many matters that Shen Zechuan had yet to attend to, but he was presently leaning back against the pillow. He had no wish to see anyone except for Xiao Chiye, but Xiao Chiye did not come in even after he waited for a little over an hour. Eventually, he ended up drifting to sleep.

The next time Shen Zechuan woke up, he was woken by the heat. He had already been shifted further into the bed. The sky was murky and bleak, accompanied by the urgent howls of wind and rain. He cocked his head to see Xiao Chiye sitting by the outer edge of the bed, reading a letter by the faint candlelight.

The instant Shen Zechuan saw Xiao Chiye, he started to ache all over. He was too lazy to move, having just woken up, so he clung dazedly to the pillow for a while. His foot under the blanket slid over to make light contact with Xiao Chiye's calf.

Xiao Chiye ignored him.

Shen Zechuan propped himself up to look over at the letter, then explained in a hoarse voice, "It's from Yuanzhuo... I have to reply back to him later to get Gao Zhongxiong to write up a notice immediately. We have to make it clear to Qidong that Cizhou deployed its troops this time to fight the Biansha Cavalry."

Xiao Chiye looked at him out of the corner of his eyes, then folded the letter and tossed it to the side. He said nothing.

Shen Zechuan took his chance to lie on Xiao Chiye's arm and buried his head. "Ce'an."

"I'll return to Cizhou with you in a few days." Xiao Chiye lowered his eyes to stare at Shen Zechuan. "Let's see. You broke your fingers, and you jumped off a building. Ji Gang-shifu is going to have to lash me until the horsewhip breaks."

Shen Zechuan said in a muted voice, "Don't."

Xiao Chiye fell silent for a moment.

Shen Zechuan nuzzled his face against Xiao Chiye's arm and called out softly, "A-Ye."

Xiao Chiye felt that Shen Zechuan really deserved a spanking. He was determined not to fall for it this time, so he raised his other hand to grab the

back of Shen Zechuan's collar and lifted him over to the side. "Who's A-Ye? No such person."

Shen Zechuan said, "Er—"

Xiao Chiye simply covered Shen Zechuan with the blanket, then blew out the candle flame. Without even embracing him, he turned his back and lay down, still fully clothed. He still remembered that feeling when he broke into a dash. He had really gone all out then, as if his life depended on it. He would not care to look even if there had been a mountain of swords and a sea of flames before him. He was about to die from all those stabs Shen Zechuan was dishing out to his heart.

Shen Zechuan peeled off the blanket and bumped against Xiao Chiye's back all the way up to his shoulder. He stuck to Xiao Chiye's temple and said, "I can't sleep if you aren't hugging me."

Xiao Chiye lay flat and grabbed Shen Zechuan around his waist to drag him onto his body. Shen Zechuan looked at him, and he looked at Shen Zechuan. However, he would not release his grip and instead secured Shen Zechuan in this position so that Shen Zechuan could not move.

"Go ahead and sleep." Xiao Chiye said.

"This position is rather cramped." Shen Zechuan motioned to his chest with his eyes. "It's still pounding."

"Isn't that nice?" Xiao Chiye said with a shadow of a smile. "Mine has been pounding all this time."

Shen Zechuan raised his palm over Xiao Chiye's chest and rubbed it.

Xiao Chiye lifted him up high and said, "No touching. I'm angry."<sup>3</sup>

Shen Zechuan was like a downtrodden cat that had fallen into the water<sup>4</sup> as Xiao Chiye held him in his hands while he brandished his paws to scratch at Xiao Chiye's chest. So light, yet so ticklish. So devilish, yet so pampered. The scratches made even Xiao Chiye's teeth itch. Look at those expressive, lazy eyes; he was clearly an emboldened one, brazenly acting as if nothing that happened was of his own doing.

Xiao Chiye was miffed, but those scratches wore his bad temper down into nothingness. The way Shen Zechuan looked and acted now could not be found anywhere else, for it was the outcome of being much too indulged and spoiled in Xiao Chiye's arms. Xiao Chiye knew this very well, but he did not intend to let Shen Zechuan get away with it unpunished.

"This a scrub you're giving me?" Xiao Chiye said mercilessly. "It's been two days since I last bathed."





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### Footnotes

1. 血流成洼 based on 血流成河, literally blood flowing like a river (i.e., bloodbath)
2. A saying from Mencius. 君子不立危墙之下 literally, a gentleman would not stand under a shaky wall.



- 3.
4. 落水 literally fallen into water, although also used figuratively of someone gone astray, or down on their luck (as in 落水狗)

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 176 : BREAKING WAVES

Translated with: [Jia](#)<3



Xiao Chiye headed south from Bianbo camp to join up with the Cizhou garrison troops at the borders of Libei. But instead of continuing south, he chose the same route Shen Zechuan had taken and took a detour to the west of Dunzhou. The troops could only advance at night in order to not alarm King Yi of Fanzhou, but fortunately, he made it just in time.

Shen Zechuan leaned over to sniff Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye would not let him get his wish and lifted him high. In retaliation, Shen Zechuan clutched him by the front of his clothes. Xiao Chiye stayed conscious of Shen Zechuan's bandaged right hand, worried that he would worsen the injury if he so much as exerted force on it, so he had no choice but to lower Shen Zechuan and let the latter sniff all he wanted.

"It has been two days since I last bathed too." Shen Zechuan pressed his knee up against Xiao Chiye and sank into the bedding to snuggle up to him. "Let's bathe together."

Rain pitter-pattered on the eaves, sounding as if it was being scoured by countless amounts of tiny brushes. Xiao Chiye opened up his chest to Shen Zechuan, and Shen Zechuan lay on top of it. That loosened collar of his gave him a laid-back air. Every inch of his skin was seeking out Xiao Chiye. He was this relaxed, as if the sensuality oozing off him was unintentional, and all these expressions of his, innocent.

Shen Zechuan had the ability to turn his exhalations of breath into murmurs. In Xiao Chiye's eyes, Shen Zechuan was a natural beauty. The expression in those eyes tantalized Xiao Chiye's heart the same way his warm fingertips grazed against the surface of the lake in Xiao Chiye's soul, stirring up ripple after ripple. Shen Zechuan had moments where he would plead; every time he could not bear it anymore, he would tearfully call out all of Xiao Chiye's forms of address, yet he could even make the way he pleaded sound so intoxicating.

They had always been in sync with one another in bed, each with the ability to mutually read even the slightest moan and groan that passed between them. Such unparalleled ecstasy was derived from the way they fit so perfectly together. If Xiao Chiye wanted to hold his own against a lover like this, he had to be a wall, one that could stand firm against the incoming waves.

“Sure,” Xiao Chiye’s expression suddenly shifted as he said in a frivolous tone. “I’ll bathe with you.”

Shen Zechuan found the expression in those eyes ominous.



As Dunzhou was located far to the east, the days grew cold easily. The bathhouses set up within Tianji Courtyard were unlike the ones in Qudu with windows; instead, they were all sturdily built enclosed rooms. Inside, the bathing facilities were not only complete and comprehensive, but also varied and fanciful. Hot, humid water vapor would come assailing them in the faces the moment the door was opened and the bamboo blinds rolled up.

Even before Shen Zechuan had been completely stripped of his clothes, he was already soaking in the water. Under the pretense of keeping his wound from contact with water, both his wrists had been bound with a waist sash and conveniently hung up on a small rack near the pool by Xiao Chiye. Xiao Chiye had even selected a little golden bell from the wicker basket for Shen Zechuan, which he had suspended in the air. As long as Shen Zechuan moved, the bell would ring, crisp and clear.

Shen Zechuan’s clothes were soaked through. He could not withstand the heat in the bathhouse, but at that moment, he was too preoccupied to care about anything else. The tips of his ears had gone bright red, the stark contrast of which made the jade earring seem particularly fair and delicate in comparison. Xiao Chiye squatted before him and hoisted up Shen Zechuan’s legs.

“Since you can’t seem to remember a word I say,” A bare-chested Xiao Chiye wiped the small blade clean with a handkerchief. “I’ll have to teach you a lesson and drill it into you.”

Shen Zechuan’s toes curled slightly as he called out with his eyes shut. “Xiao Ce’an!”

“Hm,” Xiao Chiye’s attention was on his hands. “Who are you calling?”

The chill of the blade against Shen Zechuan jolted Shen Zechuan into opening his eyes. Shame burned in his eyes. "I hate you to death!"

Xiao Chiye spared him a glance. "I hate you to death too."

Feeling the friction of the small blade as it scraped against him, Shen Zechuan could only tremble slightly. The water was hot, while the blade was cool, and the sensation of the blade traversing every inch of him was especially distinct and clear. He could not bear it, and he could not bring himself to look down. All he could dare to do was stare at Xiao Chiye.

This gaze was truly too pitiful. It was the first time Xiao Chiye had ever seen it, and he simply had the urge to capture the moment by grabbing a brush and painting it down without delay. He was initially still miffed, but then he suddenly started to laugh. Xiao Chiye had never done something like this before. This was his first time, so he went at it very carefully and shaved all the areas that ought to be shaved completely clean.

Shen Zechuan's back was still pressing against the wall of the pool, and these vastly different sensations drained him of his entire life's composure. He was genuinely in Xiao Chiye's hands now, and he did not dare to move even an inch. But their surroundings were so brightly illuminated that he gasped lightly for breath in the damp mist. Condensation coated the jade earring with every rise and fall of his chest. Shen Zechuan seemed to have become Xiao Chiye's jade, one that was toyed with until no ounce of privacy and secrecy remained.

Xiao Chiye asked, "Are you still going to stab me in the heart next time?"

Shen Zechuan did not answer.

Xiao Chiye took another look after he was done shaving and discovered that Shen Zechuan's eyes were red through and through. He could not tell if he had teared up from the steam or frustration. Xiao Chiye's heart did not soften at all. He raised his hand to pinch Shen Zechuan's cheek and proclaim ruthlessly, "For each time you get injured, I'll shave you once."

Shen Zechuan felt cool and chilly down there. His eyes were brimming with tears, and the redness at the tip of his ears had already spread to his chest. Before he was done taking a breather, Xiao Chiye pinned him against the wall of the pool and kissed him until the bell went swinging wildly.



The rain was still falling the next day. Shen Zechuan had a rare good night's sleep.

When Xiao Chiye put on his clothes, Chen Yang was already waiting under the eaves. He slipped on the wooden clogs in the room and went out of the inner chamber. Instead of having Chen Yang discuss work in this room, Xiao Chiye headed out onto the walkway and made his way to another room.

Chen Yang followed behind him and raised the bamboo blinds to disperse some of the stuffiness inside. He turned to Xiao Chiye and presented the register of names. "The cavalymen taken prisoner this time numbered two thousand and three hundred men. They are now being held in the Dunzhou prison under the watch of the Cizhou's Garrison Troops."

Xiao Chiye flipped through the book without sitting down and asked with his back to the light, "Where's Lei Jingzhe?"

"Dead." Chen Yang paused for a moment. "He was already killed when we dug him out from the ruins. Based on his injuries, he died of strangulation."

Xiao Chiye set down the book. He recalled the injury on Shen Zechuan's right hand. After standing for a while, he said, "Don't wait until we return to Cizhou. It'd be too late. Write a letter now and have it sent to Qidong posthaste. Use my personal seal..." At this point, he paused again and turned around, "Or rather, affix Lanzhou's seal."

This matter concerned the situation in Zhongbo, and personal relationships must not be brought into the mix during the discussions with Qi Zhuyin. Qi Zhuyin was already doing her part as a friend by taking care of Lu Pingyan on Lu Guangbai's behalf. Xiao Chiye's personal seal represented Libei, and if they kept on asking favors of her, they would not be able to repay this debt. Moreover, Shen Zechuan was the one in charge of Cizhou now. As a commanding general of Libei, affixing his own seal would diminish Shen Zechuan's authority and prestige. Shen Zechuan still had to deal with Qi Zhuyin in the future, and it would be inconvenient for both parties to act if they had to show him consideration and take him into account.

"Lei Jingzhe is the main perpetrator behind the turmoil and unrest in the two prefectures of Dunzhou and Duanzhou. This time, he even led the Biansha Cavalry into Dunzhou. Libei and Cizhou joined forces to attack the enemy. We fought the Biansha people, for the sake of the Zhongbo's commoners." Chen Yang said smoothly. "We are not in the wrong, even if news of this incident were to spread to Qudu."

“We are not in the wrong only because Qudu has no soldiers.” Xiao Chiye said, “Otherwise, there would be tens of thousands of accusations and charges slapped on Lanzhou. But just as a cornered dog would jump over a wall, a desperate man would be driven to drastic measures. Dunzhou is already in our possession. Lanzhou now has three prefectures under his control. Even if Xue Xiuzhuo and the Empress Dowager have been too busy with their own affairs, they are going to start thinking of ways to bring Lanzhou under control. The best way is to set Qi Zhuyin loose to take down Fanzhou first so that Cizhou loses their barrier in the southeast.”

But this matter was not of utmost urgency. The Bianjun Commandery was presently unmanned, and Qi Zhuyin had already moved from Cangjun Commandery to Bianjun Commandery to hold the fort and patch up the gap in defenses on Lu Guangbai’s behalf. The Biansha people transferred Hasen from the southeast to the north, yet this did not give Qidong an unfair advantage over them. Amu’er was still deploying his elite troops and generals here.

That Xiao Chiye was able to make it to Cizhou this time was also due to Xiao Fangxu.

Duanzhou was left without soldiers after the defeat of the Zhongbo’s troops, and consequently, this place became a vulnerable weakness of Dazhou. But Amu’er did not invade a second time. Instead, he concentrated his troops in the north and southeast. It was as if he was specifically bypassing Zhongbo to chip away at the two tough nuts that were Libei and Qidong. Xiao Fangxu thought that Amu’er was using diversionary tactics, and the emergence of the scorpions squad made Xiao Fangxu all the more certain that Amu’er had not given up on Zhongbo at all. For this reason, he had to take Shen Zechuan’s proposal to rebuild Zhongbo’s line of defense seriously.

Xiao Chiye made a few inquiries about Dunzhou’s military affairs. They had only just discussed the armory when they saw Gu Jin enter.

“Master.” Gu Jin cast a glance at the courtyard and said, “Fei Sheng and the others are still kneeling on the veranda.”

Xiao Chiye turned his head aside to look at the overlapping shadows through the window lattice. He did not answer.

So Gu Jin did not dare to bring it up again and retreated to the side.

There were still bandits in Dunzhou whom they had yet to deal with. The 15,000 men Xiao Chiye brought with him were enough to keep them in

check with their military presence. Liu'er could barely even walk properly when he saw Xiao Chiye. Seeing that even Lei Jingzhe was dead, he did not dare to start hatching all those plans of his again. But he was, after all, not a decent man, and Xiao Chiye had no intent to let him remain around him; thus, he sent Liu'er away to Kong Ling for him to make the necessary arrangements. Xiao Chiye did not lay a hand on the Dunzhou armory, as they still had plans to use this place after conquering it.

Xiao Chiye busied himself around until noon before he remembered that Shen Zechuan was still sleeping. He returned to the room for a look and saw that Shen Zechuan had already gotten out of bed and was presently standing under the eaves listening to Kong Ling discuss affairs.

When Shen Zechuan saw Xiao Chiye, he silently averted his gaze.

Xiao Chiye played it cool, knowing that he had gone too far in bullying Shen Zechuan yesterday, and Shen Zechuan had still yet to get over it. As he had gotten up too early this morning, he lifted the curtains to enter the inner chamber, where he took the chance while he had free time to take a nap.

When Xiao Chiye woke up, Shen Zechuan was sitting at the desk looking at Cizhou's case files.

Xiao Chiye wiped his face with a handkerchief and asked, "Have you taken your meal?"

Shen Zechuan answered in a muted voice, "No."

Xiao Chiye wanted to laugh, finding Lanzhou to be quite the pitiful one. No doubt he was unaccustomed to being smooth and bare down there, although the way he sat all prim and proper was unexpectedly a little seductive. Xiao Chiye sat down on the opposite side and propped up his leg before saying in a leisurely and carefree manner, "Then, let's call for them to serve up the food. We'll eat a little."

Shen Zechuan set his brush down. He was about to say something when someone entered the outer chamber.

Chen Yang did not head into the inner chamber. "Master, Laohu is here."

Only then, Xiao Chiye remembered that he had asked Chen Yang to summon Tantai Hu over before he took his nap. There was something he had to say in Shen Zechuan's presence. He straightened up a little and said, "Let Laohu in—"

Shen Zechuan suddenly mouthed to him: *no entry*.

Xiao Chiye gave him a questioning look, but Shen Zechuan ignored him. Outside, Tantai Hu had already strode across the threshold and was waiting for Xiao Chiye to summon him into the inner chamber. Xiao Chiye did not understand what Shen Zechuan meant by it, so he could only say, “I called you over for a matter. I didn’t mention it before in Libei, but the time is right now. Let me ask you, will you defend Dunzhou?”

Tantai Hu has been following Xiao Chiye around all this time, so he was taken aback to hear him ask. After blanking out for a moment, he asked, “Is Master remaining in Dunzhou too?”

Twisting his thumb ring, Xiao Chiye said, “You had no choice when you followed me in Qudu, and you were forced by circumstance when we later went to Libei. Times are different now. You can assume sole responsibility—”

Xiao Chiye saw Shen Zechuan making his way over from under the other side of the table. Realizing that it did not bode well, he attempted to press down on Shen Zechuan’s head, but Shen Zechuan bit down on him. He felt the stab of pain, but did not make a sound.

Outside, Tantai Hu had clued in on the key point and was getting all antsy, so he asked, “Does Master not want me to return to Libei anymore?”

The tip of Shen Zechuan’s nose edged along the curves of Xiao Chiye’s contours. Xiao Chiye wanted to draw his legs back, but Shen Zechuan was wedged in the middle, and Xiao Chiye could not flip over the table and scoop the latter up. They had not done anything last night. Xiao Chiye, keeping Shen Zechuan’s injury in mind, had simply fallen asleep after shaving Shen Zechuan clean. And now the hot puffs of air the latter was breathing into him were making him hard.

“You are a native of Zhongbo. The trusted aides under your command are also natives of Zhongbo. We spoke about it before—” Xiao Chiye composed himself and continued after a moment’s pause, “back in Qudu.”

His tongue was slippery.

Xiao Chiye tilted his head back slightly and carefully swallowed back that little sigh to keep it from escaping. He was inside Shen Zechuan’s mouth when he heard Tantai Hu fall to his knees with a “thud”.

The corners of Shen Zechuan’s upturned eyes misted over with water from having taken Xiao Chiye deep into his mouth. He raised his eyes to look at Xiao Chiye in this position; the viciousness in them all but turned



into glistening waves of ripples that intensified Xiao Chiye's desire to bite him. Palms Xiao Chiye had nowhere to rest edged up along Shen Zechuan's chin before finally coming to a stop at the back of Shen Zechuan's head.

"Don't cry." Xiao Chiye said in a raspy voice. "Continue."

Tantai Hu choked back the tears that had just spilled over and said as he kneeled outside, "Mas... I followed the Viceroy for five or six years, and it was all due to the Viceroy's promotion that I could lead the troops. After we left Qudu, it was the Viceroy who trained and nurtured me throughout. When you told me to keep the camp defense layout in mind back then when we fought the Shasan Camp in Libei, I thought you wanted me to remain in Libei and guard the camps on your behalf. So why are you leaving me in Dunzhou now?!"

Too hot.

Xiao Chiye could not help but loosen his collar. The waves of pleasure crashed over him and sent tingling sensations up the small of his back. All he could think of was to make Shen Zechuan cry until Shen Zechuan could no longer stir up a storm.



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## CHAPTER 177: TORRENTIAL RAIN

Tantai Hu was still pouring his heart out. "I have no objections if the Viceroy wants me to defend Dunzhou. I just can't bear to part with my brothers from Libei, and even more so, the Viceroy. Dunzhou is the place my eldest brother was originally stationed. I'm really..."

Xiao Chiye's fingers sunk into Shen Zechuan's hair. He patiently caressed Shen Zechuan's earlobe with his thumb, rubbing it until that jade earring took on a faint hue of scarlet. The window was open, and occasionally, the muffled sound of thunder would rumble. Xiao Chiye paid it no heed.

Given that the inner and outer chambers were merely separated by a bamboo blind, Tantai Hu's voice was extremely clear. Shen Zechuan was hopelessly flushed in the face, and his words, inarticulate. He looked so tender that he seemed succulent and ripe for the taking. He had hit upon the idea on the spur of the moment. How was he to know it would be so hard to pull off? Not only was his mouth stuffed to the brim, he was also choked to the point his eyes were watering.

When all was said and done, Tantai Hu was a bona fide man, and he felt rather embarrassed and ashamed to kneel here and cry. He composed himself and reverted to addressing Xiao Chiye by his original form of address. "Dunzhou doesn't have a garrison troop at present. Since Master is willing to leave this place in my hands, I will have to prove myself worthy of this kindness."

Magnificent waves of pleasure assaulted Xiao Chiye closely one after another as he grasped Shen Zechuan's right hand while simultaneously pressing Shen Zechuan's head down with his hand in Shen Zechuan's hair. It was cramped and narrow under the table. Shen Zechuan was unable to endure the heat, and it did not take long for him to be sweating profusely.

"I'll leave you five thousand soldiers." Xiao Chiye's Adam's apple bobbed. "All the future accounts will go through Cizhou. You'll be under Lanzhou's management. If there are any matters of concern, let Lanzhou know as soon as possible."

Tantai Hu knew Shen Zechuan was in the inner chamber too. He thought for a moment and said in all seriousness, "Dunzhou has to recruit new soldiers and rebuild the city walls. I have to first discuss the exact figure for this portion of the expenditure with the Prefectural Lord."

Tantai Hu mentioned some other matters too, all of which were government affairs that required further in-depth discussions. If it had been some other time, Shen Zechuan would have summoned Kong Ling in to draft up a document with Tantai Hu. But he was in no position to be distracted at this moment, and even if he had an opinion, they would all vanish at the press of Xiao Chiye's hand. The waves in those eyes built up until they eventually consolidated into water droplets that fell off like beads tumbling off a broken string.

This was too stimulating a scene.

Xiao Chiye tightened his grip. The sound of the rain was loud at times, and soft at others. Shen Zechuan could not hold in his saliva. In this harried moment, he did not even know when Tantai Hu had taken his leave. Xiao Chiye lifted a leg and kicked the table away.

Muffled thunder suddenly crashed through the sky. The rain poured even harder, pelting at the windows noisily as broken beads of water splashed all over. Xiao Chiye did not go anywhere else. He remained here, leaning against the chair to teach Shen Zechuan a lesson. Both of Shen Zechuan's hands were bound behind his back as he straddled Xiao Chiye with his face to him, murmuring under the din of the rain.

Too smooth.

In just a couple of times, Shen Zechuan could not take it all in anymore. He shuddered amidst the jolts of pleasure, cutting a pitiful sight as he dirtied Xiao Chiye's clothes from grinding against him. Xiao Chiye did not play tricks this time. He bound those two wrists of Shen Zechuan's in place, letting him plead for mercy all he wanted with those "A-Ye" and "Ce'an" of his. He simply settled the account with Shen Zechuan, along with the interest.

The rain was still falling.



When the rain came to a stop, Xiao Chiye fell onto the bedding and scooped Shen Zechuan over. He was still grasping the latter's right wrist as he secured him where he was. Shen Zechuan drifted off and woke up again, his head resting on Xiao Chiye's chest as he mumbled something incoherent.

Xiao Chiye listened for a long time but could not get what he was saying. He was so tired and sleepy he could barely open his eyes. He gave him a vague reply, and both men grunted incongruously for a moment, with

neither making sense of the other, before gradually sinking into a deep sleep.

He slept until noon the next day, and while he was still half asleep, he heard Shen Zechuan calling for him. He opened his eyes and dazedly said, "Hm, hm?"

Shen Zechuan, too sleepy to raise his head, grasped Xiao Chiye's little braid tightly.

Xiao Chiye slept for a while longer, but with military affairs still on his mind, it did not take him long to wake up. He had been going at it too hard last night, and now he rolled over to pin Shen Zechuan down. "Get up. Time to drink the medicine."

Shen Zechuan covered Xiao Chiye's forehead with his left hand and pretended not to hear.

Xiao Chiye sighed and buried his head into Shen Zechuan's chest to nuzzle against him until Shen Zechuan sank into the bedding. He said in a muffled voice, "Shen Lanzhou, help me out of bed."

The pressure on Shen Zechuan made it hard for him to breathe, and it did not work when he clutched and tugged Xiao Chiye's little braid either, so he could only open his eyes and say feebly, "My waist is sore, and my knees are hurting. I can't get up."

Xiao Chiye reached his hand under Shen Zechuan and helped him up with his hand supporting the latter's back, then hoisted him over himself before getting out of bed. Shen Zechuan was still in a daze when he was set down into the water. He leaned against Xiao Chiye, truly not wanting to even move his finger. Xiao Chiye did not want to move either, so both of them remained in this position as they soaked in the water.

Chen Yang had already been waiting the entire morning. He heard the door open, and saw Xiao Chiye dressed in a clean, loose-fitting robe with wooden clogs on his feet. He let the maidservants in first. After a moment, he saw Shen Zechuan, also dressed in a loose-fitting robe, step forth in his wooden clogs.

Both of them looked like they had not slept enough.

"Where's Laohu?" Xiao Chiye said. "Call him over again later. I forgot to instruct him on a number of issues yesterday."

"Summon Fei Sheng first." Shen Zechuan looked at the veranda. "Why is he still kneeling?"

Chen Yang acknowledged the orders and took his leave to get them.



Fei Sheng was kneeling at the foot of the veranda when he saw Kong Ling coming in with a straw raincloak draped over him. He bowed his head and greeted, "Mister Chengfeng."

Kong Ling removed his bamboo hat and took off the straw raincloak, which he hung up at the side. "Why are you still kneeling?"

Fei Sheng answered, "Master has not instructed otherwise."

Fei Sheng had been kneeling here for two days. Even while Xiao Chiye was giving him the cold shoulder, he did not harbor Xiao Chiye the slightest bit of resentment. Kong Ling's mind cleared in understanding, and he comforted, "The Marquis and the Prefectural Lord spend more time apart than together, so it's inevitable for the Marquis to fly into a rage when the Prefectural Lord is injured. Military affairs these few days are rather taxing. His anger should have more or less worn off by now."

Fei Sheng hurriedly said, "As guards, we ought to be punished for letting our master get injured. I have not seen Master for two days already, and I'm worried about his injuries."

Kong Ling nodded. "Your loyalty doesn't go unnoticed by the Marquis. Wait for a while longer, and it should be your turn to be summoned."

Fei Sheng knew that Kong Ling must have discerned something by saying this, so he said, "I, Fei the Tenth, am an unrefined man of little education. Please enlighten me."

Kong Ling smiled and looked up to see Chen Yang walking towards them. He merely said, "Don't panic. Good times will follow after the rough time you had kneeling these two days."

Fei Sheng was worried that Xiao Chiye was going to wait until the dust had settled before settling scores with him, but then Kong Ling's words did not seem to indicate that this would be the case. Kneeling these two days had all but dissipated the joy he had felt earlier. He could not be sure how Xiao Chiye was going to punish him given what he had seen of Xiao Chiye's expression. Hearing himself being summoned, he hurriedly got to his feet and followed after Chen Yang.

Shen Zechuan was sitting on the chair drinking his medicine, and Xiao Chiye was keeping a close watch on him to ensure that he drank up every last drop of it. This medicine was so bitter it made Shen Zechuan frown, but he did not dare to spit it out with Xiao Chiye's gaze on him, so he forced himself to swallow it.

He would not even drink strong tea because he hated the bitterness. Without Ji Gang by his side, he would pick and choose his medicines. Unless he was seriously injured, like he had been in the horse carriage this time, he would never give in.

Xiao Chiye looked at the military affairs and pushed the small plate of honeyed candies towards Shen Zechuan in passing.

Fei Sheng entered, paid his obeisances, and knelt in the hall.

It would not do for Shen Zechuan to stuff himself with candy in front of his subordinates, so he retracted his fingertips from the rim of the plate and put up with the bitterness. "Have the brothers' injuries been attended to?"

Fei Sheng answered truthfully. "Yes, they are all superficial injuries; not at all serious."

Shen Zechuan said with a solemn countenance, "They should recuperate if they are injured. Exempt them from shift duties these few days and leave the night watch to Chen Yang and the rest. Those two brothers have to be buried with full honors. If they have family in Cizhou, take out forty taels of silver from my account and see to the arrangements for them on my behalf."

Fei Sheng was delighted at hearing this, but he did not dare to let it show on his face. He hurriedly said, "I'll surely carry out Master's instruction down to the letter."

Not anyone could carry out jobs on Shen Zechuan's behalf. Tasks like this all used to be done by Qiao Tianya. To be able to draw money from Shen Zechuan's personal account meant that Shen Zechuan could trust him, and this trust was far more valuable than monetary rewards. Fei Sheng was beside himself with joy, but upon seeing an expressionless Xiao Chiye sitting at the side, he restrained himself and took his leave with his head lowered.

The Imperial Bodyguards had put up a wonderful defense this time, and they did not turn tail and flee from the battlefield in the face of danger. Shen Zechuan was sure to reward them. Xiao Chiye had Fei Sheng kneel because he wanted to knock it into Fei Sheng's head that as guards, they were at fault for every injury their master sustained, and that they should not forget who they were just because Shen Zechuan did not hold them accountable time and time again. At the same time, there was also another layer of meaning behind his action. If Xiao Chiye were to first punish Fei Sheng,

then Shen Zechuan's reward later would appear all the more considerate, and Fei Sheng would then have to remember Shen Zechuan's kindness.

Shen Zechuan turned his head, wanting to say a word to Xiao Chiye during this interval. Xiao Chiye raised his hand and stuffed the candy into his mouth. Kong Ling entered.

Xiao Chiye said with his usual expression, "We have now taken down Dunzhou, but how to go about defending it is a problem. Cizhou has no commanding general at present, so I'm leaving Tantai Hu here, along with 5,000 men from the Imperial Army and Cizhou's Garrison Troop. We have to step up recruitment this winter. Fortifications of the city are also of pressing urgency."

Chen Yang handed the register to Kong Ling.

There were some words that were Shen Zechuan's place to say, but he still had the candy in his mouth, so Xiao Chiye continued, "Dunzhou's *yamen* needs to be rebuilt. The household registers have to be clean. Chengfeng, think about it and see if there is anyone from Cizhou's *yamen* screening process this year that you can assign over to give Tantai Hu a helping hand."

The screening of the lesser functionaries of Cizhou's *yamen* was conducted by Zhou Gui's advisors. Two men were executed over Gao Zhongxiong's incident the last time, and by handing this task to Kong Ling, Shen Zechuan was giving the advisors of Cizhou another chance.

Kong Ling rose to his feet and answered, "There are several decent ones. Once I get back, I'll draft up a list and present it to your lordship for perusal. When the time comes, I'd also like to ask for Yuanzhuo to give advice and counsel from the side."

By doing this, Kong Ling took the opportunity Shen Zechuan offered him, and in passing, gave Yao Wenyu a boost while lowering his own position. Although Chen Yang had seen advisors before while following Xiao Chiye around in the military tents, all of them did not possess the same kind of magnanimous bearing Kong Ling had. Surprised, he cast a glance at Kong Ling.

"For certain arrangements, just discuss it in detail with Tantai Hu." Xiao Chiye said. "You are originally the advisor of his eldest brother, Tantai Long, so just speak your mind. He respects you deep down and will not dare to give you the attitude."

They discussed some more about the governmental affairs in Dunzhou, all of which were plans that had to be drafted and worked out. There were still a bunch of merchants outside the courtyard waiting to see Shen Zechuan. Yan Heru and Hairigu had been placed under lock and key too, as there were still questions about the scorpions that had yet to be cleared up. On the other hand, Xiao Chiye had to maintain correspondences with Wu Ziyu, who had remained behind in Libei. Snow had already started to fall in Libei, and the various bridle paths were either obstructed or damaged. The convoy squad was handed the task of repairing the paths, but they only had so much money and manpower. The priority of paths to be repaired and the process of repairs were all questions that had to go through Xiao Chiye first before a decision could be made.

This tiny bit of respite seemed to be all the free time both of them could get. Shen Zechuan did not want to wake up in the morning precisely because there was too much to do. Once the merchants entered, they started to make such a din with everyone trying to get a word in that Xiao Chiye regretted it a little. They had been going at it to their heart's content the night before, and as a result, Shen Zechuan had to hang in there and drag his lackadaisical self to handle the day's affairs.

With that thought in mind, Xiao Chiye turned his head around to look at Shen Zechuan. But who would have known that Shen Zechuan would be leaning against his chair listening to the merchants make a ruckus with a deadpan expression, all the while holding a brush in his hand to draw a tortoise on the paper?

So Xiao Chiye laughed.

And saw Shen Zechuan write his name, Xiao Ce'an, on it.<sup>1</sup>

Credits: thank you [Tea](#) for proofreading! <3





## CHAPTER 178: MERCHANTS

Worried about their respective businesses, the merchants were all anxious to meet with Shen Zechuan.

The hall was saturated with a cacophony of noises, with a blend of all sorts of accents engaged in conversations where everyone was talking without actually communicating and comprehending the other, much like a chicken trying to talk to a duck. Many people could not even speak bureaucratic jargon fluently without the Yan clan acting as the mediator. Yan Heru set up this “small mutual market” in Dunzhou, and they had prior dealings in trades like tea, salt, copper, and steel with the bandits as well as the various tribes of Biansha. Now that Yan Heru was in custody, they were afraid that Shen Zechuan would pursue the matter. Hence, they made plans to call on Shen Zechuan together, hoping to make enough of a commotion that the law would not be enforced given the large number of violators.<sup>2</sup>

Chen Yang notified the maidservants to prepare tea. Not only was the hall packed with seated people, the area at the foot of the veranda was also fully crammed with standing merchants who had come after getting wind of the news. These people, having arrived from all over the world, crowded boisterously together, making such a ruckus that the courtyard resembled a bustling downtown area.

It was here Shen Zechuan sat, answering, “that makes sense” regardless of what he heard. The din in the hall persisted until it was almost night, and still, they did not make any progress. Shen Zechuan had seemingly replied to every question, but he did not really answer any of them. He left them hanging until they were all starving and choked up with pent-up frustrations.

Xiao Chiye headed over next door to finish up his discussion of military affairs with Tantai Hu. He stepped out to see the dark sky and the lamps lit in the hall. The merchants outside were sitting and reclining in various poses on the mats on the ground, while Shen Zechuan was still inside playing the time game with the merchants.

Fei Sheng lifted the curtains and stepped out. He moved over to Xiao Chiye and said in a soft voice, “Master asks if you are done with discussion of military affairs. If so, we can serve up the meal.”

Xiao Chiye asked, “Have these people already been dismissed?”

Fei Sheng answered, "Master says not to dismiss them. Let them remain here. He even invited them to stay here for the night."

So Xiao Chiye nodded and said, "Then, let's have dinner in the courtyard next door."



The merchants had all made up their minds to get a definitive answer from Shen Zechuan. At the very least, they had to see Yan Heru. Their goods were all stored at a side courtyard belonging to the Yan clan. What was to become of these goods now that the Biansha Cavalry and the bandits had retreated? Yan Heru had given them his guarantee, so the question of whether they ought to stay or leave all had to be re-discussed.

But Shen Zechuan was too good at passing the buck and did not give them anything precise. Fearing the soldiers whose presence was everywhere in Dunzhou, the merchants did not dare to have a falling out with Shen Zechuan. All they could do was suppress their anger and continue to sit here with the sole intention of dragging it on and wearing Shen Zechuan down.

Shen Zechuan reckoned it was about time once he was done reading all the important affairs of Dunzhou. On seeing Fei Sheng return, he rose and said to the merchants with a smile, "Gentlemen, you have been sitting here all day. We can discuss the matters again later. I've gotten my men to prepare a banquet. Let's talk about it in detail during the feast later."

Without giving any explanation, he bent under the curtains Fei Sheng had lifted and left.

The merchants sitting inside waited for a long time, but Shen Zechuan did not return, and the maidservants did not enter to serve the dishes either. They lifted the curtains and stepped out for a look to find only familiar faces left in the courtyard. Not even a guard was in sight.

The man who had smoked a few pipes grew anxious and slapped his thigh. "He couldn't have run away, could he?"

Instantly alarmed, the merchants crowded together like a flock of sparrows and charged over to the entrance of the courtyard, where they discovered the doors were completely sealed.

Someone said in horror, "Don't tell me they are planning to silence us? That won't do! Your Lordship, Your Lordship! We are all decent businessmen with documents endorsed by the local authorities!"

Upon hearing the pounding on the door, Fei Sheng, who was outside, hoisted his blade over his shoulder and said, "What nonsense are you all

spouting? His Lordship is inviting all of you gentlemen to have a rest in the courtyard. Weren't you people unwilling to leave? Then just sleep here!"

The merchants hollered, "We want to see His Lordship!"

Fei Sheng sneered and said, "Haven't you already seen him today? My master stayed inside with all of you gentlemen for half the day." As he spoke, he sent someone to move over a chair for him. He sat down facing the door. "We have checked all of your goods, and the copper and steel among them are all strictly prohibited by the government. It's not going to be that easy to retrieve them."

"It's a state of extreme unrest everywhere now!" The man who had been smoking earlier stood on tiptoe to lean over the crack of the door and quibbled, "It's all too easy to get our hands on a few batches of goods, but we only did the trade this one time. We are all honest people!"

Fei Sheng did not beat around the bush with them. He raised a hand to take the book and said as he flipped the pages, "Know what I'm holding in my hands now? It's the book of registrations from the Yan clan's pawnshop, with detailed records of the goods every one of you imports to Dunzhou every month. It is all down in black and white, so it can't be fake, can it?"

The merchants within whispered to one another, wiping their sweat and flicking their sleeves as they crowded together again. They made such a din that Fei Sheng could not make out what exactly they were saying. Eventually, that man craned his neck and shouted through the door, "Tea has long since ceased to be prohibited. Hey, I'm a tea trader! Open the door. Don't implicate the innocent!"

"Zhongbo has been in such a state of decline these two years. Who are you selling tea to in Dunzhou? The Yan clan themselves is the largest tea merchant in the south." As Fei Sheng spoke, he lifted his Xiuchun blade and rapped hard on the door panel with the sheath. "Stop making a ruckus! Hurry up and spit out the truth!"

"What truth do you want us to spit out?" The man stubbornly refused to admit it. "The goods are all recorded clearly in the book. Just match the goods with the records in the book, and it will all be clear."

Fei Sheng swung the book in his hand and said, "None of you will be able to escape if we send this to Qudu and hand it over to the *yamen*. Let me tell you this; my master is a benevolent man. He's giving you the opportunity to make amends. All you need to do is to list down truthfully on paper who you consulted with in Dunzhou and who you converted the silver

for, and I'll immediately open the doors and let all of you out. All past accounts will be written off too."

Other than tea out of the quartet of tea, salt, copper and steel, the last three were all materials controlled by the imperial court. The Xi clan could set up a copper mine in Juexi because they had special permission, as decreed by the imperial edict. They had to audit the accounts with the Ministry of Revenues and the Ministry of Works on a monthly basis, as well as assign supervisors for the specific purpose of supervision. But this errand was a lucrative one with plenty of potential to harvest ill-gotten gains, and the supervisors – all of whom were picked by the Ministry of Revenue – were often in cahoots with the Xi Clan. They colluded to falsify accounts for submission to the imperial court, which in turn helped the Xi Clan to conceal the copper and steel. All the flow and movement of copper and steel outside the Xi clan could be seen as collusion between the local officials and merchants. These coppers and steels were just like the military provisions that were stolen from within Dazhou in exchange for huge profits.

Yan Heru's operation of the pawnshops and pleasure houses in Dunzhou was not just meant to provide the various merchants from all over with a place to trade, but also to dispose of stolen goods on behalf of the local officials. It was here he had the goods converted into silver. Liu'er had not given a complete account when he led Shen Zechuan's squad into Dunzhou; that was, the need for a specific secret signal to enter Dunzhou was not just for the purpose of "playing by the rules".

Once Fei Sheng was done speaking, an uproar broke out on the other side of the door. All kinds of accents could be heard among the din as the merchants crowded and jostled noisily at the door. Fei Sheng closed the book, lifted the recently brewed tea in his hand, and blew at it as he savored it.



Before dinnertime, Chen Yang had given the kitchen instruction to prepare fish, and as a result, Shen Zechuan ate an extra half a bowl of rice. The remaining half of the fish ended up in Xiao Chiye's tummy. As long as the Second Young Master did not have to pick out the fish bones himself, he was more than happy to consume fish to his heart's content.

After their meal, both men stood under the eaves and listened as the merchants in the courtyard next door cursed and swore. Xiao Chiye rinsed

his mouth and said as he wiped it. “Isn’t there still a scorpion? Let’s call him over now. I have a question for him.”

Chen Yang left to summon him.

Xiao Chiye turned towards Shen Zechuan and asked, “You haven’t been calling for Ding Tao to stay by your side these days. Why is that?”

Shen Zechuan replied while looking at Xiao Chiye, “Lei Jingzhe is in Dunzhou. If there is no one keeping watch on Li Xiong, he might run out to look for Lei Jingzhe. Ding Tao is his playmate, so it’s only fitting for the two children to keep each other company.”

Xiao Chiye raised the teacup in his hand to take a sip. He appeared to have believed Shen Zechuan.

When Shen Zechuan tilted his head, he exposed part of his neck, which was decorated with faint traces of Xiao Chiye. Set against those marks, the jade earring appeared even whiter in contrast. Shen Zechuan did not continue the conversation on Ding Tao; instead, he said, “The arm guard was previously damaged. I’ll get another one made when we return to Cizhou this time.”

Thinking about the arm guard reminded Xiao Chiye of Hasen. He looked into the night and said, “It’s still usable after some repairs.”

Xiao Chiye had never mentioned Hasen to Shen Zechuan. That defeat had silenced him quickly, concealing away all those lofty sentiments and ambitions of his. Transporting supplies was truly exhausting, but *everyone* was exhausted in Libei. Even Lu Yizhi was patching up old coats all day to provide warm winter clothes for the battlegrounds. Xiao Fangxu had kept the blade that was Xiao Chiye back in its sheath, holding him back from putting all of his brilliance and talents on full display, but Xiao Chiye was glad to endure this hardship; he was willing to bide his time and wait for the right opportunity.

“I’ll get two made for you,” Shen Zechuan said seriously, “and engrave my name on them too.”

Xiao Chiye raised his arm and pinched Shen Zechuan’s chin. After a moment’s pause, he said, “Let’s not engrave any names on the arm guard.”

Blades and swords did not discriminate between friend or foe on the battlefield; injuries and deaths in war were inevitable. Xiao Chiye was unwilling to let Shen Zechuan risk his life out there with him, not even with his name. He wanted a good omen—he wanted Shen Zechuan to live to a ripe old age.



Hairigu was locked up together with Yan Heru. Both of them had already been starving for two days. He was still wounded, and his lips were parched when he was dragged to the veranda under the eaves. He braced himself, barely hanging in there.

Xiao Chiye squatted down and shrouded Hairigu under his shadow. Gu Jin immediately pressed Hairigu's head down and brushed aside his hair to reveal the scorpion tattoo on the side of his neck.

"Scorpion of Gedale." Xiao Chiye asked gravely, "What are you doing in Zhongbo?"

Hairigu's arms were tightly bound. He scuffed the ground, refusing to answer. Gu Jin gripped him by the throat and yanked his head up in Xiao Chiye's direction, then said coldly. "Answer the question."

Hairigu breathed heavily as he cast a swift glance at Shen Zechuan, who was standing by the door. But this one look infuriated Xiao Chiye, and Hairigu's head was almost instantaneously slammed down onto the ground. Sounds of him struggling rang out as he was pressed against the icy cold wooden floorboards.

"I'm not the enemy!" Hairigu could not break free. He felt as if he was being crushed by an iron arm. He did his utmost to look up, but all he could see was Xiao Chiye's boots. "Help me, Shen—"

Xiao Chiye was expressionless.

Gradually, Hairigu ran out of breath. His cheek scraped against the floor, and while he was on the verge of death, he shouted, "There is still a lot more I have to say!" He gasped hard for air. "Don't you all want to know about Bai Cha?!"

Xiao Chiye responded. "Before you learn to 'answer', we don't want to know a thing."

Hairigu felt the strength of the pressure being exerted on his nape. He strained to push his head back against that force. Sweat trickled down his temples as he choked out, "I, Zhongbo, cough, cough! To flee for my life!"

The two fingers on Shen Zechuan's right hand started to throb with faint pulses of pain. He strode a step closer and stopped next to Hairigu. "Three days ago, you told me that you called me a son of Gedale because Bai Cha split you people up."

Hairigu swallowed his saliva with difficulty and gasped heavily. "That's correct. It's because Bai Cha split us up... that's why you exist!"

Shen Zechuan frowned slightly.

Xiao Chiye let go abruptly, and Hairigu took in huge gulps of air. Gu Jin lifted him up; he was all covered in grime as he took a moment to take a breather before blurting out, “In the Biansha tongue, Gedale means ‘light’. This was the name Bai Cha gave it. Your mother’s story is a long one, so if you don’t mind, give me a drink of water first. I swear to you that every word I say is the truth.”

Credits: [Tea](#) for proofreading! <3



## CHAPTER 179 : WOMAN

What Lei Jingzhe had said about Bai Cha being a promiscuous whore in Gedale was, in fact, a lie, because Bai Cha had never set foot in Gedale. She was in full bloom for a very brief period of time, with half of her life spent in Duanzhou.

Thirty years ago, when the King of Wolves, Xiao Fangxu, was still herding horses at Luoxia Pass with a stalk of grass in his mouth, and when Amu'er was still an eagle slave along the banks of the Chashi River, Bai Cha had already been sold to Duanzhou. The thought that they could later go on to be capable of making waves and stirring up a storm several years later had never crossed the boys' minds, but the girl was already well aware of the kind of path she was about to embark on.

Cuiqing was Bai Cha's madam. She was in the prime of her life then, with twin peaks voluptuous and as fair as snow when she bent over. Even just by leaning against the door, she could command all the attention of the men passing by. A woman with a sharp, discerning eye for discovering gems, she picked Bai Cha out from a bunch of girls and raised her.

Back then, there was no Libei, and the north was dominated by the Hanshe Tribe. Two sides of Duanzhou were surrounded by enemies, and it was very close to the various Biansha Tribes, which lay east of Chashi River. It was here the bandits found a way to make money. They snatched women from decent families and conspired with the *yamen* to forge household registrations, then sold a portion of them to the pleasure houses in Duanzhou. The rest were taken to the other side of the Chashi River, where they were sold to the various tribes of Biansha.

It was tough-going for Cuiqing's business, and being crowded out by the competitors in the same trade irked her. She used half of her life savings to feed and train these girls. She invited a teacher to teach them the four arts of music, chess, calligraphy, and painting in the hope that she could hold her head high when they were ready to serve patrons. Of the girls, she was the most exacting of Bai Cha, and true to her expectations, Bai Cha did not let her down a few years later when she went on to become number one in the establishment.

"Do you know what kind of people had the highest number of deaths on the banks of the Chashi River at that time?" Hairigu waited for a moment, but no one responded to him, so he answered his own question. "It's the women."

When the bandits were at their most rampant, their numbers could hit nearly ten thousand. They wandered on both ends of the Chashi River, exchanging women for money. Even if the abducted women managed to escape by sheer luck, there was no way they could ever return home again.

“Later, the various tribes threw us to Gedale.” Hairigu said, “At the same time, they also cast away a few women who were... no longer needed. Sometimes, these women would walk back on foot, but it was tough for them to be accepted back by their parents.”

These women had lost the proof of their household registrations, which made it difficult for them to return to Dazhou. Even if they managed to, their parents and siblings would refuse to open the door and welcome them back. They were better off dead than alive. If they were by any chance pregnant, then they were guilty of the most heinous crimes. Not only would they be beaten up upon returning to their hometowns, but they would also even be burned to death.

Hairigu pursed his parched lips and said, “My mother was a girl from Dengzhou. She was sold by the bandits to the Qingshu Tribe, and from then on, she became a captive of the Qingshu Tribe’s leader. He not only forced himself on her, but even gave her to his younger brother before his death. This buddy, in turn, gave her to another man during a banquet. She was passed on from tribe to tribe in Biansha... eventually, she fled with me. We went through untold hardships to make it to Duanzhou. Happily enough, her registration was still intact, and the *yamen* still had her missing person case open. She was leered at... and verbally abused, but we eventually returned to Dengzhou, where her younger brother took us in.”

The cussing of the merchants next door diminished. It was already late at night now.

Sitting under the eaves, Hairigu drank up that bowl of water and continued, “My mother was very happy, and she did much to supplement the family income. We stayed there for half a month. Then, one night, she was once again loaded into a carriage and sold to Duanzhou.”

Hairigu’s mother was wounded. It was a wound unseen, a wound called “woman”. She received training in the pleasure quarters in Duanzhou. There was no longer another way out for her. Being alive proved to be torture. Hairigu could swear on his life that his mother was a harmless and kind woman.

“She met Bai Cha in Duanzhou.” Hairigu wanted to look at Shen Zechuan, but having learned his lesson, he looked at Xiao Chiye instead. “You would never have guessed that Bai Cha was the guardian spirit of the banks of the Chashi River. Cuiqing’s continuous expansion of the establishment buildings was, in fact, Bai Cha’s idea. Having gained the power to supplant Cuiqing, she set up a sufficiently strong network in Duanzhou to take in these women and children.”

Bai Cha did not fight alone. She merely took the lead in lifting that veil of curtain. They hid among the debauched scenes of carnal pleasure, contending with the unending night. This war was a soundless one fought in the quiet, one in which Bai Cha realized that acceptance was but a drop in the bucket.

“It was not easy to get registered in Duanzhou, and there was no garrison stationed outside the city. The sanctuary Bai Cha provided could not surmount all those obstacles either. She was a bird trapped in a vessel. Heaven would not help, but some people ought to pay the price.” Hairigu lifted his eyes and said slowly, “And so Bai Cha set her sights on the bandits. She wanted the bandits to be the first in line to be punished.”

“The Zhu clan was deeply involved with the bandits back then. Their backing was actually the reason the bandits were so lawless in Duanzhou. Lei Jingzhe’s mother was called Xiaoyinlei, who married into the Zhu clan of Duanzhou. She once tactfully persuaded her husband Zhu to send troops to suppress the bandits, but to no avail. That year, Shen Wei left Qudu, and the Provincial Administration Commissioner of Zhongbo evacuated. Shen Wei was conferred as the Prince of Jianxing, and Bai Cha decided to marry him.”

For many years after Shen Wei met Bai Cha, he could not be sure if that encounter had been intentional or coincidental. But Shen Wei’s heart was already enraptured. He even splurged on thousands of gold before eventually winning the heart of the beauty and taking her home in his embrace.

“After Bai Cha married Shen Wei, Xiaoyinlei gave birth to Lei Jingzhe. During Lei Jingzhe’s full month celebration feast, Bai Cha went to have a talk with Xiaoyinlei, who subsequently put in another suggestion to her husband Zhu. This time, she told him that Shen Wei would soon start a thorough investigation in Zhongbo, and if her husband still wanted to remain an official, he had to cut off ties with the bandits immediately and

make the first move against them. Not long afterward, Zhu submitted a document to Dunzhou and gave Shen Wei an account of every crime the bandits had committed in Dunzhou. He shoved all the blame onto the bandits and followed up with a request for Shen Wei to send troops over to wipe the bandits out.”

Shen Wei agreed. He needed to prove his usefulness to Qudu. So Tantai Long deployed his troops and joined forces with the Duanzhou garrison troops to fight their way across the Chashi River to destroy the bandits’ trading grounds with the various tribes of Biansha.

“But as I have mentioned earlier, the bandits had fallen in with the Liaoying tribe, and their remaining men temporarily retreated to the desert. The spies the bandits left behind in the Duanzhou *yamen* wanted to find out the reason behind Zhu’s betrayal, and after several attempts probing into it, they noticed Xiaoyinlei. Subsequently, she fell out of favor, and a mere few years later, she passed away from illness in the Zhu clan’s backyard. With that, Lei Jingzhe fell out of favor too.” At this point, Hairigu pointed at his neck. “That’s why I say that Lei Jingzhe is our brother. The first time he came to Gedale to look for us was to seek help. He probably knew what Xiaoyinlei had done, yet he still wished to become a bandit. He told me he hoped we could join forces to get back at Zhongbo. He wanted to establish a new military force here and proclaim ourselves kings in Dunzhou and Duanzhou. After I rejected him, I assumed he gave up on the thought, but instead, he threw in his lot with Amu’er.”

Shen Zechuan repeated the same question, “Why did you say Bai Cha split up Gedale?”

“After Amu’er rose to prominence, he sought to maximize his resources to the fullest. He asked us to join him as the iron hammer that would oppose the Libei Armored Cavalry. Because of this, Bai Cha changed her mind. She wanted to reclaim all of Gedale back into Dazhou. At her behest, we resisted the Hanshe tribe’s attempts to conscript us. We would no longer be their slaves. A group of us retreated to this side of the Chashi River to stand with Mother. Amu’er refused to give up, but back then, Gedale had already been torn in two.” Hairigu pointed at himself. “The Zhongbo faction led by me, and the Biansha faction led by Jida. Jida believed that there was no way to obtain land by relying solely on the strength of women, and we needed a place that could serve as a permanent residence. On the other hand, I did not think that the people of Biansha would be open to reason. We still had to

serve as slaves by following Amu'er, and they would never give us bastards any cattle or sheep. In the end, we went our separate ways."

But Bai Cha died.

Shen Zechuan recalled that particular dream, where Shen Wei's terrified face lay hidden behind the swinging bead curtains. He clenched his right hand again. This was the hand that killed Jida and Lei Jingzhe. He swiftly weaved a web in his mind, connecting the dots he had yet to completely figure out.

"Once Bai Cha was killed, Gedale was as good as Amu'er's."

Shen Zechuan looked back upon all that had happened in Qudu in the beginning.

"And this, was the real prelude to the defeat of the Zhongbo troops."

Special thanks to [Alex](#) for sparing brain cells and [Tea](#) for proofreading!  
<3



## CHAPTER 180 SHEN WEI

It all dated back to the time during the reign of Emperor Guangcheng.

Shen Zechuan was of the opinion that the resurgence of Yongyi brought about by Emperor Guangcheng had been Dazhou's last hope. Although it had been short-lived, it had brought on an emerging wave of countless talents. The reign of Yongyi was an era of the rise of wise and virtuous men. It was a period that signaled the revival of Dazhou.

At that time, Qudu was ruled by a strong, decisive emperor who was at the peak of health. His civil officials included Qi Huilian and Hai Liangyi, and his military generals counted Qi Shiyu and Xiao Fangxu among the lot. These virtuous men of superior capabilities had all followed a sovereign. All of them possessed the same dream, and the resurgence during the reign of Yongyi was a ray of light, a glory, these people jointly created.

Amu'er, who was once an eagle slave, stood on the banks of the Chashi River and gazed across the turbulent river, where the Dazhou he saw was an impregnable behemoth. The Twelve Tribes of Biansha were helpless when faced against such a Dazhou. Their strongest Hanshe Tribe was repeatedly beaten back by Xiao Fangxu in the north. Once winter came around, cattle and sheep that had frozen to death were a common sight everywhere.

At first, Amu'er led the Liaoying Tribe to leave the banks of the Chashi River just to find a land where they could survive. His brothers all starved to death in the snowstorm. As the Liaoying Tribe was small and weak, Amu'er had no choice but to lead his tribe to live a vagrant life in the desert. In the process of roaming, he saw the mutually destructive infighting among the Twelve Tribes of Biansha. The Huiyan Tribe, a small and weak tribe just like the Liaoying Tribe, could not survive being trampled upon by the strong tribes, and so they left the desert and defected to Xiao Fangxu. But Amu'er had enough of shackles and fetters. He did not believe that the saker falcons the Heaven bestowed upon them were born to be slaves. He did not want the mercy of the strong at all. He only wanted to stand on his feet.

Amu'er rose to power in the desert. He was still an eagle slave when he defeated Sude of the Hanshe Tribe and married Sude's younger sister, Surina. The next time Amu'er faced up against Dazhou again, his opponent was Xiao Fangxu. Amu'er came to the realization that the Twelve Tribes of Biansha had to be united like Dazhou. He had to become the ruler of the

desert and grow to be as powerful as Emperor Guangcheng, so he started to swallow up the other tribes.

But the Libei Armored Cavalry had military supplies and gears, and the construction of their iron wall proved to be an impregnable defense that prevented Amu'er from penetrating deeper into the territory. In all those times he crossed swords with Xiao Fangxu, he discovered that Emperor Guangcheng was already old, and Dazhou was no longer as vibrant and flourishing as it had been a few years ago. It dawned on him that there was more than this one way to defeat Dazhou. Gedale proved to be an opportunity when he set his eyes back on the banks of the Chashi River, and Amu'er decided to use the scorpions of Gedale to dismantle Dazhou's defenses.

Bai Cha was the immovable force that stood in Amu'er's way in Gedale.

But exactly what kind of method did Amu'er employ to kill Bai Cha?

"Why do you people still want to live in Gedale?" Xiao Chiye propped up his arm. "Given that Bai Cha had set up a safe haven in Duanzhou."

"Because of the implementation of the census registers."<sup>3</sup> Shen Zechuan thought of Qi Huilian. "This was a brick wall."

"That's right. The majority of the women didn't have a household registration. During the times when Zhu colluded with the bandits, they reported many deaths in the name lists they sent to Qudu in order to cancel these women's records. Even if a small number of the women's families were still around, they would end up being sold away by their brothers at home, just like my mother." Hairigu felt a little downcast. "The courtesans led by Bai Cha were limited in their power, and to resolve the issue of the household registration, the majority of them married the lesser functionaries of the Duanzhou *yamen*. Bai Cha partitioned an area in the pleasure quarter as our residence and raised the children there. But as the number of people increased, it became extremely tough to hide ourselves. The hardest part was children like me, whose appearances were so conspicuous that it was of no use even if we were to get the household registration papers. Unable to see the light in Duanzhou, we lived off the women's savings in the backyard of the courtesans' quarters. Later, the bandits were suppressed, and Gedale gained a period of peace. It was at that time we returned to Gedale. When Amu'er was rallying the scorpions together, he promised to give us land, as well as cattle and sheep. Jida believed him. I couldn't stand up to the pursuit



of the Biansha Cavalry, so I could only return here once more. After Bai Cha's death, the courtesans continued to help us, but their strength was no longer what it had once been. I led my people to live on the outskirts of Duanzhou. A few years later, Amu'er launched a surprise attack at the Chashi River's line of defense, and Zhongbo no longer came under the jurisdiction of the *yamen*. That was the time I entered Zhongbo, where I lived until now."

Hairigu's mouth was parched from all that talking. Chen Yang poured him another bowl of water. Hairigu said his thanks in a small voice and held up the bowl with both hands to drink it all up.

"The timing is just right." Xiao Chiye looked at Shen Zechuan.

"Amu'er got his hands on the scorpions after Bai Cha's death and had them divided into black and white. The white scorpions passed him information from within Dazhou, and the military defense map was just one of them. During the reign of Xiande, Juexi was hit with a calamity, and Hai Liangyi traced the account books and called for Hua Siqian to account for it. To make up for the state treasury's deficit, Hua Siqian asked the officials from the noble clans who were in collusion with him for money."

"He didn't get it." Shen Zechuan said with certainty. "Hua Siqian resold the Hua clan's fields and houses to Xi Hongxuan during the third year of the reign of Xiande precisely because he did not get the money he wanted from the noble clan officials. But the deficit was too huge a sum, and the Hua clan had no way of making up for it."

"Then the Zhongbo troops' defeat happened." Xiao Chiye frowned.

The route taken by the Biansha Cavalry in carrying out their surprise assault was deeply ingrained in Xiao Chiye's memory. They once analyzed it back at the Plum Blossom Residence. The destination of the Biansha Cavalry back then had been Juexi. If there were white scorpions hiding among the noble clans, Amu'er should have known that Juexi was already out of food at that time.

Xiao Chiye silently drew a couple of strokes on the ground. After a moment's pause, he said, "Juexi isn't easy to defend. It was a risk for Amu'er's cavalry to invade deep into Dazhou. The strength of the Biansha Cavalry of that time was their use of resources obtained from the battles to sustain themselves in the war;<sup>4</sup> they were incapable of defending the cities. If their goal was still Juexi, then this route is a straight path to their own demise. They would end up facing a three-way siege in Juexi."

“What if the officials from the noble clans who were involved in the military defeat case wanted Amu’er dead?” Shen Zechuan covered up the military sketch Xiao Chiye drew and said out of the blue, “There was no one to hold them in check, and Amu’er couldn’t control them. They wanted to treat Amu’er like a dog the same way they did Shen Wei. They could have lured Amu’er deeper into the territory then taken him out with the combined power of three armies. This would have completely turned the case of military defeat into a case of Shen Wei’s collusion with the enemy.”

“That would mean that the noble clans were not aware of the existence of the white scorpions.” Enlightened, Xiao Chiye tossed away the branch, “They thought they could manipulate Amu’er.”

Both parties had their own ulterior motives, and each had their own goals in this game. Perhaps Amu’er had pretended to be a fool from Biansha; he did not reveal the card up his sleeve, and the noble clans did not even have a clue that there were white scorpions among them. Amu’er seized the opportunity and took advantage of the situation to ambush Zhongbo. It was as he had originally planned. What he desired was not one instance of victory, but to completely bring about Dazhou’s collapse from within.

He succeeded.

The Zhongbo troops’ defeat was a crucial node that signified the absolute end of the resurgence during the Yongyi reign. Due to the Zhongbo troops’ defeat, Dazhou underwent a radical change internally, starting from the fourth year of the reign of Xiande. Hai Liangyi thus embarked on the path of openly opposing the noble clans. Together with Xue Xiuzhuo and the others, he launched an investigation into Hua Siqian for as long as six years. Libei was forced to send in Xiao Chiye as a hostage, thereby sowing the seed for the insurgency that would later go on to occur. The Empress Dowager also cleared out the imperial court during the reign of Emperor Guangcheng. With everyone deeply enmired in internal strife, the Zhongbo troops’ defeat became the pebble Amu’er used to test the path ahead. Perhaps he had not expected Dazhou’s collapse to come about this soon, but this pebble hit right on target—it was the straw that broke the camel’s back.

“We thought Shen Wei killed Bai Cha.” Hairigu piped up again in the solemn atmosphere. “He was possibly influenced by the remaining bandits,

who poisoned his mind until he saw Bai Cha as a spy from Biansha.”

Shen Zechuan lowered his gaze to stare at his right hand in contemplation.

“If that’s the case,” Xiao Chiye said, “Shen Wei didn’t collude with the enemy. Then, all his actions during the reign of Xiande make no sense.”

There was no scouring Shen Wei’s guilt clean, because he cowered back from battle and fled, then collaborated with his lawful son, Shen Zhouji, to hold a banquet to strangle Tantai Long, who advocated war, to death. He did not only retreat, but also asked the military officers and generals to do so along with him. The six prefectures had been handed over on a silver platter, and this was what Xiao Chiye despised most about Shen Wei.

Why did Xiao Chiye try every means possible to take the remaining soldiers from the Zhongbo garrison troops under his command when he later took over the Imperial Army? Precisely because it was too humiliating. These soldiers suffered the infamy of cowering away from battles. Forty thousand people died in the Chashi Sinkhole, yet they had no chance to fight back. It was with the thought of setting the Zhongbo soldiers led by Tantai Hu back into Zhongbo one day that Xiao Chiye took to heart what Tantai Hu had said that day—*“the humiliation of our nation has yet to be redressed, and the feuds of our families have yet to be avenged”*.

He who is owned the debt shall collect it himself.

“Think about it the other way around.” Shen Wei’s face repeatedly appeared in Shen Zechuan’s mind. He muttered, “It will make sense once it’s reversed.”

Hairigu did not understand what he meant.

The voices from the merchants next door had already quietened down. In the momentary silence under the cold, forbidding moonlight in the courtyard, Xiao Chiye raised his hands to drape the cloak over Shen Zechuan’s shoulders.

“Since the noble clans did not know of the existence of the white scorpions, then they could only rely on their own abilities to contact Amu’er.” Shen Zechuan gathered his cloak around him. “And there are only three places where they could reach Amu’er—Libei, the Bianjun Commandery, and Duanzhou. I once interrogated Ji Lei back in Qudu, and he said that Shen Wei was sent to Zhongbo because the noble clans wanted him to intercept and sever the connections between Libei and Qidong.

Perhaps he wasn't just sent there to play watchdog, but also to get in touch with the various tribes of Biansha on behalf of the noble clans."

Hairigu's blood ran cold as he said, "Then wouldn't that mean he married Bai Cha as a test?"

Shen Zechuan swiftly organized his line of thought and said in a clear, methodical manner, "Zhu gave the bandits free access in and out of Duanzhou as they pleased. Even the women of Dengzhou suffered greatly because of it, so it wouldn't stand to reason for there to be fewer victims in Dunzhou. Dunzhou and Duanzhou are so close to each other. It was impossible for Tantai Long to be in the dark about the bandits' selling of the women. Ever since I heard Hairigu mention Zhu's forging of the household registrations, I've been harboring a guess. Zhu was merely a minor prefect at the frontier; how could he have the ability to alter the census registers far away in Qudu? Zhu had backers, and these people were not men Tantai Long could lay his hands on. Shen Wei came to Zhongbo to conspire with Zhu, and he went to Duanzhou to investigate the network Bai Cha had concealed."

This was also the part that had baffled Shen Zechuan earlier. If Bai Cha had been able to pull the wool over Shen Wei's eyes, then it was implausible how the bandits in Dunzhou had been able to find out and trace it to her so easily. She married Shen Wei to put an end to the banditry, and Shen Wei's deployment of troops to eradicate the bandits had been to test Bai Cha.

Before his death, Ji Lei had mentioned one thing.

Shen Wei acted on the Empress Dowager's orders and colluded with Ji Lei to fabricate the Eastern Palace rebellion case. They killed the crown prince at Zhao Zui Temple. Not long afterward, Shen Wei noticed the presence of spies all around his residence, and there were always people moving around on the roof. He could not sleep at night because of this, thinking that Empress Dowager wanted to get rid of him after he had outlived his usefulness. So he bribed Pan Rugui with a huge sum of money and was subsequently sent to Zhongbo.

"Shen Wei was afraid of death. He was already suspecting that the noble clans had treated him as a useless pawn to be discarded. For this reason, he went to Zhongbo to seek a way out for himself in addition to helping the noble clans get in touch with the various tribes of Biansha. He wavered between the noble clans and Biansha, until Amu'er appeared. "

Shen Zechuan's eyes were dark.  
"Shen Wei was the scorpion."

Credits: thank you [Tea](#) for proofreading! <3

## CHAPTER 181: CE'AN

Shen Wei and Bai Cha were husband and wife for quite several years. They were strange bedfellows who shared the same bed but nursed different dreams and worked for different ends. At the same time, they were guessing who the other person really was. In those years, Shen Wei cautioned himself not to feel compassion. They had a son, and Bai Cha decided on “Zechuan” from among the exquisite gems of names. They did as customs dictated and held a banquet, where not the slightest trace of killing intent could be found in their eyes when they looked at each other. It was as if they were really in love.

Shen Wei was a child of common birth born to a concubine. He endured plenty in the past, but he eventually walked out of it to become the noble clans' blade. He thought he was sharp enough, and to prove his loyalty, he even dared to kill the crown prince. But he soon discovered the futility of it, for he was destined to be cast aside once again. The noble clans' officials who were in power scorned him. He was just a nobody struggling on the other end of the natural chasm between them.

Shen Wei sometimes sat in the courtyard and watched Bai Cha play with their son under the eaves, and he would mistakenly think of themselves as a perfect match made in heaven living in conjugal bliss. There was a brief period when Shen Wei lost himself in the thought, because the expression in Bai Cha's eyes was too sincere. So sincere, he thought he was the man Bai Cha admired and adored the most when she fixed that gaze upon him.

But these were all shadows of the past, fleeting and ephemeral.

Shen Wei would always acknowledge the fact that he was a scum. Shen Wei did not want to be a dog for the rest of his life, and Bai Cha was one of the chains. When Shen Wei was once again faced with the choices presented to him as he stood before the fork in the road in front of him, he hesitated for only a moment before ending her.

He was a blade.

Who eventually stabbed himself bloody.

Shen Zechuan resembled Bai Cha so much that Shen Wei only wanted to kill him. They were not father and son; they were a testimony of an insignificant relationship. The incriminating handle against Shen Wei was in Shen Zechuan's eyes, and this made Shen Zechuan's gaze on him too

much for Shen Wei to bear. But Shen Wei did not kill off Shen Zechuan, even though the thought of throwing Shen Zechuan to the pack of wolves had crossed his mind countless times.

Shen Zechuan was the son of Shen Wei and Bai Cha. He had two strains of cold, detached blood coursing through his veins. For this, Shen Wei drank to his heart's content. He kept this son, then tossed this son out. He taught Shen Zechuan nothing. This was his revenge.

Revenge against Bai Cha, and against Shen Wei himself.

"But..." Chen Yang broke the silence and asked carefully, "If Shen Wei became a scorpion before the military defeat, then why would he set himself on fire? He had already accomplished his mission when the Biansha Cavalry set foot in Dunzhou. His only chance of survival was to continue to follow Amu'er east."

Shen Zechuan could not figure out why. This was also why he did not believe Ji Lei at first. He did not have the slightest bit of a clue as he did not understand Shen Wei. He could only say, "I can't figure it out. If the Prince of Jianxing's manor was still standing, we could perhaps find some clues from it."

"How many people do you have?" Xiao Chiye asked Hairigu.

"I can't tell..." On seeing the expression in Xiao Chiye's eyes, Hairigu deflated and said, "Eight hundred. Only eight hundred. There were initially over a thousand those few years, but it isn't easy to spend life in hiding all over. Many of them left one after another."

"You hijacked Lei Jingzhe's military supplies and gears before." Shen Zechuan said, "But you sent them back."

With the attention of the guards on him, Hairigu slowly raised his hands and said innocently, "I have no land. I live in a small alley in Dunzhou. These military gears are too heavy for me to hide them. We only have eight hundred people."

But this wasn't what the eight hundred of you thought when you hijacked the military supplies, Gu Jin thought.

"My mother said before," Hairigu said in all seriousness, "that things must always be returned to their rightful owner. These military gears didn't belong to me to begin with."

Showing no mercy, Xiao Chiye casually exposed Hairigu. "Might as well say that things you have no idea how to use must be returned to their rightful owner."

Hairigu put on an “*that’s exactly it*” expression.

“What did Yan Heru give you to make you go all out for him like this?” As soon as Shen Zechuan tilted his head, Xiao Chiye knew he was going to start negotiations.

Hairigu said in all sincerity, “He’s good-looking.”

Shen Zechuan found that this Biansha scorpion was actually pretty good at putting on a mask. He appeared to be rather gullible and easily deceived, but in truth, he was a sly one.

Shen Zechuan asked, “What do you want by throwing in your lot with me?”

“Some promises.” Hairigu said. “Having been on the receiving end of Bai Cha’s kindness, I’m willing to trust you. For this reason...”

“I’ll give you one more chance.” Shen Zechuan held up his index finger and spoke in what could be said to be a gentle manner.

After a moment of silence, Hairigu honestly answered, “I want land, a piece of land that people like me can call ours.”

“What are you going to give me in exchange?” Shen Zechuan drawled. “I’m not lacking these eight hundred people of yours.”

“We are all people your mother left behind.” Hairigu said, “You can regard us as elite soldiers.”

“Bai Cha is Bai Cha.” Shen Zechuan said, “I’ve never shown you and your people any kindness.”

“Feelings can always be fostered.” Having said that, Hairigu raised his hands again and said solemnly to Xiao Chiye. “I’m talking about feelings of gratitude. You’re Bai Cha’s son. For this reason alone, I’m willing to put myself at your disposal.”

“If I were Yan Heru,” Shen Zechuan said with biting sarcasm, “I’d believe it.”

Hairigu contended with Lei Jingzhe in Dunzhou using the financial assistance Yan Heru rendered him. The reason he could remain alive was because he was smart enough, and smart people rarely brought old ties into the equation; they had their priorities all clearly worked out. If Dunzhou had not fallen into Shen Zechuan’s hands this time, Hairigu would never have remembered Bai Cha—the person he had wanted to save on Fuxian Peak was Yan Heru.

Xiao Chiye said with heartfelt sincerity, “My wife is so intelligent.”



Hairigu could only switch tactics. “You killed Lei Jingzhe and foiled Amu’er’s deployment in Zhongbo. He will not give up on Zhongbo easily. Soon, the cavalry will converge outside the city of Duanzhou. You have to quickly build up the city walls here. But Dunzhou has no garrison troops, so you can only deploy a portion from the Cizhou garrison troops here. However, Cizhou is also under threat from Qudu. Therefore, you lack people—you lack troops.”

“I do lack troops, but I have no lack of money.” Shen Zechuan said, “My men will be stationed in Dunzhou. They will establish a new order here and swiftly reorganize the garrison troops.”

“Can regular troops resist the elite forces of Biansha?” Hairigu asked, “Perhaps your... husband has a better understanding.”

A dark light suddenly flashed in Xiao Chiye’s eyes, but he very naturally continued the conversation, “Hasen is leading the elite forces of Biansha on the battlefield in the north, and the forces in the south have to take on Qi Zhuyin. Amu’er doesn’t have any remaining elite forces to deploy to Zhongbo.”

“That is merely a diversionary tactic.” Hairigu responded with certainty. “It’s not an easy fight on the southern front. Tianfei Watchtower and Suotian Pass have Qidong securely surrounded. Qi Zhuyin can deploy 120,000 troops from the Bianjun Commandery to fight the Biansha Cavalry. As long as Qi Zhuyin herself doesn’t set foot out of Bianjun, there is no way the cavalry will be able to break through her defenses. Amu’er’s stretching of the battle line this far is simply a ploy to confuse the Libei Cavalry. His goal is Zhongbo.”

That was right; this was Xiao Chiye’s guess too.

Amu’er established a unit of scorpions, yet he hid them here without immediately putting them to use on the northern battlefield; this was his scheme to catch his foes off guard. Lei Jingzhe’s infiltration into Dunzhou was a ploy to occupy the area without any noise, as well as to allow the Biansha Cavalry to swiftly ambush the Libei camps down south.

Hasen would be swapped over.

Xiao Chiye guessed.

Hasen’s departure from the battlegrounds in Libei would imply that the scorpion unit had taken over his position. The Libei Cavalry must think of a way to resist the iron hammers before this happened. Simultaneously, Shen

Zechuan had to establish Zhongbo's defenses before then, or they would all fall prey to the onslaught of attacks by Biansha.

"Before I leave Dunzhou, I want to meet your eight hundred men."  
Shen Zechuan ended the night's discussion. "Then we'll discuss the other matters."



Shen Zechuan rested his head against Xiao Chiye's chest amidst the cool night breeze. The medicine on his right hand had been changed. Xiao Chiye had bandaged it very carefully, and before they retired to bed, he had taken Shen Zechuan's wrist into his grasp.

Neither of them spoke; it was as though they had both fallen asleep.

Xiao Chiye stroked the back of Shen Zechuan's head, staring at the ceiling as he mulled over matters.

Shen Zechuan opened his eyes. "The profits Yan Heru earned from grains in Zhongbo are money made off the misery of others. We can get him to make reparations with the warm winter clothes that Libei is lacking this time."

"Are you planning to squeeze him dry?" Xiao Chiye released his hand to cup Shen Zechuan's cheeks. He whispered, "Lanzhou."

"The merchant's goods this batch can be transported over to the mutual market in the winter to be traded with the Huiyan tribe." Shen Zechuan gazed at Xiao Chiye, who was close within his reach. "Once winter comes, the trade route will be fully opened up."

"Then it looks like I'll have to wait until next year to get married to you." Xiao Chiye laughed.

"That's too long," Shen Zechuan replied softly. "I'll ask the Prince of Libei for your hand in marriage during the spring festival<sup>5</sup> this year."

They silently shared a kiss. Shen Zechuan sank into the crook of Xiao Chiye's arms, and Xiao Chiye turned over and lowered his head to press against him. Enveloped by that gaze of his, Shen Zechuan reached out with his fingers to caress Xiao Chiye's cheek.

With the case of the Zhongbo troops' defeat unraveled, the primary issue Shen Zechuan faced was not only the threat of the cavalry from the east, but also how he should naturally progress to stand on his own feet under the stain of Shen Wei's name. As long as it was Shen Zechuan's banner they were flying under, the Zhongbo troops' defeat would remain a shackle.

“During my time in Duanzhou, I thought that if there ever came a day when I grew up, I would change my family name and take on *shifu*’s family name to become a Ji. Then I’d be a squad commander in Duanzhou, just like my big brother.” Shen Zechuan glided his fingers along gently; he was like the imprisoned moonlight as he lay here in Xiao Chiye’s arms. “But then, while at Zhao Zui Temple, I came to the realization that I would still be Shen Wei’s son even if I were to change my family name.”

With a face that bore a striking resemblance to Bai Cha, all traces of Shen Wei seemed to have been erased by his mother. But those traces lay concealed deep within him, manifesting into a different kind of insanity. If Shen Zechuan had not met Qi Huilian after crawling out of Chashi Sinkhole, perhaps he would be even more deranged. What his teacher had imparted to him was not only the Confucian classics; he had also bestowed upon him “Lanzhou”. Lanzhou had stepped out of Shen Wei’s shadow—this was a part of him that genuinely belonged to Shen Zechuan alone. This part allowed him to retain his sanity, preventing him from being destroyed and incinerated in all his battles with the nightmares of the Chashi Sinkhole. It was precisely because of this that Xiao Chiye could succeed in keeping Shen Zechuan under lock and become Shen Zechuan’s sheath.

“All I wanted to do as a child was to fly.” Xiao Chiye flicked a finger at Shen Zechuan’s forehead. “I wondered why Xiao Fangxu was my old man. He kept lifting us and tossing us into the air all day long, and he was so tall and so strong to boot.”

Shen Zechuan started to laugh.

“They all say that I resemble my old man.” Xiao Chiye looked at Shen Zechuan, “When I was sent to Qudu, I thought it was a punishment, because I had once been complacent over it. There in Qudu, I wanted to strip off the part of me that belonged to Libei. I didn’t tell anyone this, but I hated the courtesy name ‘Ce’an’ then, for it linked with ‘Chiye’ to fetter my talons and fangs. I drank the best of wines with Li Jianheng, yet I couldn’t sleep at night. Even with my eyes open, thoughts of the Hongyan Mountains would still haunt me.”

That was a sort of restless torture. Xiao Chiye did not even know who he should hate during that period of time. He knew that his father and brother were not at fault—he could only hate himself. When Shen Zechuan looked at Xiao Chiye, he saw the latter as an untouchable reflection far beyond his reach. Yet when Xiao Chiye looked at Shen Zechuan, he felt

him to be an obtainable mirage of the moon in the water that lay right at his fingertips. Only Shen Zechuan understood his pain. Those eyes of his alleviated the frustration that taunted him day in and day out. He had already been wanting to possess Shen Zechuan back then.

“You may be Shen Wei’s son,” Xiao Chiye whispered, “but you’re mine.”

Credits: thank you [Tea](#) for proofreading! <3

## CHAPTER 182: QUAIL

The merchants were locked up in the courtyard for two days. It was one thing to go without food and water, but it was the lack of latrines and chamber pots that proved to be the most intolerable. They could not hold it in any longer and thought of climbing over the wall to get out. As it turned out, Fei Sheng was prepared for this and had his men stand guard at the top of the wall to douse them in the face with several buckets of cold water, subsequently causing an uproar to break out in the courtyard.

“The fuck is this?! What’s wrong with you?! You nearly made me piss my pants!”

Fei Sheng had been sitting until his buttocks were aching. He stood up and took several steps before saying, “Piss, huh. You people are the one reeking of it, anyway. Not my problem.”

The merchants all held up their pants, their legs shaking from the urgency of their needs. The man who took the lead earlier clung to the crack in the door and put aside his pride to plead, “My good sir, all men surely have to answer the call of nature! Aren’t you extorting a confession by doing this?!”

Fei Sheng exclaimed in astonishment and moved closer to the side of the door, “What nonsense are you spouting? I didn’t even touch a single finger of yours!”

This man pressed his legs together and bent over at the waist. “Yes, yes, yes. But you still have to let us use the latrine somehow!”

Fei Sheng said with a hypocritical smile, “I’ve already made it clear to you people. You want to come out, sure, but first write down the names of the officials who supplied you with the goods.”

The merchants were not natives of Zhongbo, and they still had to return to their hometowns after conducting the business, so how would they be willing to offend the local officials? When they refused to write, Fei Sheng continued to keep the door sealed. Out of options, they could only put up with the shame and pull down their pants to relieve themselves. It was still fine at the start, but it became unbearable later as the foul stench of urine permeated the courtyard. It was so overwhelming that they all covered their noses, and after two days, they finally caved in and confessed it all.

Proud of his success, Fei Sheng handed the name list to Shen Zechuan, who wanted this list to investigate if there were any white scorpions among

these local officials. With the transportation of such a large batch of goods east, they would have inevitably left a trail behind.



Yan Heru, having been starved into obedience, was now sitting cross-legged looking all well-behaved as he stood trial. He waited, but seeing as Shen Zechuan was still maintaining his silence, he asked, “Your lordship, aren’t you going to interrogate me?”

Shen Zechuan set the list before Yan Heru and said, “All the names in here are your acquaintances, right?”

“I’m a businessman, and businessmen like me have nothing whatsoever to do with the *yamen*.” Yan Heru tilted his head and finished looking through the name list. “They are just some drinking buddies.”

“Hezhou is the most convenient for you to do business if you so wish, but you set up a small mutual trade market in Dunzhou and brought the merchants from all over the world here together.” Having slept well last night, Shen Zechuan was feeling so refreshed this morning that he did not even lose patience beating around the bush with Yan Heru. “That’s quite something you’re up to.”

Yan Heru blinked his eyes and said, “Even if I am up to something, they are all small tricks employed in the business world. Your lordship is truly the one who is circumspect and farsighted. Let’s not even bring up Huaizhou, Cizhou, and Chazhou, because it makes me green-eyed with envy just to mention them. Now that Dunzhou is under your control, I shall make my livelihood under you. I’m willing and happy to be your younger brother.”

“Why don’t you make it clear first before talking about becoming sworn brothers?” Shen Zechuan said. “These local officials embezzled official goods and handed them to the merchants to be transported here, where they then sold the goods to the various Biansha Tribes through you and used this as an opportunity to have the goods converted into money. You’re truly a righteous one to be leading a bunch of people into making their fortune off state wealth.”

“You are so smart.” Yan Heru actually started to account for his actions with his hands behind his back. “That’s right; that’s exactly the case. It’s through the tea trade that my Yan clan made its fortune. We had to spend mountains of silvers on bribing the local officials in order to find a means of subsistence under the Xi clan, but we could never have enough to fill this

bottomless pit. These rats in charge of the local copper and iron mines had lucrative jobs where they could line their pockets to the brim. They only had to hold out their hands, and they would be able to fish up tens of thousands of silver. Anyone else would be tempted by this, so I decided I might as well join them in this endeavor.”

Yan Heru showed no sign of fear as he spoke to this point. All the business he had successively engaged in was all capital crimes punishable by execution if he had been reported to the authorities, but he had still gone ahead with them, and he had even become rather seasoned at it.

“But I’m not the one who is providing Amu’er with copper and iron,” Yan Heru bared his canine tooth and smiled at Shen Zechuan. “Your Lordship’s interrogation of me today is because you’ve found out that these are all but small batches of goods that are completely incapable of meeting the requirements for the scorpions’ equipment, right?”

Shen Zechuan did not respond.

“All the transactions that pass through my hands are recorded in black and white. Your Lordship, having conducted your investigation to this date, should have already known that I’m telling the truth.” Tired from sitting cross-legged, Yan Heru shifted a couple of times. “I’ll have you know that the person who went to Zhongbo at the very start to deal in grain was Xi Hongxuan.”

After Xi Hongxuan’s death, all the Xi clan’s shops fell into Shen Zechuan’s hands. The reason why he ordered Ge Qingqing to stay still in Juexi was to keep a tight watch on Xi Dan. He understood the Xi clan’s current accounts like the back of his hand, and he was aware that Xi Hongxuan was the one dealing in grains in Zhongbo after the fourth year of Xiande, although it was directly resold to the Yan clan by the fifth year of Xiande. But despite turning over the Xi clan’s accounts, Shen Zechuan could not find any traces of copper and iron trading between Xi Hongxuan and the various tribes of Biansha.

“Whether it was before or after the troops’ defeat, Zhongbo is the only place where you can transport goods to Amu’er.” Yan Heru said, “Even though Zhongbo lost the ability to defend itself after the fourth year of Xiande, Amu’er never made another move to invade again. By now, it should have already dawned on Your Lordship why this was the case, right?”

To transport goods.

After the fourth year of Xiande, not a single one of the provincial administration commissioners deployed to Zhongbo from Qudu lasted for long. Replacements were a frequent occurrence. Initially, Shen Zechuan had thought that it was due to the severity of the banditry, but upon arrival in Zhongbo, he quickly learned that this was not the case. At the very least, Lei Jingzhe had not been that influential at the beginning of the fourth year of Xiande. Afterward, he thought about how thorough Hai Liangyi had been in transferring Jiang Qingshan over to Qudu after he became the Grand Secretary. He had Jiang Qingshan reside temporarily in Qudu while waiting for the confirmation of his appointment then, and he had done it all so that he could send Jiang Qingshan down to Zhongbo to change and turn the situation there around.

“I truly want to fraternize with Your Lordship.” Yan Heru said, “Come on, let’s do this together.”

“Hezhou was still transporting grains to Qudu last year.” Shen Zechuan was in no hurry to answer. He looked at Yan Heru. “You have money and grain. Why aren’t you throwing in your lot with Xue Xiuzhuo? He is working in collaboration with an equally powerful ally in Juexi—Jiang Qingshan. No reason for him to let you do as you please.”

Yan Heru curbed his smile and said, “I want to too, but this man only wants my head.”

Shen Zechuan asked, “Xue Xiuzhuo is checking your accounts?”

“Not just mine, he’s also looking into the Xi clan’s accounts.” Yan Heru said. “This man is a fearsome one. He can’t tolerate corruption, and he particularly doesn’t care about sentimental ties at all.”

Yan Heru was loath to deal with people like Xue Xiuzhou for a very simple reason—he was afraid of Xue Xiuzhuo. Back in the reign of Xiande when Xue Xiuzhuo was still serving as the Chief Supervising Secretary in the Ministry of Revenue, Yan Heru had attempted to bribe Xue Xiuzhuo. However, it proved futile. Not only did it not work, Xue Xiuzhou also almost traced it back to Yan Heru’s shops at that time.

The way in which Yan Heru formed his alliances was very simple, and that was, everyone transgressed together, giving the others a hold over himself at the same time he had a hold over the others.

Shen Zechuan did not continue Yan Heru’s thread of conversation.

On seeing this, Yan Heru hurriedly craned his neck and said, “Do we have a deal? Let us draft up the rules and regulations, alright? Our



respective shares in the mutual trade market's business in Huaizhou, Cizhou, Chazhou, and Libei in the future, along with the finer details of the business operations are all open to negotiations. I can also deliver grains to Libei."

"The business aspect is easy to work out. As long as you can make up for the remaining winter clothes for the Libei Armored Cavalry before the tenth month," Shen Zechuan set the lid over the teacup. "Hezhou has to assume the responsibility of supplying the granaries in Chazhou and Dunzhou at the start of spring next year."

"Can you establish yourself as king by the beginning of spring next year? You can't. In that case, my grains in Hezhou are still subject to requisition by Qudu, and I'll have to transport them to Qidong as military provisions." The internal abacus in Yan Heru's mind was clicking away at high speed as he made his calculations. "Qi Zhuyin is the commander-in-chief of the Qidong Five Commanderies, and she's just over the banks of Hezhou. I don't have the troops to obstruct her. When the time comes and she doesn't receive the provisions as scheduled, she will come after me first and foremost. Never mind if it's just me, but if it implicates Your Lordship, then Cizhou will be beset with a crisis. "

Shen Zechuan was well-aware that Yan Heru had his own schemes in mind, and so he asked, "So, your point is?"

Yan Heru's eyes lit up. "How about this? When spring comes next year, the supply to the granaries of Chazhou and Dunzhou will be jointly borne by Hezhou and Cizhou. I'll take the lion's share. Isn't that honorable enough of me? As for the portion of provisions owed to Qidong, I'll personally head to Baimazhou via the water routes on the west side to purchase them. I have old acquaintances there. But the consumption of money to bribe my way through the checkpoints is too high. I have to figure out a way to make up for it over the winter. How about Your Lordship waive the tariffs for the merchants who have registered at the Yan clan's pawnshop and let them trade what they've amassed on hand at the mutual market in Libei? The Huiyan tribe has tea, which I can make a killing with if I buy and resell it at Yongyi Harbor."

Having drunk his fill of tea, Shen Zechuan rose to his feet and made to leave without so much another word.

"Aye." Yan Heru followed suit and said, "This won't do either? Your Lordship, you're really a little stingy! Even if you want to shear my wool,

you still have to let me fill up my tummy first.”

Shen Zechuan strode out of the door. It just so happened that Xiao Chiye was entering from the moon gate.<sup>6</sup>

Yan Heru simply fell to the ground and shamelessly created a scene. He hollered, “Don’t go, Shen-gege! You’re my dear kin brother! We can always discuss it over again, man!”

Shen Zechuan turned his head back to look askance at him. “It’s all thanks to you the bandits are running rampant in Chazhou, Dunzhou, Fanzhou, and Dengzhou. Ever since the fifth year of Xiande, the Yan Clan has earned quite the fortune in Zhongbo. I’m already giving you due respect by not closing down the Yan clan’s shops for good. If anyone in the two prefectures of Chazhou and Dunzhou die of starvation at the start of spring next year, I’ll have your head for it.”

Feeling timid and apprehensive, Yan Heru cowered and shrunk his neck back like a little quail. As he lay on the ground, he saw Xiao Chiye’s boots through the curtain Fei Sheng had lifted. He suddenly had a brainwave and shouted, “I still have a treasure!”

Xiao Chiye rapped his umbrella on the step and said, “What treasure? Show this eye-opener to your Second Young Master too.”

Yan Heru promptly put on a smiling face and said ingratiatingly, “What Second Young Master? It’s Second Master! The Second Master liked pearls and jades back in Qudu, right? I just so happened to newly acquire some good stuff at the start of autumn. As the saying goes, a precious sword ought to be gifted to a hero;<sup>7</sup> in the same vein, precious gems are befitting of the Second Master. I’ve long wanted to pay a tribute of respect to the Second Master!”

Xiao Chiye had been wanting to make Shen Zechuan a few more earrings, so his interest was piqued on hearing him. He had Fei Sheng continue holding up the curtain as he asked, “What kinds of goods?”

Yan Heru knew that the relationship between Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan was an intimate one. Shen Zechuan had said “my husband” on Fuxian Peak. He could not convince Shen Zechuan, but he could coax Xiao Chiye and make him happy, so he said, “When I get out, I’ll get my men to deliver them to your residence for your amusement.”

Xiao Chiye was in quite the good mood. “A sensible one, you are.”

Yan Heru nodded his head as though he were pounding garlic. “The Second Master came with the Prefectural Lord on official business and has

been staying on my property for quite a few days, and I still have yet to play the good host and entertain you. That makes me feel so ashamed.”

Xiao Chiye stood on the stairs, and Yan Heru secretly smacked his lips as he marveled just how tall this Xiao the Second was. Those shoulders were so broad one could simply roll around on them.

“What did you call the Prefectural Lord earlier?” Xiao Chiye inquired.

Yan Heru answered, “Shen-gege.”

“Toss him out,” Xiao Chiye’s tone abruptly went cold. “Let him clear his mind in the pond. To think he even forgot who his parents and siblings are.”

Fei Sheng leaned over to pick up Yan Heru and headed out.

How was Yan Heru to know that Xiao Chiye was displeased again? He kicked his legs and said in a panic, “I remember, I remember! Second Master, don’t toss me away!” The wind was extremely cold out there. Yan Heru continued, “There’s something I still have yet to tell the Second Master. You—”

Fei Sheng had already dunked him into the water.



Five days later, Shen Zechuan departed for Cizhou, while Tantai Hu remained in Dunzhou. His letter was delivered right at this time to the Bianjun Commandery, where it was sent into the campground.

Qi Zhuyin stepped out of the tent. Upon seeing Qi Wei dismount from his horse, she asked, “Where did that letter come from?”

Qi Wei presented the letter and answered, “From Zhongbo. It’s affixed with his private seal.”

“Looks like Shen Zechuan is doing rather well for himself in Zhongbo.” Qi Zhuyin opened up the letter. “To think he could still remain alive long enough to send a letter my way.”

Although Qi Wei had not looked at the letter without permission, he knew what its contents entailed. As Qi Zhuyin was reading it, he said, “It has not even been half a year since the establishment of the Cizhou garrison troops, and yet they were able to defeat the Biansha Cavalry in Dunzhou. Their ability can’t be underestimated.”

“We have Xiao the Second to thank for this.” Qi Zhuyin handed the letter back to Qi Wei and looked at the overcast sky. “The longer that the

Prince of Libei keeps him in check and holds him back, the more zealous he will be when he steps onto the frontlines in the future.”

Qi Wei said, “After the new year, Qudu will be urging you to head up north to suppress King Yi of Fanzhou.”

Qi Zhuyin did not respond. She whistled towards the soldiers at the back and grabbed her overcoat. As she put it on, she changed the subject. “Is my father well?”

Qi Wei followed Qi Zhuyin and answered. “As per your instructions, five men have been tasked to take turns to attend to him. His concubines<sup>8</sup> in the residence are not allowed to go near. They’re not happy about this and have been making a racket over at the madam’s residence day in and day out.”

Qi Zhuyin had initially been about to get on her horse, but stopped on hearing what he said. “Hua the Third didn’t give them a lashing?”

Qi Wei scratched his head. “She was raised as a princess and isn’t like the rest of us. She’s all soft-spoken when she talks to those concubines. She’s truly a gentle one.”

“Then she’s got a good temper.” Just thinking about those women in the courtyard at the rear gave Qi Zhuyin a headache. She continued, “The old man’s got a stroke and they’re treating it like he’s about to breathe his last. They kept clamoring all day long about splitting the family properties, even harping over that golden chamber pot of his.”

Qi Wei said, “They’re scared of you.”

Qi Zhuyin was irate. “Did I not feed them?”

Qi Wei replied awkwardly, “Well, you’ve been watching their accounts and deducting their rouge allowance.”

Qi Zhuyin had nothing to say to that. This was a rotten debt. For the past few years, Qi Zhuyin had drained her personal funds empty in order to make up for the shortfall in the military salaries and provisions of the Qidong’s garrison troops. The remaining four camps could rely on their garrison troops to cultivate the lands<sup>9</sup> to mitigate this burden, and the granaries were in abundance in all the years there was no war. But the Bianjun Commandery could not do the same. Lu Guangbai had emptied out his family assets for the troops in Bianjun, as had Qi Zhuyin with her dowry. When the military provisions for the Bianjun Commandery were discovered to be rotten half a year ago, Qi Zhuyin had borrowed money from merchants to make up for the difference. She had initially saved

enough to pay off the debt, but then, the wedding between Hua and Qi took place soon after, and to marry Hua Xiangyi into the family, the Qi clan's finances had been utterly exhausted.

The amount of money these concubines spent every month was alarming. Just the amount spent on rouges and powders amounted to a couple tens of thousands of taels. By making the decision to deduct this amount, Qi Zhuyin might as well have stirred the hornet's nest. She had riled her father's concubines into a sobbing mess in the rear courtyard then, all baying to complain to Qi Shiyu.

Qi Wei knew of Qi Zhuyin's troubles, and spoke up. "What if we discussed it with the madam? Her dowry..."

Qi Zhuyin cast a swift glance over, and Qi Wei, aware that he had spoken out of turn, immediately sank to his knees.

Without looking at Qi Wei again, Qi Zhuyin got onto the horse. "Deploy Hongying back, say it's on my order. If anyone dares to get rough with Hua the Third, tell Hongying not to stand on ceremony with them and just have them tied up and sent over directly to me. She did not marry far away to Qidong to help me make up for the deficit or to become the punching bag of my father's concubines. She has Qi Shiyu's name plastered all over her, and she is the rightful madam of Qidong that I traversed eight hundred *li* to welcome. Bullying her is akin to bullying my old man, and bullying my old man equates to bullying me. So on that note, don't you dare have any designs on the little maiden, you hear me?"



## CHAPTER 183: INSEPARABLE (FISH & WATER)

Ji Gang was feeling lonely at home with Shen Zechuan faraway on his trip and Ding Tao and Li Xiong both absent. All he could do every day was to brew some tea and take a stroll with his bird. His culinary skills were exemplary, so he took care of Yao Wenyu for Shen Zechuan. He was nothing if not meticulous, and in half a month, the color began to return to Yao Wenyu's complexion.

When the weather was fine, Qiao Tianya would accompany Yao Wenyu out to bask in the sunlight. He had collected quite the number of old books, which Yao Wenyu read in the courtyard.

As Yao Wenyu's mobility was limited, Qiao Tianya helped him wash up before bed every night. But there was one occasion where Qiao Tianya noticed the reddened tips of Yao Wenyu's ears while wiping him down and came to the realization that the latter had never looked him in the eyes in the bathhouse. It was only during such a time that Qiao Tianya could find back that Unpolished Jade Yuanzhuo from the fourth month in spring.

They did not actually converse much.

Besides voicing his thoughts during the discussions, Yao Wenyu spent his usual time sitting in idleness. He kept vigil by the chessboard, contemplating his moves every day. It was not uncommon for him to hold on to a book for an entire day, with the page he was on in the morning still the same page when he closed the book at night. Sleep did not come easy for him. Both his legs were not wholly numb; instead, they hurt every single moment. It was only when Qiao Tianya was playing the zither that he would feel a tad better.

Sleeping to the murmurings of the zither felt to Yao Wenyu as though he were sitting in the drizzle with his eyes closed.

Qiao Tianya cut back a lot on his drinking nowadays, and he had shaved his stubble clean. He was spending even more time lying outstretched in his chair with his arms behind his head, staring out of the window in a daze. From his occasional observations of him, Yao Wenyu found that the way Qiao Tianya was set against the snowy mountains and dense fog beyond the window made him appear so very tranquil. It was as if all the tempestuous vicissitudes of the martial fraternity had been banished

from his memory, turning him from a vagabond wanderer into the pine beneath the moon.

Yao Wenyu had never addressed him by the name of Qiao Tianya; “Qiao Tianya” was someone who needed a refuge where he could brush the wanderlust off himself. He laughed and cursed in his state of intoxication, executing his swordplay as he pleased and to his heart’s content, and when he sobered up, he was a solitary shadow from which an aura of frost emanated. They seemed to be like two broken pieces of jade that had encountered each other to mutually make up for what the other lacked, and, in doing so, pieced back together those bygone days of free-spiritedness.



“Fanzhou has been a lot quieter lately.” Gao Zhongxiong sat by the fire and warmed his hands. “King Yi should have already gotten the news about Dunzhou. He must be terribly on edge now.”

“The army has to pass by the north of Fanzhou on their return journey. It’s only natural for King Yi to be afraid given how close the army is.” Zhou Gui said as he sipped his hot tea.

“I can’t understand.” Gao Zhongxiong said. “Fanzhou is surrounded by enemies on all sides. King Yi’s haste to rebel and establish himself under his own banner seems more like he’s in a rush to court death.”

“King Yi claimed himself to be the ‘Great Progeny’ of Fanzhou. He not only renovated the original *yamen* of Fanzhou but also brazenly scoured for beauties in Fanzhou in the name of choosing his consorts.” Zhou Gui lamented. “Rather than say he wants to join in the fight for the imperial throne, you might as well say he just wanted to make merry while he can.”

When King Yi first established himself, he had not expected Shen Zechuan to move that quickly. Huaizhou, Cizhou, and Chazhou severed all possibilities of him expanding his territory northwest. He was not as tough as Shen Zechuan, and he did not have that many talents under his command as Shen Zechuan did. He initially rose in rebellion because he could no longer put up with the bandits. The people he had led were all his neighbors. At present, the military commander he had appointed in Fanzhou was a butcher, and his civil officials were all elderly gentlemen. All they petitioned about during the daily court sessions were stuff like who snatched whose donkey and who committed adultery with whose husband.

“Going by what the prefectural lord said,” Gao Zhongxiong piped up. “King Yi cannot fall for the time being. We have to keep him alive until



next year. King Yi knows he is too powerless to resist; that's why he attempted to seek Lei Jingzhe's help. But now that Lei Jingzhe is already dead, he is left high and dry. He ought to be scared to death now."

"King Yi is not an iron shield after all." Zhou Gui said. "We have to think of another way to deal with Qi Zhuyin. Yuanzhuo, what are your views on this?"

Yao Wenyu snapped back to his senses. With the hot tea still in hand, he said, "My guess is that Qi Zhuyin's delay in deploying troops to crush the rebels in Zhongbo is not merely because of Lu Guangbai's desertion."

Zhou Gui blurted out a sound of surprise and asked, "Do you mean to say that there's another reason for it?"

"During the wedding between Hua and Qi, the Hereditary Prince's Consort personally made a trip to Qidong to deliver gifts for the purpose of taking her father back. Qi Zhuyin's willingness to risk the wrath of Qudu to protect Lu Pingyan was not just for personal reasons, but also to show Libei her stance." Warmth returned to Yao Wenyu's fingers. "If Qi Zhuyin obeys Qudu's command and heads north to quell the rebels in Zhongbo, then she will have to face two battlefronts alone going by the current territories. Should Qudu forcibly order her to attack Libei once she recovers Zhongbo, then the battleground in the north will be precipitated into crisis. The moment the Armored Cavalry of Libei falls apart, she will become the last line of defense in the east. All her troops on hand will have to be deployed into battle, and her geographical advantage in Qidong will vanish. When the time comes, all she can do is to grit her teeth and push on."

Realization struck Gao Zhongxiong then, and he said, "If it comes to that, then even if Qi Zhuyin is able to defeat Amu'er in the end, she would not have the strength and resources left to act as a counterweight to Qudu."

Yao Wenyu nodded. "The Qidong Garrison Troops is what Qi Zhuyin is counting on. Without these troops, Qudu will be able to replace her easily."

For a long time, Zhou Gui could not snap out of his shock. In the end, he could only say, "The commander-in-chief is indeed far-sighted. Yuanzhuo, how did you come to that conjecture? Before the eighth month when the prefectural lord was still here, we all thought that Qi Zhuyin would come."

"It was only after the wedding between Hua and Qi that I made that inference." Yao Wenyu said. "Before the wedding, the commander-in-chief did not immediately head north under the pretext that there was no one to

guard the Bianjun Commandery, which in turn allowed the marquis to return to Libei. The empress dowager's sending of Han Cheng to escort the bride to the groom's residence was, in part, also meant to press Qi Zhuyin into action. But after the wedding, the commander-in-chief remained stationed in Bianjun without making so much as a move."

The empress dowager wanted to convince Qi Zhuyin to deploy her troops, but she did not have enough bargaining chips in her hands. Her last trump card was Hua Xiangyi, and she had already shown her hand, but as things played out, Qi Shiyu had a stroke, and this card of hers was as good as forfeited. Everyone under the empress dowager's command was going to be secretly gnashing their teeth in resentment over the fact that Qi Zhuyin was not a man.

They were still chatting around the fire when Qiao Tianya suddenly lifted the curtain and announced, "The prefectural lord is back."

Zhou Gui and Gao Zhongxiong promptly rose to their feet. Gao Zhongxiong wanted to push the wheelchair for Yao Wenyu, but he was a step too slow. Qiao Tianya beat him to it and took over the wheelchair with natural ease to push Yao Wenyu out through the curtain that had been lifted for them.



Fei Sheng took extreme care on the road, but the ninth month was just right around the corner, and Shen Zechuan could not avoid the ambush of the cold even when he was huddled up against Xiao Chiye. He fell ill again, this time with a fever so high it seemed to burn away whatever bit of composure he had possessed back in Dunzhou.

The recruitment for the Dunzhou garrison troops was of utmost importance, and the advisors had all been waiting in the study for a day. Even while lying in bed, Shen Zechuan was still mulling over the matter.

"Hand the accounts from Dunzhou over to Yuanzhuo," With his cheeks slightly flushed and palm over his eyes, Shen Zechuan said in the dim light. "Have Chengfeng assist. Come up with an estimate of the military expenses for Dunzhou tonight and send it over to Tantai Hu in two days at the latest."

Blocking him, Xiao Chiye combed his fingers through Shen Zechuan's slightly damp hair to brush it aside. He said in a hushed tone, "I've got it all in mind."

Shen Zechuan did not wish for Xiao Chiye to leave, but the matter on hand was pressing, and the Biansha Cavalry would remain a menace to

them with the situation in Duanzhou still unclear. It was imperative that there would be no delays to the establishment of Dunzhou's defenses. He glanced at Xiao Chiye with half-lidded eyes and said. "Tell Qiao Tianya about the arm guard; he'll know what to do."

Xiao Chiye hummed an acknowledgment in reply and watched as Shen Zechuan closed his eyes. He waited a moment for the latter's breathing to become steady before getting up to change his clothes and leave. When he walked down the stairs, he said to Fei Sheng, "Wake the Prefectural Lord up when the medicine is ready. Make sure he finishes it."

Even after returning to their residence, Shen Zechuan's medicine was still decocted under Fei Sheng's watchful eyes. Fei Sheng strode a few steps with Xiao Chiye and nodded his head in acknowledgement.

"If the Prefectural Lord is awake when *shifu* comes, invite him in. If not, then ask him to head back first." Chen Yang came over to drape the cloak over Xiao Chiye. While Xiao Chiye was putting it on, he said, "If *shifu* asks about what happened in Dunzhou, omit the part about Fuxian peak. I'll tell *shifu* about it myself afterward."

Xiao Chiye stood still and looked at the sky.

"I'll be back before the hour of hai." He was still speaking even as he was striding out. "Remember to prepare candies when the medicine is ready. It's also fine to swap it for honeyed water..."

He had already walked off even before the words had fully left his mouth.

Xiao Chiye arrived at the study, and everyone stood to pay their obeisances, but he had already taken his seat, skipping all the formalities. As Yao Wenyu looked over the account books of the Yan clan and Dunzhou, Kong Ling updated him with a detailed account of the situation.

Not a single one of the advisors dared to smoke their pipes today as they sat, all prim and proper. The marquis' oppressive aura overwhelmed them, keeping them from lifting their heads, and their reports were all concise and comprehensive. They did not even dare to overdo the flattery.

The situation in Dunzhou was complicated; the key issue lay in its distance from Cizhou, along with the fact that Fanzhou was between them. As a result, many matters had to be discussed in detail. Zhou Gui initially assumed that Xiao Chiye would not be as familiar with the topography of Zhongbo as Shen Zechuan was and had someone present a map. Unexpectedly, Xiao Chiye had Zhongbo's map clearly imprinted in his

mind from all those times he had been making the rounds transporting military supplies in Libei, and he did not make a single mistake during the conversation that anyone could find fault with.

They lit lamps in the study to discuss official business, while Shen Zechuan alternated between consciousness and sleep within the room.

Shen Zechuan woke up when he heard Fei Sheng bringing in the medicine. He drank the medicine without even popping a candy this time and fell back asleep. Fei Sheng closed the door and had the people serving in the courtyard change their shoes. The maidservants, having also taken off their pendants and hairpins, made no sound as they walked.

Perhaps it was because of the quiet; Shen Zechuan surprisingly slept for a long time. When he woke up again, he heard movement outside the door and thought Xiao Chiye had returned. But Xiao Chiye never came in, and Shen Zechuan fell asleep again. In the middle of night, he was woken up by the scalding heat, only to find Xiao Chiye sleeping soundly on him. Unable to move, Shen Zechuan remained pinned under him until he was all drenched in sweat. It was only near daybreak when he felt a little more rejuvenated.

Shen Zechuan feebly put his hand on Xiao Chiye's back, only to come into contact with a section of gauze. All traces of sleep promptly deserted him. Wide awake now, he wanted to get up to take a look, but Xiao Chiye pressed him back into place.

"Hm?" Xiao Chiye buried his face and said in a heavy voice, "Getting water?"

Shen Zechuan felt along the bandage for a while, his alarm intensifying the more he touched.

Xiao Chiye caught Shen Zechuan's hand to stop him from groping blindly, "Watch where you are pressing. It hurts."

Both men looked at each other for a moment, and Xiao Chiye suddenly clasped his arms around Shen Zechuan, preventing the latter from moving.

Shen Zechuan stared at Xiao Chiye and drawled, "Didn't I say not to ask for a lashing?"

His illness had rendered him all thin and sallow, and his voice was hoarse. He looked as if his eyes were going to redden the next instant as he looked at Xiao Chiye in this way.

After the incident in Chazhou the last time, Xiao Chiye had told Ji Gang to whip him once for each time Shen Zechuan got hurt. Shen Zechuan

had coaxed him back in Dunzhou, and he had gotten severely “punished” for it. He thought Xiao Chiye would let it drop. But who would have known that Xiao Chiye would act so quickly upon returning? In the short amount of time that Shen Zechuan had taken a nap, Xiao Chiye had already received his whipping.

Xiao Chiye bumped his forehead against Shen Zechuan’s and stuck close to him. Sensing that his fever had receded, he lazily uttered a “hm”. He remained in this way with his shoulder and arm bare, his back bandaged with several layers of gauze. Xiao Chiye had injured his right arm when he faced up against Hasen at the Tudalong Banner, and the wounds had left scars behind, and now, new scars criss-crossed with the old, making them tingle with numbness and pain.

The lashings pained Shen Zechuan. Just touching that gauze alone hurt him so much that his fingers curled. Xiao Chiye remained close to him, making him breathless for air. He hated Xiao Chiye to death. But as he lay here, he only wanted to repeat over and over again,

He regretted it now.



Ding Tao sat in low spirits under the eaves playing cat’s cradle<sup>10</sup> with Li Xiong. Seeing as Ji Gang had been standing under the eaves for an hour, he tugged at the corner of Ji Gang’s clothes and asked, “Grandpa, why don’t you sit?”

Ji Gang’s mind was still wandering. He asked Ding Tao, “Did I hit too hard?”

Ding Tao comforted him. “Master was the one who made the request and forced you into it. You could do nothing about it either.”

Ji Gang felt ill at ease as he sat down. After a while, he stood up and said, “I’d best go get some ointment.”

Fei Sheng was originally waiting on the veranda. On seeing Ji Gang’s approach, he hurried over to greet him.

Ji Gang gazed at the principal room, looking as though he wanted to say something only to swallow his words back down. He handed the ointment to Fei Sheng, and after thinking for a moment, asked, “Was the Marquis also staying together with Lanzhou when they were on official business in Dunzhou?”

Remembering Xiao Chiye’s instructions, Fei Sheng maintained his composure and said, “Yes. The Marquis and Master are living examples of

what the stories described as confidants. They are like fish and water—inseparable from one another.”

Seeing how frank and unperturbed Fei Sheng was, Ji Gang felt that it was he who had read too much into it. As they said, bosom friends were hard to find. What’s more, Lanzhou and Xiao’er had gone through life and death together. For them to be far closer than the norm was only to be... he could not go on thinking any further. Somehow, he still felt that something was not quite right. But Ji Gang was reluctant to veer his thoughts into another direction, unwilling as he was to make conjectures about Shen Zechuan on these. They had gone to propose marriage for Ji Mu when Ji Mu was still around, and back then, Shen Zechuan had said that he also wanted to marry a wife in the future. Consequently, Hua Pingting went scouting for quite a number of maidens. They were all poor, humble families in the neighborhood who stayed close by. Shen Zechuan only had to like one of them, and they would have gone to call on the family for a visit.

“*Shifu?*” Fei Sheng called out tentatively.

Ji Gang placed his hands behind his back and said, ‘Continue to keep watch. I’ll come again later.’”

Ji Gang wanted to have a talk with Xiao Chiye again, but Xiao Chiye was too busy. The latter seemed to be in a never-ending rush as he went back and forth between the residence and Zhou’s residence. The dust in Dunzhou had only just settled when the letter from Libei came. Once Shen Zechuan recovered from his illness, Xiao Chiye would have to depart for Bianbo Camp.

“The winter coats will arrive in Libei in the ninth month. You can just dispatch someone to assist at the Bianbo Camp.” Shen Zechuan secured the arm guard for Xiao Chiye and asked, “Is it snowing heavily in Libei?”

“Intermittently, I guess.” Xiao Chiye answered. “It’s often sleet at present. The maintenance of the bridle paths is of utmost importance. We have to ensure that the paths run smoothly unobstructed by the time heavy snow descends in the eleventh month.”

“Tell His Lordship that we have already secured the military provisions for the beginning of spring next year.” Shen Zechuan’s hand slid from the arm guard to Xiao Chiye’s palm. He looked up at the latter and said, “The construction of the bridle path from Dunzhou to Bianbo Camp will also start next year.”

They wanted to connect Zhongbo and Libei together so that Bianbo Camp had direct access to Cizhou and Dunzhou. The information coming from Dunzhou had to be fast and up to date.

Xiao Chiye might not be able to return these two months. He had to keep an eye on Libei's territory at all times. In addition, he also had to be precise in his calculations of the reserves of supplies on the battleground, lest heavy snow unexpectedly collapsed the paths and cut off access, and the lack of supplies ended up causing those on the battlefield to be caught up in an arduous battle.

"If Ding Tao gets too mischievous, send him back to Dajing. Eldest sister-in-law can deal with him."

As Xiao Chiye spoke, he lowered his head and led Shen Zechuan with both hands to step on both of his own feet. Then he clasped him by the back of his head and stood with him to exchange a kiss.

The fabric of their clothes chafed against one another. Shen Zechuan propped himself against Xiao Chiye's arms and melted away into his scent.

Xiao Chiye liked the way Shen Zechuan tilted his head up like this. This was him seeking him out, and all that pervaded the air when they touched was desire borne out of love. He bore all of Shen Zechuan's weight; he was capable of picking up Shen Zechuan with ease. It was only a kiss to begin with, but he did not let go as they entwined together intimately amidst the interweaving of their breaths.

"I've already asked Eldest Sister-in-law to make preparations." Xiao Chiye said, "Chen Yang will be sent over before the new year to take you and *shifu* to Dajing."

Shen Zechuan's breathing had grown ragged from the kiss. "I'll prepare a gift..."

Silly Lanzhou.

Xiao Chiye cupped Shen Zechuan and kissed him with even more intensity.

Xiao Chiye came in a hurry and left in a hurry too. On this overcast day shrouded in fog in Cizhou, he braved the rain and headed north even as he bore those wounds he had received from the lashings. All was calm and peaceful for the time being in the three prefectures of Zhongbo. Xiao Chiye planted Tantai Hu in Dunzhou, leaving the latter as a bulwark for Shen Zechuan.

Cizhou entered a brief period of respite, and Shen Zechuan seemed to have reined in his brilliance and gone into a state of dormancy. But very quickly, Xue Xiuzhuo, who was faraway in Qudu, came to learn just how formidable this round of hibernation was.

During the Hanyi Festival<sup>11</sup> in the tenth month, Chazhou hosted a banquet with funding from the Yan clan and invited all the talents in the world over regardless of whether the person was a distinguished man from the countryside or a reclusive statesman in a bustling city. As long as they were academically accomplished, they would all receive the invitation to participate in the intellectual discourse<sup>12</sup> between the literati.

If it had been a nobody, he naturally would not have stirred up a storm. But this time, it took less than three days for the ox carts and boats to set out in full force as all the virtuous and wise talents flocked to their destination.

For the one who had sent the invitation was a man named Yao Wenyu.



## CHAPTER 184: DISCOURSE

Chazhou was hit by an unbroken spell of wet weather in the tenth month, and the sound of rain drumming rhythmically against the banana leaves outside the windows was audible even with the curtains down. Luo Mu was not in his official garb but his common robe<sup>13</sup> as he sat in the seat to the right of the guest of honor. He surveyed his surroundings and discovered that the interior of this teahouse was already filled to the brim with people. Guests hailed from all corners of the land, and a sizable number of them were wearing sandals and rain cloaks made of straw.

The incense by the window burned out just after midday. Luo Mu heard movements and straightened up to look at the door, where he saw that oil-paper umbrella swaying slightly aside to reveal that figure in darkish blue<sup>14</sup> scholar attire<sup>15</sup> beneath. The latter's large, meandering sleeves rested on his knees, with a cat lounging between them. Delicate wrist bones peeked out under those sleeves, accentuating those fingers of his and making them appear all the more long, slender, and strong.

Yao Wenyu bent over in his wheelchair and said with sincerity, "My apologies for having kept the various elders waiting."

The little wheels rolled over the wooden floorboards as Qiao Tianya pushed Yao Wenyu in. Murmurs of whispers promptly rose in the room. Those who had not removed their woven hats earlier took them off now one after another. Countless gazes fell upon Yao Wenyu, watching him attentively.

Yao Wenyu came to a stop before the round window.

"We have all gathered here today to attend the discourse our young friend Yuanzhuo here has invited us to." Elder Mei of Qinzhou, who was smoking his pipe, tapped it and looked at Yao Wenyu. "It has been a year since we last met, and my young friend's poise has far surpassed that of before."

Tea had already been served, and that particular incense was lit up yet again.

A so-called discourse was simply an oral conversation. Host and guests sat facing each other, and they would absolutely not touch upon political affairs or civil issues, only on profound and esoteric subjects. This was why Luo Mu was not wearing his official attire today. They had to go back and forth with one another as they engaged in verbal discussions while seated in

the venue, and this required the participants to be not only erudite and insightful but also poetically eloquent.

Yao Wenyu, having traversed all over the world in his search for knowledge, was adept at the art of it, which was why his one invitation could garner hundreds of responses, allowing him to organize a dialogue in Chazhou. He was an articulate conversationalist in the past, and his ideas were original and distinctive. As he did not enter civil service despite being born in a noble clan, he was far more popular than Hai Liangyi among the recluses who were averse to politics.

Elder Mei had already been waiting for an hour, so he cut to the chase after the exchange of customary greetings. "I see that my young friend has changed."

Yao Wenyu answered, "This body is not my own; this change does not reflect my own."

Elder Mei ceased smoking his pipe. "I can see it with my own eyes. If you have not changed, why aren't you standing up?"

Yao Wenyu put down the horsetail whisk he had just been holding on to. "Was I standing a year ago when I conversed with you in Qinzhou?"

"Of course you were," Elder Mei said.

Yao Wenyu thus replied. "Then, I'm still standing right now."

Luo Mu had once participated in such a discourse when he had been pursuing his studies in Dengzhou, but that had been merely an informal discussion among fellow students of the academy. Kong Ling was also talented at sophistry, but for some reason, he had not shown up today. The conversation continued, as did the drizzle outside. Everyone in attendance was listening with bated breath and rapt attention.

With his back leaning against the door, Qiao Tianya watched the raindrops splash on the sides of the eaves and cast a hazy veil over the mountains in the distance. Yao Wenyu's voice was crystal clear, and his calm and collected answers seemed to fall like chess pieces he let drop in the courtyard, one at a time, pitter-pattering in this rain.



Li Jianting sat in her seat and asked Xue Xiuzhuo, "Since a discourse can convene the wise and virtuous together, why isn't the imperial college organizing one?"

Xue Xiuzhuo closed the book and answered her with a question, "What kind of people can participate in it?"

“All the learned men in the world,” Li Jianting replied.

“That’s not right.” Xue Xiuzhuo looked Li Jianting in the eyes. “It’s those who have nothing to worry about in the world.”

Xue Xiuzhuo participated in such discourses before, although not that many times. To court officials like him, Jiang Qingshan, and the others, these so-called intellectual and philosophical conversations were mere rhetoric, since the participants discussed neither state affairs nor civil and agricultural matters. These discussions were all the rage in the thirteen cities of Juexi, followed by the eight cities of Qudu. Pan Lin and the other young masters of the noble clans held Yao Wenyu in such high esteem because Yao Wenyu rarely touched on political affairs, which was kind of unconventional. But such unconventionality had to be built on the premise that he did not have to worry about the basic necessities like food and clothes. Such conversations went extinct in Zhongbo after the reign of Xiande. Was it because of the lack of learned scholars in Zhongbo? No, the real reason was that there was no longer a person who wasn’t starving in Zhongbo.

Li Jianting pondered it over for a moment. “In that case, what use is there for Yao Wenyu to invite all of these people without a care in the world?”

After a moment’s silence, Xue Xiuzhuo turned his gaze to look at the swaying banana leaves in front of the window. The rain poured with urgency, as though this was the same day he had played chess with Yao Wenyu.



The sky had already darkened outside the teahouse, but the dialogue had yet to end. Elder Mei, being advanced in age, was tired from all the sitting. He was debating with Yao Wenyu over the nature of “the changed and the unchanged”, and he had already drunk several cups of tea to moisten his throat.

Elder Mei cleared his throat. “The change I’m talking about is the physical changes before our eyes, and it’s not just that. You have changed, and so have the times and the world. You’re no longer the same ‘you’ as you have been earlier, even more so the ‘you’ from one year ago.”

All eyes fell upon Yao Wenyu, waiting for his answer. But Yao Wenyu slowly lowered his sleeves and bowed to Elder Mei from his wheelchair. “You are absolutely right.”

His words sparked an uproar the moment they left his mouth. This debate was clearly not over. They came all the way here from afar just to hear them duke it out until a clear victor emerged. Who would have expected Yao Wenyu to simply concede defeat of his own accord?

“Gone is the glory of the Yongyi reign. Dazhou is already on the wane. With the invasion by our foreign enemies in the northeast and the collusion of officials and merchants in the southwest, just how many places are there left for us in this world to converse freely about the mysteries of the universe?”

A commotion broke out in the room at these words. An enraged Elder Mei tossed his pipe aside and covered his nose and mouth with his sleeve. “Foul! Foul! FOUL! What an unbearable stench! How intolerably vulgar! Why has Yao Wenyu become Hai Renshi?!”

The tea tables clattered noisily as several people rose to their feet. Luo Mu hurriedly got up too and attempted to dissuade the others, but then he heard Yao Wenyu, who was before the window, laughed. The more he laughed, the louder his laughter was. “Look at how severe the misappropriations of the commoners’ fields in the eight cities are. The vision of the starved dead dotting the streets everywhere is no longer just empty talk—I’ve changed, and so has the world. You are right smacked in the middle of it. How long can you remain unchanged for?”

Elder Mei originally wanted to leave, but on hearing Yao Wenyu, he could not refrain from rebutting, “Without what keeps them alive, all living creatures will perish.<sup>16</sup> To change or not to change is the natural order of the world. You strayed from the Way<sup>17</sup> and fell into the trappings of this secular world. Are you trying to emulate Qi Huilian and Hai Liangyi by being a virtuous gentleman?!”<sup>18</sup>

Yao Wenyu said, “The one who forced this change on me today is none other than you and this very society.”

Elder Mei could barely catch his breath as he held onto the table and said, “Letting nature take its course is the natural order of things!<sup>19</sup> What has Qi Huilian changed? And what has Hai Liangyi changed? You are following in their footsteps. Yuanzhuo, oh, Yuanzhuo! This is but a futile attempt!”

Yao Wenyu schooled his expression and said, “Since you speak of the natural order of things, then this empire shall change as it ought to, and this world will descend into anarchy as it must. You may very well continue to

stand by and do nothing if you so wish. I have already abandoned my Way; I'm going to step into this turbulent world."

Elder Mei stomped his feet in anxiety and yelled like a child, "No, come back! Get back here!"

Xue Xiuzhuo subscribed to the philosophy that "one must live or die with his principles".<sup>20</sup> This was the creed Grand Mentor Qi believed in, as did Secretariat Elder Hai. Yao Wenyu was the only one among them who didn't. But Yao Wenyu's move today was a clear break from his past belief in letting nature run its course. This was a declaration to all that he had forsaken his original self to become a man of the secular world.

Pelts of raindrops fell right before Qiao Tianya's eyes into the water puddles, where they burst into tiny sprays of water and stirred up ripples. A small fish with fine scales leaped out of a ripple, and Kong Ling, who was near the pond, caught it and tossed it back.

Fei Sheng was holding up the umbrella while Kong Ling and Shen Zechuan, both wearing bamboo hats, fished by the pond.

Kong Ling cast out the hook again and said, "After today, men with lofty aspirations ought to be flocking to Cizhou."

Shen Zechuan said as he held onto the fishing rod, "If men with lofty aspirations were this easy to obtain, how would I have kept missing Mister each time?"

Kong Ling laughed. He avoided answering and merely lamented, "This move of Yuanzhuo is both a 'change of path' and an 'undertaking of path'. He did it to tell the world that Secretariat Elder Hai's legacy still lives on in Cizhou. He's no longer the same man he was before."

"Shenwei's brush and ink are already in place." Shen Zechuan said. "Whether Yuanzhuo can redeem his reputation in the hearts of the scholars in the world depends on this lyrical expression of his."

Yao Wenyu was attacked by the students during the initial imperial college crisis because of his birth origins, but now, he had taken on a different path from that of Elder Mei and the others. With the help of Gao Zhongxiong's highly effective and emotive penmanship, those two legs of his could become a definitive statement of will and ambition. In addition, the questions that were to follow would no doubt include the reason he came to Cizhou. If he was guilty of a crime, then why didn't the imperial court send anyone to arrest him? By thinking down the line of this question, one would be able to see a Zhongbo that had already been fractured.

“Due to the passing of Emperor Tianchen, the imperial examinations held in spring were done away with. Following right after, Secretariat Elder Hai remonstrated with his death, and the imperial college students attacked the officials of humble origins from all sides. Many people handed in their resignations during this period, and Qudu still has to maintain the stability of the three parties this winter.” Shen Zechuan swung his fishing rod. “Xue Xiuzhuo already has half a foot in the Grand Secretariat by virtue of the heir apparent to the throne. For this reason, the empress dowager must suppress the practical doers faction led by him; she can’t let him become a minister with genuine regent powers in his hands. In that case, when will he be able to fulfill his promise to the imperial college? He and Yuanzhuo are both old acquaintances and fellow students under the same teacher; so there must be more than meets the eye now that Yuanzhuo has switched to my camp. Moreover, the transgressions of the Li clan are already a fact long known to all, and copycats are popping up one after another seeing that King Yi of Fanzhou has yet to be taken down. Even if Xue Xiuzhuo wants to retaliate and fight back now, his hands are tied. No matter how you look at it, all he can do this winter is to get beaten.”

“The mess created by the noble clans is way too great.” Kong Ling shook his head as he grasped his fishing rod. “The empress dowager refuses to release her grip on power, and everyone in the Grand Secretariat has lost heart. Meanwhile, Xue Xiuzhuo is still in the fledgling stage of his authority. As long as the three parties remain locked in a stalemate, the eight cities’ misappropriation of commoners’ fields will remain unresolved. The longer this drags on, the more advantageous it will be for the prefectural lord.”

Just as they had discussed here, Gao Zhongxiong’s essays went into circulation a few days later. The tailwind Hai Liangyi left behind had not fizzled out at all. As long as their message was sincere, it could evoke a collective, emotional sigh. The contents of Yao Wenyu’s discourse in Chazhou had long ceased to be important; what was crucial was that even the ignorant students who could not tell one grain from another had to face up to the fact now.

And that was, in just six months, Qudu had completely lost the ability to maintain stability in its empire. The man Yao Wenyu had aligned himself with was called Shen Zechuan, a felonious subject who rebelled and fled

Qudu half a year ago with Xiao Chiye. However, they had not only escaped execution, but were even on the up and coming now.

The empress dowager could not command the Qidong Garrison Troops into moving, so Han Cheng came out of obscurity once more to ask the Eight Great Training Divisions to dispatch troops to exterminate Shen Zechuan, who was far away in Cizhou. But the Ministry of War declined on the grounds that Qudu had no generals. The conference was a very unpleasant one, and with the end of the year closing in on them, the relationship between the three sides grew increasingly tense.

Once the snow started falling, the number of refugees who sought asylum in Cizhou and Chazhou ballooned. At the same time that Tantai Hu was recruiting soldiers for the garrison troops in Dunzhou, the Imperial Bodyguards were also enlisting new members. Shen Zechuan planned to put Hairigu together with the Imperial Bodyguards. By the time Shen Zechuan realized it, the twelfth month had come, and just as he was getting his new year gifts ready, a bout of unprecedented heavy snow came calling at Libei.

## CHAPTER 185: HONGYAN

Heaven and earth were a vast expanse of white where the frigid wind swept past and sent the salt-like snow rustling. Owing to the severe collapse of the bridle paths, it was practically impossible for the grain wagons to enter the war zone. Xiao Chiye left Lang Tao Xue Jin at Bianbo camp and led his men to dig the snow for two days.

Wu Ziyu tightened his collar in the chilly wind and covered up his mouth and nose. He rubbed his frozen hands together, his voice muffled as he spoke. "Damn it, I just took a nap, and the path gets all blocked up again with snow. When will this end?"

Chen Yang never touched wine when he was on duty, but even he could not stand it any longer and kept chugging down *On Horseback* until his stomach burned. "The closer we get to the northeast, the colder it becomes. Fortunately, the prefectural lord sent the winter coats over before the tenth month; otherwise, who knows how many brothers would have succumbed to the cold?"

"It's such a cold day," Gu Jin squatted on the ground and shook his head, "and the armor weighs a ton. The battle steeds won't be able to stand it."

The battle steeds of Libei were not as tolerant of the cold as Biansha's ponies. It was an uphill task preparing fodder for the stables each time winter came around. The horses had it harder than the humans.

"Keep digging." Xiao Chiye said, "We have to make it to the battlegrounds by tonight."

It was simply impossible to see the white puff of air Xiao Chiye exhaled. The wind was so strong that it sent his cloak flapping noisily. There was no end in sight ahead, and the blocked bridle path north of the Shasan Camp was a dead end, so he could only lead his convoy squad to take a long detour from the Three Great Training Divisions of Liuyang. The supplies in Sha'er Camp had run out, and they could only rely on Shayi Camp to replenish stocks. As these two camps jointly undertook the operational combat missions on the battlefields, their equipment was expended rather swiftly. They had gathered together a batch of military craftsmen after the eleventh month, and with more than 50,000 men in total, a staggeringly large amount of materials was needed. Xiao Chiye had to keep up with the uninterrupted flow of supply to both fronts.



But the one in the most challenging position was Zhao Hui, who was to the west of the Tudalong Banner. The heavy snow had persisted for several days, and a path that had caved in once before was no longer usable. The path Xiao Chiye had repaired with wooden planks could not withstand the load of such heavy snowfall. Coupled with the heavy weight of the grain wagons, Xiao Chiye did not dare pass through without careful consideration. He could only let Zhao Hui wait for a few more days as he set off from the battlegrounds with the grain wagons in tow and detoured around the Tudalong Banner.

Gu Jin blew hard on his palms and stood up to yell, "Keep digging!"

The convoy squad had not had a day's rest in the past three months, but none of the soldiers groused, because Xiao Chiye did not have a break either. They were practically running in circles all over Libei's territory. Even with his eyes closed now, Xiao Chiye could point out which path was the quickest shortcut to take. Xiao Chiye had astonishing stamina and energy; even as he was transporting supplies, he did not delay recovering the use of his right arm. Just a few days in Bianbo Camp before setting off, he was still drawing the Conqueror's Bow, and that ear-piercing twang of the bowstring had left the Libei Armored Cavalry dumbstruck.

Xiao Chiye arrived at the site of the battle at the hour of chou, which was also when Xiao Fangxu had just withdrawn from the battlefield. Father and son both cut sorry figures before the dimly illuminated tent.

Xiao Fangxu took off his helmet. It was such a cold day, and yet he had run until he was all drenched in sweat. He took a hot handkerchief to wipe his face, then nodded in a signal to Xiao Chiye before bending over to enter the military tent. Both of the great commanding generals, Zuo Qianqiu and Jiang Sheng, were present in the tent, along with the deputy generals and brigade commanders from the two camps. All of them looked utterly exhausted.

"This is really damn bizarre." Xiao Fangxu tossed the handkerchief on the table. "Their ponies' asses are almost trailing on the ground. How can they still run so fast in the heavy snow?"

"No matter what, we cannot retreat again." Zuo Qianqiu stood before the map and pointed to the southeastern corner of the Tudalong Banner. "If we retreat any further, this place will fall into the enemy's hands too. When that happens, Zhao Hui's remaining route for supplies will be cut off. In just

one winter, Hasen can drag out the battle and wear him down to his death at the Tudalong Banner.”

Spring came late in Libei. This bout of snow would last until the third month next year at the very least. Even if Zhao Hui had stockpiled food in Changzhu Camp, the entire army could not afford to deplete their equipment supplies. There were no batches of military craftsmen over at the Changzhu Camp.

“According to the military reports,” Jiang Sheng kicked off his boots and poured out the melted snow within. “Hasen has been giving Zhao Hui’s troops the slip lately. He saw that the supplies can’t be restocked for the time being and so wants to wear Zhao Hui down first.”

Xiao Chiye sat in the corner and ate his flatbread with milk tea. Despite wolfing down his food, he did not miss any of the words they had spoken about at length.

After a moment of silence, Xiao Fangxu said while staring at the map, “This is a warning sign of an impending surprise attack by Hasen.”

Xiao Chiye thought so too.

Hasen was wearing Zhao Hui down to exhaust him. The Libei Armored Cavalry consumed too much equipment, and their battle steeds were no match for the ponies at all during winter. The amount of assistance Shayi Camp could render Zhao Hui now that the bridle paths had collapsed was too minimal, and the Changzhu camp still had no reinforcements to back them. When Guo Weili had been stationed here, the Three Great Training Divisions of Liuyang led by Zhao Hui served as his reinforcements. But now that Zhao Hui had stepped to the fore, all he had to back him up was the remaining troops who were guarding the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path. Moreover, those troops had no direct access to him due to the heavy snow.

“The supplies have already made it here,” Xiao Fangxu looked back at Xiao Chiye. “Hasen’s ambush will surely take place these two days.”

If they continued waiting it out, Xiao Chiye would have to move up north, and Hasen would have missed his opportunity.

“Early tomorrow morning, I will lead Squad Three to lie in wait over here.” Xiao Fangxu shifted his fingers. “Qianqiu will guard the camp, and Old Jiang will head over from around the back. We’ll form a net here. At the very least, we have to knock Hasen off his momentum. This lad is not only good at field operations but also in going on the offensive and

defensive; we can't let him find a place that can provide him with cover. All we can do is to box him in on the snowfield."

The Armored Cavalry was a wall in motion. If they flanked him from both sides, Hasen would have no choice but to collide into a wall. Restricting the pace of the Biansha Cavalry's advancement was equivalent to chopping off their legs. Even after they fell to the ground, the Libei Armored Cavalry would still remain a wall that would prove tough for the Biansha's scimitars and piked daggers to break out of.

Xiao Chiye did not leave after the meeting ended.

Zuo Qianqiu came over and patted Xiao Chiye on his right arm. "Have your wounds healed?"

Xiao Chiye lifted up his arm and moved it around. "No problem there with holding a blade or pulling a bow."

"We have to thank Lanzhou during the spring festival." Zuo Qianqiu said with a laugh. "The winter coats this time are all real cotton. For the last few years, the clothes that were delivered by Qudu were all padded with paper scraps. Your Eldest Sister-in-law wrote to say that she would personally cook a meal to thank Lanzhou when he comes."

Xiao Chiye glanced at Xiao Fangxu, then replied humbly. "This is what he ought to do; it's nothing deserving of thanks from Eldest Sister-in-law. A couple of days ago, he even sent a letter to announce that the new year gifts had been prepared; all that's left is for the new year to come around."

Xiao Fangxu sprinkled fine salt into his own bowl, as though he had not heard their conversation.

So Zuo Qianqiu said, "Your father praised him for quite a number of days. During the spring festival, let's—"

Xiao Fangxu said with certainty. "Nope, I've never praised him before."

"Right." Zuo Qianqiu threw Xiao Chiye a meaningful glance, "I was the one showering him with praise!"

"Why aren't you retiring to your tent for the night?" Xiao Fangxu asked Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye watched him drink up his milk tea before responding. "Will you be donning heavy armor when you head out to lay an ambush tomorrow?"

"How am I supposed to intercept Hasen without wearing it?" Xiao Fangxu set his bowl aside. "He's even better at warfare than Amu'er."

“Then take off your helmet,” Xiao Chiye said, “There could be scorpions hidden among Hasen’s troops.”

“Without our helmets, how can we be considered an iron wall? If we want to obstruct them in the snowfields, this is our only option.” Xiao Fangxu warmed up his fingers together and contemplated for a while. “According to your report, there are very few scorpions, and it would be too much of a strain for them to fend against the present Libei Armored Cavalry. Even if there are scorpions among Hasen’s troops, there could only be a scattering of them.”

“The Armored Cavalry is too heavy.” Xiao Chiye looked at Xiao Fangxu. “It’s imperative for the Armored Cavalry to make changes after the beginning of spring next year. If we want to force the Biansha Cavalry back to the east, we have to be prepared for all possibilities.”

“You want to strip off layers of the Armored Cavalry’s armor to lighten its weight,” Xiao Fangxu finally turned his head, “Yet you still can’t match their speed.”

Xiao Chiye did not utter a word as he locked eyes with Xiao Fangxu.

“The troops you trained in Qudu were all infantrymen, and your experience with battling on horseback comes from Lu Guangbai. But Libei doesn’t have the natural geographical advantage that the Bianjun Commandery has. If we want to possess a wall, we can only rely on heavy armor.” Xiao Fangxu tossed a few pieces of coal into the brazier. “Your eldest brother shed the weight of the Libei Armored Cavalry, but we’re still unable to break through that line in the east.”

Xiao Fangxu looked at the brazier.

“Amu’er’s transformations are simply too fast. He has gotten a clear handle on the Libei Armored Cavalry in the past few decades. There is no way simple additions and subtractions can stand up to such a Biansha Cavalry. The Armored Cavalry must make changes like never before.”

This was the predicament of the Libei Armored Cavalry. Amu’er succeeded in his training of the scorpion unit, and looking at the result of their last confrontation, the hammers of this squad were the Libei Armored Cavalry’s nemesis. But would simply removing the helmet be enough of a countermeasure? This would mean that cracks had already begun to show in the Libei Armored Cavalry’s heavy armor, and this put Xiao Fangxu at a loss what to do. Still, he had no choice but to continue taking the risk, because this was the only advantage the Libei Armored Cavalry had left. If

they discarded this advantage, they would not be able to hold their own even against the ordinary Biansha Cavalry.

Amu'er was truly a genius, and Hasen was pretty remarkable too. Biansha was now exhibiting certain signs of rejuvenation. It even occurred to Xiao Fangxu that Amu'er would be able to completely merge the Twelve Tribes by winter next year at the latest. When the time comes, the entire frontline on the eastern side of Dazhou would become a war zone.

This was the key reason Qi Zhuyin refused to head up north and fall foul of Libei. She had also seen this monstrous beast from where she stood in Qidong. This was why she could not intimidate Libei because of the strife in Qudu, for they would inevitably stand on the same battlefield in the future; the enemy had already gotten powerful to the point that it was terrifying.

What should they do?

Xiao Chiye pillowed his head upon his arms as he lay in bed and contemplated this question over and over in the dark of night.

They possessed the best military craftsmen in the world, and they had a staggering number of them, yet they had no recourse against Amu'er. This was almost about to be a kind of humiliation.

There was no way Amu'er was invulnerable.

The Biansha Cavalry had their weaknesses too, except that these weaknesses were obscured by their unbelievable speed. They had to remove these from the equation and find a new breakthrough. But it was at this moment that Xiao Chiye was hit with the realization of his own unfamiliarity. He had crossed swords with the Biansha Cavalry far too few times, and all his countermeasures against the Biansha Cavalry were merely armchair strategies. He could not continue to conceive tactics by seeing his foes through a hazy mist.

Xiao Chiye could not fall asleep. He turned over and got up to put on his coat. He stepped out of his tent, where he saw Xiao Fangxu conversing with the soldiers in the camp. When Xiao Fangxu noticed his presence, he patted the space next to him and handed him a bowl of milk tea after he sat down.

"It's taboo not to sleep when you have to leave for war tomorrow morning." Xiao Chiye sipped the warm milk tea.

"When I was the same age as you, I was still bursting with energy even after staying up for three days." Xiao Fangxu's coat was old and worn, and

its edges were extremely frayed. It had been mended over and over by Lu Yizhi, but even so, he refused to switch to a new one, because this had been sewn by his wife.

Xiao Chiye gulped down the tea, frowning as he replied. "That was donkey's years ago."

As the fire crackled, father and son sat shoulder to shoulder for a long while.

Xiao Fangxu asked, "Realized how exhausting this is yet?"

Xiao Chiye did not respond.

Xiao Fangxu thus looked at his youngest son. After a moment, he spoke up, "You used to want to fly, so you fought to the death to succeed with Meng, and you're still doing the same now that you want to win."

Xiao Chiye heaved a sigh. "And whose bad habit is this?"

Xiao Fangxu let loose a laugh. "Not mine. Your mother's."

Xiao Chiye rubbed his fingers along the rim of the bowl and paused for a moment. "You lost to Amu'er at twenty-three; I lost to Hasen at twenty-three."

"It took me seven years to collect my dues for this debt." Firelight that enveloped Xiao Fangxu's facial features accentuated them, making him appear all the more handsome, and more dignified and awe-inspiring than Xiao Chiye. "You understand how that feels. When I lost to him, I couldn't find my way forward. I even thought for a while that I didn't have the talent to be commander-in-chief. I've seen many outstanding commanding generals at Luoxia Pass, many of whom are real geniuses. I suppose you've no idea about this, but," The corner of Xiao Fangxu's mouth curled up in a smile. "Qi Shiyu was the one in the limelight at that time. He turned Qidong into a force to behold. The chief commander of the five commanderies was truly too strong. I looked at him and at them, and I thought I had no talent. There was no way I could stand on the same battlefields as them."

The firelight flickered, and a warring scene of glinting spears and armored horses manifested in the shadows. The military banner flapped so hard it looked as if it was going to be torn apart, but it was very peaceful here, as if this was the most stable, tranquil corner of this world.

Xiao Fangxu spread out his right hand and said with downcast eyes, "I lost my first battle steed in that battle. However, the Biansha Cavalry left me too little time—they made me extract myself out of that slump swiftly. I could no longer wait for the others, nor feel sorry for myself. When I stood

at the very front, I realized that I did not want to lose at all. I only wanted to win.”

Win.

Such a wild ambition sustained Xiao Fangxu and kept him going. It brought him countless motivation and ultimate glory. In those seven years, he never dared to stop for a moment. Every single day, he was looking out in the distance at Hongyan Mountains. He had seen through himself. That had been a swift and resolute transformation. He overcame all difficulties, even at the expense of offending his former commanding general to build a stable at Luoxia Pass. This alone took him three whole years. By the time he truly accomplished it, he was already twenty-eight years old.

Xiao Fangxu scrutinized the lines in his palm and said, “You returned to Libei and focused your attention on both the ‘Armored Cavalry’ and ‘Imperial Army’, but you never thought to look at the commanding generals. Guo Weili hurt Gu Jin, and a feud was thus formed between both of you, but Guo Weili’s meritorious services are legitimate. He is your elder brother’s vanguard at Changzhu Camp, and his defense of the Tudalong Banner is impregnable. Jiang Sheng is a veteran. He has hardly been in the limelight, but the Sha’er Camp, which he is at, is the pivot that holds the lines between boundaries together. He is the foundation that supports us all, whether up north or down south. A-Ye, what you possess is not just that bit of soldiers, but also the experience that countless soldiers and officers have amassed. You went to Zhongbo back then and met Lu Guangbai, but now that you’re back in Libei, you aren’t willing to learn anything new. Men who are the most familiar with the battlefields of Libei are already standing before you. You’ve wasted too much time.”

Xiao Chiye tightened his grip on the teacup.

“You want this position.” Xiao Fangxu slowly clenched his fist. It was as if he was asking both Xiao Chiye and himself at the same time. “But are you truly qualified enough?”

Before Xiao Chiye returned to Libei, he had already been rejected by its commanding generals. It was hard for him to describe that feeling; he had indeed felt hurt. He no longer got into any disputes with these people afterward, but it was also from then on that they went their separate ways. Xiao Chiye had been back for so long, and the Imperial Army was still the Imperial Army. When he stood within the military tent, he was just so glaringly different from the rest of the commanding generals. He did not

need these people to apply ointment for him when he got injured. They gave off the appearance of unity, but they were divided at heart; they could not become one.

The tea on the fire started boiling and bubbling over. Xiao Chiye felt that he was like the wolf straying at the edge of the pack. He seemed to have returned, but in truth, he was still standing in the same spot. He watched these people fight with all their might, but there was no place for him among them.

"You don't need seven years to defeat Hasen." Xiao Fangxu gazed at Xiao Chiye and said, "But you must learn to be tolerant."

Xiao Fangxu left the camp at the hour of chen. The snow fell even more heavily today, which made it easier to get blinded without the helmet acting as a shield. Before he put on his helmet, he whistled at Xiao Chiye. Xiao Chiye came to stand beside the horse, and he tousled Xiao Chiye's hair.

"It's too dangerous to advance your troops on snowy nights. Wait for the hour of mao tomorrow before you set off for the north." As Xiao Fangxu spoke, he put on his helmet. His voice sounded muffled inside of it. "We'll discuss the detailed route when I return."

"The hour of chou at the latest." Xiao Chiye said. "The snow is too heavy. Any later, and you'll lose your way."

"That will depend on the situation." Xiao Fangxu pulled the reins. "I'm leaving."

Xiao Chiye watched as Xiao Fangxu led his troops out of the camp. Those armored hooves heading north resembled a wandering dragon that was swallowed up by the snow and fog in the blink of an eye. He stood for a while longer, then turned and went into the tent to catch up on his sleep.

Xiao Chiye fell into a deep sleep this time around and awoke to the sound of horse hooves. He was not in good spirits, and it took him a few moments of coming around to realize that it was already dark. He sat up and put his clothes on. When he stepped out, he saw soldiers all over the camp. Chen Yang and Gu Jin, who were meant to be on duty at the entrance, were both missing.

Xiao Chiye turned around and grabbed hold of someone to ask. "What's going on?"

"Sha'er camp met with an ambush!" The junior soldier put on his armor swiftly and bowed in a hurry to Xiao Chiye. "We are going to mobilize troops south now to provide reinforcements!"



Xiao Chiye quickly made his way to the front of the military tent. When he lifted the flap, he was met with the sight of a fully dressed Zuo Qianqiu. The latter was just about to step out. Xiao Chiye asked, "Jiang Sheng hasn't returned yet?"

Zuo Qianqiu took large strides forward with a grave expression. "No, it's likely he was stalled. This was a plan to lure us away from the base. Unfortunately, Hasen's presence at Tudalong Banner was but a farce; his real objective is to ambush Sha'er camp."

The bridle paths connecting Sha'er camp and Shasan camp had been blocked off. Jiang Sheng had made a detour to lay in ambush together with Xiao Fangxu, resulting in a sharp decrease in the number of troops left to defend the camp. Shayi camp was all they could count on to make up for this shortage.

"A-Ye," Zuo Qianqiu said before mounting his horse. "You have to hold down the fort here; there are still provisions in the camp."

Xiao Chiye said, "I don't have the authority to mobilize troops."

"You can't lead the convoy squad north." Zuo Qianqiu steered the horse around. "Stay here and wait for your father to come back!"

His horse had already galloped off at the last drop of his words.

Xiao Chiye took a couple of steps back to make way for the cavalry behind him. He scanned the vicinity and spotted Chen Yang amidst the chaos before him.

"Gu Jin has gone up north to inform his lordship of the situation," Chen Yang hurried over to Xiao Chiye's side. "The snow is too heavy; even Meng can't fly in this weather. Gu Jin is the only one who is able to find his way through the snow at night."

Xiao Chiye asked. "What time did he leave?"

"An hour ago," Chen Yang estimated the time. "He will only be back by the hour of mao."

Xiao Chiye froze for a second, then continued to ask, "The hour of chou has already passed?"

"It's currently three quarters past the hour of chou," Chen Yang glanced worriedly at Xiao Chiye, "... any traces of their tracks have all been covered up by the snow. Squad Three is probably still in the snowfields, but Jiang Sheng is there too. Master, his lordship's military strength far exceeds that of Hasen; he'll definitely be able to make it back by the hour of mao."

Anxiety began to eat away at Xiao Chiye; this was an emotion that proved tough to vent. He did not have the authority to mobilize troops, and the manpower left in Shayi camp was not sufficient to sustain a trip up north. All he could do was wait.

This was a plan to lure them away from their base, but what did Hasen intend to achieve by launching a sneak attack on Sha'er camp?

Xiao Chiye stared at the map and lifted his finger to trace along the line that Xiao Fangxu had drawn. That sense of unease started to pervade his entire being, gnawing at him. He seemed to be still standing in Tudalong Banner that rainy night, standing in confrontation with Hasen across the curtain of rain.

Sha'er camp's food supplies were still in Shayi camp. As Xiao Chiye had only arrived last night, Jiang Sheng did not manage to transfer the provisions in time. Sha'er camp's route down to the south had been obstructed by the heavy snow, so raiding Sha'er camp would neither garner them any food supplies, nor pose a threat to the Shasan camp.

So why?

Xiao Chiye asked himself in the face of these intricate and complicated routes.

The hour of yin passed too slowly. Xiao Chiye kept asking for the time in the military tent. He paced back and forth in the same place and rubbed away those haphazardly drawn lines. He gradually stopped tracing Xiao Fangxu's path and put himself in Hasen's position.

Hasen was an accomplished hunter who was familiar with the bridle paths of Libei—this was already evident back then at the Tudalong Banner. He wore Zhao Hui down, and the blizzard became his cover, allowing him to move in and out of the snowfields with ease.

Xiao Chiye stopped in his tracks and repeated those words earlier. A chill ran down his spine, so cutting was it that his fingers stiffened.

Exceptional hunters would not reveal their targets easily. They were patient, and any weaknesses they exposed were all pretenses to lure in the enemies. Hasen could move freely on the snowfields, which meant that he must know the routes in the north like the back of his hand. He knew which section of the road was suitable for an ambush. For the six months Hasen had been on the battlefield in the north, he had spent every day dealing with the Libei Armored Cavalry. He was practicing all this time; he already had a clear handle on Xiao Fangxu's rhythm.

This was a trap. Hasen trapped Xiao Fangxu the same way he had trapped Xiao Chiye. He never thought to launch a sneak attack on Changzhu Camp in the snowstorm, and he had no interest in the Sha'er camp. He went around in such a big circle, and this was all for the sake of a target called Xiao Fangxu.

Xiao Chiye abruptly pulled the tent flap open and bumped into Chen Yang's head-on.

Chen Yang staggered back and blurted out in a hurry before he got the chance to pay his obeisances, "Gu Jin is back!"

Xiao Chiye looked out. Not only was Gu Jin back, but even Jiang Sheng had also returned. Xiao Chiye approached them briskly and pushed aside the Armored Cavalry, who was standing in his way. He kept searching, but no, Xiao Fangxu was not among them.

Jiang Sheng, who was badly injured, was carried back on a stretcher. The color drained from Xiao Chiye's face when he saw that smashed helmet, and he hissed, "Fuck!"

"It's the scorpions." Gu Jin wiped his face vigorously with the corner of his clothes and said in a hoarse voice, "Master, they hid behind the armors. They had our tokens on them. They disguised themselves as the Libei Armored Cavalry at the old relay station in Tudalong Banner, and they deceived every one of us!"

"Where is my father?" Xiao Chiye grabbed the front of Gu Jin's clothes and enunciated each word of his question.

"... Ambushed." Half of Jian Sheng's face was covered in blood. The ringing in his ears was pretty bad. With fingers bent, he gripped the edge of the stretcher and mumbled somewhat incoherently, "It happened right under our nose. They are too fast..."

Gu Jin bit down so hard on his lips they blanched. It was with difficulty that he said under Xiao Chiye's gaze, "I didn't find him, Master..."

Xiao Chiye shoved Gu Jin aside. He whistled before he remembered that he had not brought Lang Tao Xue Jin over. He strode a few steps over to the stable and led a horse out before mounting it.

Wu Ziyu tried to stop Xiao Chiye's horse. "Viceroy, you don't have authority to mobilize troops. You'll be dismissed and investigated for arbitrarily heading up north without permission! We have to first send a message to Sha'er Camp and report—"

Without looking at Wu Ziyu, Xiao Chiye cracked the horsewhip and shot forth like a sharp arrow.

“Damn it!” Wu Ziyu flung down his helmet where he stood and shouted to his left and right, “Quick, report it to Sha’er camp!”

Xiao Chiye galloped among the boundless expanse of heavy snow. The wind tore at his sleeves as he charged along the hoofprints towards the northwest. The cold was penetrating, and very quickly, his freezing hands that were gripping the reins turned purplish red. The horse could not keep up with galloping at such speed, so he could only trudge through the heavy snow on foot. With his keen sense of smell, he tracked his way deep into the snowstorm through the devastated battlefield, where he found Xiao Fangxu in the dark.

Xiao Chiye covered his eyes with his frozen fingers and wiped away at them hastily, but a sound he could not contain escaped from his throat. The wind of the Hongyan Mountains tousled Xiao Chiye’s hair. It was here he stood helplessly, until he eventually burst into gut-wrenching sobs.

“Give it back...” Xiao Chiye slid to his knees, torn asunder with grief and anguish as he choked with sobs at the deserted battlefield, “Give him back to me!”

Hasen had taken away his father’s head.



## CHAPTER 186: BLIZZARD

The boundary between heaven and earth was blurred as a blizzard assaulted the battlegrounds and completely engulfed the eastern mountain range of the Hongyan Mountains. No matter where the eyes roamed, it was a boundless expanse of white snow.

Hasen had initially left, but the snowstorm tonight was too strong. Worried about losing his bearings in the snowfields, he could only head back to the abandoned relay station. The scorpions that Hasen was leading this time all possessed faces that bore a striking resemblance to the Dazhou natives. They had already taken off the layer of armor they had worn as their disguise and were currently sitting around together drinking tea.

“Zhou...” One of the scorpions wiped at the token and struggled to discern the text on it under the glow of the fire. “This one’s surnamed Zhou, huh.”

“Mine’s surnamed Fu,” Another person raised a token. “It’s a man from Dajing.”

“Wolves all hail from Dajing.” A bearded man with a scar looked around at these younger generations jesting around before his gaze finally landed on Hasen, who had been silent throughout. “You slew the King of Wolves tonight. Hasen, from now on, you reign supreme on the battlefields in the north.”

The northern battlegrounds had always belonged to the King of Wolves. Having occupied the highest peak of Hongyan Mountains with his valiance and prowess, Xiao Fangxu had, for the last twenty years, struck fear in the hearts of the Twelve Tribes of Biansha at the mere mention of his name. Everyone present was acutely familiar with the legends surrounding him. Tonight, they had returned victorious, and the person they had slain was no ordinary mortal, but the god of Libei.

Hasen, who was drinking his tea, smiled shyly at Wulihan after hearing what the latter had said.

Hasen had always possessed an understated intelligence, but after tonight, no one would dare to belittle him. Wulihan could already predict just how fast Biansha would raze through Libei in the next few years. They understood the present Libei all too well. Xiao Jiming had yet to recover from his serious injuries, and Xiao Chiye was still a fledgling wet behind his ears. In addition, there was a severe dearth of commanding generals, and

Libei was facing an insurmountable winter. Hasen had been waiting for this moment for a very long time.

“But you don’t look very happy,” Wulihan said.

“Not quite what I expected.” Hasen held up the bowl with both hands and remembered his war trophy. “I grew up listening to legends of him. He’s invincible, coming from my father’s mouth.”

“The Hero will be proud of you.” Wulihan thought for a moment. “What you have hacked off tonight is also the head of the Libei Armored Cavalry.”<sup>21</sup>

Hasen drank his tea and did not answer.

But Wulihan was right. It was also the Libei Armored Cavalry’s head that Hasen had severed this night. All along, this iron wall standing in the north had seemed to be so indestructible. But when Hasen was truly standing here, he found a fatal vulnerability in the chink of the Libei Armored Cavalry’s armor.

This troop was far too centralized. Although their faith was born of the land they stood on, they were overly reliant on their commander-in-chief. The amount of time since their establishment had been too short, and as a result every single soldier had their eyes locked on Xiao Fangxu. It was as though as long as Xiao Fangxu was there, the Libei Armored Cavalry would be invincible and triumphant in every battle.

Amu’er understood this principle, as did Hasen. The reign of Tianchen was the turning point in which the Libei Armored Cavalry was no longer in the position to hold the initiative. Xiao Jiming’s retreat symbolized the beginning of its collapse, and Xiao Fangxu’s comeback made Hasen certain that this was where the crux of the Libei Armored Cavalry lay. Hasen’s transfer to the battlefield in the north was meant for him to familiarize himself with Xiao Fangxu. He had been following Amu’er on his battles all over the land ever since he was eight years old, and the name he had heard the most in the commander tent had been Xiao Fangxu. At a time when Xiao Fangxu still knew nothing of him, he already knew of Xiao Fangxu’s military habits.

Hasen did not want to win just one battle. He wanted all fronts of Libei to topple. As to who would be grief-stricken over this, it was not something he should consider, just like how Libei had never been considerate of Biansha’s sufferings. Hasen wanted to crush his opponent with all he got. He wanted to pierce through his opponent’s heart, so that his opponent

could never recover from the setback. The time for Biansha to turn the tables was now. They contended and tussled, sharpening their respective fangs in that accumulating debt of blood. To both parties, excessive compassion was tantamount to suicide.

The scorpions scattered when the fire was about to go out and looked for a corner in which to rest. With Wulihan taking the night watch, Hasen leaned against the old cabinet and closed his eyes.

The frigid wind outside howled against the eaves, sending the wind chimes hanging at the entrance of the relay station clinking and clanking violently. All that was left in the world was black and white as the night and snow tore into each other. Snowflakes that resembled tattered wads of cotton piled up to form snow dunes, and footprints left in the snow were soon swallowed up.

The scorpion standing outside the relay station taking a piss had yet to untie his pants when he was clutched by the throat. An imperceptible “crack” followed right after, and the scorpion’s body was slowly lowered to the ground.

Wulihan, who had an acute sense of hearing, almost immediately lifted his hand to reach for his iron hammer. He stared menacingly at the door panel and whispered, “Here comes the wolf.”

The scorpion closest to the door shifted silently to lean over the crack between the door with the intent to peek, but in the very moment he bent over, a long blade suddenly plunged through the gap and pierced through his head.

No one inside the house spoke. Hasen watched calmly as that blade retracted, painting the door with a splash of crimson. The smell of blood began to pervade the air. Right after the door was shoved open, a gush of wind extinguished the fire and plunged the house into darkness. A figure that bore a striking resemblance to Xiao Fangxu stood in the doorway, nearly causing Wulihan to break out in cold sweat.

In that long, endless silence, the scorpions within the house burst into action. They had lost nearly half of their own men when they encircled Xiao Fangxu to kill him, and the remaining scorpions were already beyond exhausted. The fear of being stabbed through and through by the King of Wolf reasserted itself again. The scorpions prayed the wolf pup did not have the same arm strength as his father, but when they came into contact with him, they were all nailed to the floor.



That bit of light peeking in from the entrance was blocked out too. Thick, viscous blood splattered onto their faces. Wulihan did not wipe it off. He swung his hammer towards Xiao Chiye right in the face—the same way he smashed it towards Xiao Fangxu.

But Xiao Chiye stopped Wulihan's forearm in tracks. Closely encircled on all sides with little space left, he did not turn around the blade he had just pulled out from the corpse but smashed the demonhead on the hilt<sup>22</sup> into Wulihan's face. Wulihan staggered, wanting to draw back, but Xiao Chiye did not release his grip, and the scorpion behind him hung on to his blade, so he immediately let go of Langli Blade and punched Wulihan over with his bare fist.

Wulihan's muscular body crashed into the pile of burning firewood, knocking it over. His face was drenched in blood, and he could feel that the bridge of his nose was broken. He shook his head. The impact of that heavy blow made him temporarily deaf in both ears, and for a time, he could not even see before him clearly. He spat out the tooth that had been punched off and said somewhat unintelligibly, "Kill him!"

Hasen sensed a pair of eyes locked on him. From the moment the door opened, this was a line of sight that would not permit him to ignore. Hasen knew what Xiao Chiye had come for, but he would not return it to Xiao Chiye, for that was the medal he was determined to hold on to.

Hasen gripped his piked dagger, but Xiao Chiye did not give Hasen the opportunity. He lifted a scorpion and held him up before the dagger, making use of that sturdy human body to slam Hasen against the cabinet. Xiao Chiye's fist missed its target, and the cabinet door promptly burst apart. The cabinet behind Hasen collapsed with a loud crash, which gave Hasen some leeway to catch his breath. The sudden assault of his piked dagger was swift and fierce, but this time, Xiao Chiye did not dodge it. Instead, he grasped it and wrenched it towards himself.

Hasen had experienced for himself Xiao Chiye's strength back at the Tudalong Banner. He was unable to seize his dagger back, and at the exact moment he let go, he crouched over at the waist to dodge Xiao Chiye's blow.

Xiao Chiye did not throw away the dagger. He was now pinned down by Wulihan, who had pounced on him from the side. That hillock-like body slammed Xiao Chiye against the wall, and Wulihan returned him a heavy punch. The fist smashed into him like a slab of brick, causing him to bleed

from his mouth. At the same time he took the punch, Xiao Chiye grabbed hold of Wulihan's collar, deflected his head to the side to dodge the blow, and followed up with a head slam to the injured bridge of Wulihan's nose.

Wulihan hastily covered his nose and mouth, and Xiao Chiye turned the dagger around with his fingers. Grasping that sharp, protruding tip, he jammed the dagger between the gap of his fingers and slammed a fist into Wulihan's face, which failed to move out of the way in time.

Wulihan let loose a howl of fury. The dagger was embedded in his entire right eye, and the pain made his entire body convulse with tremors. Blood poured profusely as he bent over and cursed in the Biansha tongue.

Xiao Chiye did not let Wulihan off. He yanked Wulihan by the hair and took a few quick steps to slam Wulihan's head hard against the wall. The chilling sounds of the impact persisted a few more times until the wall was awash in blood. The scorpion behind Xiao Chiye pounced and hung on to Xiao Chiye's back as he prepared to flip him over, but Xiao Chiye did not move. He backhandedly felt for the scimitar on the scorpion's waist and released his grip on Wulihan.

Wulihan cried out in pain and stumbled back. He had only taken two steps when he felt a cool sensation on his neck. Before he could even react, his blood spurt out like a fountain, and his head went tumbling.

Xiao Chiye lifted his hand to wipe at the metallic stench of blood, revealing in the darkness a pair of extremely bright eyes—eyes that brimmed over with frenzied insanity and hatred. This gave him the appearance of a ravenous wolf, one whose sense of reason had all been devoured whole by this bout of heavy snow. He stared at Hasen and said, one word at a time, “Give my father back to me.”

Hasen brushed back the red hair that was hanging over his eyes and looked at Xiao Chiye as he said in a cold, detached voice, “Then, when will your father give my brother back to me?”

Xiao Chiye had already sprung closer. He had no wish to hear Hasen speak at all. As both men wrestled with one another, they crashed through the window and rolled into the snowstorm.

Hasen struck back with all his might and knocked Xiao Chiye down into the snow, then nimbly straightened up and stepped back as he gasped for breath. In a cold voice, he said, “Your father's armored hooves trampled his head into a pulp. Right in the midst of a blizzard. He left his corpse out there in the wilderness.”

Xiao Chiye propped himself up into a standing position and spat out the froth of blood in his mouth.

Hasen twirled out a new piked dagger between his fingers. He slid those fingers along the cold gleam of the blade and said expressionlessly, "I'm merely returning the favor tit for tat."

Both men collided together again once more. The snow blew so hard amidst the roaring wind that it stung the eyes, and the gasps of their breath sounded so very guttural. Even heaven and earth were howling. Xiao Chiye locked Hasen's throat in a viselike grip and lifted Hasen to smash Hasen's back against the damaged wall of the relay station. The force of the impact jolted the flakes of snow off the wall. Hasen grabbed Xiao Chiye's right arm and twisted it with all his might, nearly breaking it.

Xiao Chiye's right hand went numb, and his old injury caused him to lose his grip, allowing Hasen to break free once again. The next instant, the remaining scorpions wrapped their arms around both of Xiao Chiye's legs, causing his entire person to tumble into the snow. Hasen grabbed the opportunity and thrust the piked dagger towards Xiao Chiye's nape from the back. Xiao Chiye braced his elbow against the ground and took the stab to the back of his left shoulder, avoiding his vital spots.

Hasen tried to pull out the piked dagger, but Xiao Chiye backhandedly covered the back of Hasen's head with his hand and slammed Hasen's head down towards the ground with terrifying force, where he then held it firmly in place in the snow. Blood swiftly stained his shoulder. The dagger that had yet to be pulled out rose and fell along with each of his gasps for breath.

Hasen pressed both palms against the snowy ground, and a hoarse sound escaped from his throat, but he could not lift his head. There was no way he could make Xiao Chiye's palm budge at all.

Xiao Chiye yanked Hasen's red hair hard, his eyes red as he bellowed in a raspy voice, "GIVE. HIM. BACK. TO. ME!"

## CHAPTER 187: APPROACH

Hasen was panting heavily. His cheek stung from being scraped by the ice on the snowfield, and the nape of his neck had turned red from exertion. The howl of the wind behind Xiao Chiye's back intensified, and the sudden swing of an iron hammer knocked him over. Seizing his opportunity, Hasen climbed to his feet and spat out the ice in his mouth.

The scorpions had suffered heavy losses this time. Of the remaining ten or so men who had crossed paths with Xiao Chiye, there were only a few still alive now. A scorpion on night patrol in the far distance blew the horn. Hasen backed off, knowing from the wind that the pack of wolves was currently charging this way.

Hasen flipped onto his horse, albeit unwillingly. His hand fell to the hilt of his scimitar, but before he could do anything, the gyrfalcon in the sky swooped down, its cry erupting in his ears. Following right after, a long arrow burst through the snowstorm under the billowy darkness of the night and hurtled straight for his head.

Xiao Chiye braced himself against the ground. His back was soaked through, but he could not tell if it was blood or sweat. With sticky fingers, he grabbed a handful of snow and stuffed it into his mouth, swallowing down the blood between his teeth. At the same time he climbed to his feet, he lunged for Hasen.

Hasen was almost dragged down by this force. He struck back with his elbow, but Xiao Chiye lifted his palm to grab hold of it. Then, Hasen's world turned topsy-turvy as Xiao Chiye flung him over. Before Hasen could return a strike, a punch from Xiao Chiye made him choke out bile. Hasen hissed as he felt the ache in his mouth. He kicked Xiao Chiye hard in the chest and immediately rose swiftly with aid from his elbows.

But Xiao Chiye was too tough of a nut to deal with! There was no way he could escape without taking Xiao Chiye out.

Hasen understood this feeling. He broke into a run with the horse and braced himself with his arms to flip onto it before Xiao Chiye made his next attack. He blew his whistle, then ripped off the sack hanging at the side of the horse and held it up high at Xiao Chiye. Hasen's fingers clenched tightly at that sack—never had he felt unable to take it lying down so intensely. But the very next moment, he flung the sack out. His voice cut through the wind as he said with detest at the same time he turned his horse around, "After

tonight, my name will overshadow the Libei Armored Cavalry. I'll make you people pay back double for what you owed me since the battles on the eastern mountain ranges." His red hair flared ostentatiously, like the manifestation of his hatred. "Take your father and scram!"

Xiao Chiye instantly understood what that sack was. The bitter wind raged. He staggered over the snow and dashed over with all he had. As he fell and rolled over, he caught hold of the sack firmly.

Hasen instantly cracked his horsewhip and galloped away into the vast expanse of heavy snow.

Xiao Chiye lay on the ground, hugging that sack as he stared at the dome of heaven. He clenched his teeth even as his chest heaved heavily, unwilling as he was to shed another tear. But he could not control the sobs.

He could *not*.

He could not look at Xiao Fangxu in his arms.

The Armored Cavalry swarmed over, and Zuo Qianqiu took the lead in tumbling down his horse. Countless helmets were removed in the ensuing silence.

Heavy snow buried Xiao Chiye. He heard the wails of the Hongyan Mountains. He no longer had the strength to stand up, for his limbs were already numb. He stared fixedly at the sky, feeling as though he had died.

The Libei Armored Cavalry suffered their first fatal blow in twenty years, having been stabbed through and through. Hasen was right. After tonight, the Libei Armored Cavalry would live in his shadow. He had used tens of scorpions to sever the dignity of the Libei Armored Cavalry.

This was too endless a night.

The iron wall of Libei collapsed with a crash, leaving countless men exposed on the outside. Armor was no longer their advantage. There were like wandering souls who had been expelled here, unable to find refuge.

Xiao Jiming waited to receive his father in Dajing. The entire city was silent when the horse carriage rolled in. Suppressed sounds of crying rose and fell.

Xiao Jiming did not cry. He was neatly dressed and properly crowned as he walked down the stairs, one step at a time, to stand before the carriage. A never-ending silence followed. His body, wrecked with severe injuries, seemed to have shrunk some. In that heavy snow, his face was pale.

A veil of gloom was cast over the firmament. The news spread throughout Dazhou a few days later. Qudu removed the banners of the Eight Great Training Divisions. But as Xiao Chiye still had the charge of regicide hanging over his head, Qudu did not issue a eulogy to Libei, instead, they merely took down the colored lanterns on the streets and hung up white flowers.

Qi Zhuyin, sans armor and hairpin, led a unit of guards hurriedly through the snow towards Libei.

Xiao Fangxu was a legend. A junior soldier of the Luoxia Pass who conquered the eastern mountain ranges of the Hongyan Mountains, he was the last person out of the Four Generals of that generation to make a name for himself. Yet, he was the one and only person out of the four to be conferred with the title of a prince. At the present time, Lu Pingyan was in ill health, Qi Shiyu was retired, and Feng Yisheng and Xiao Fangxu had both successively perished in the war. The four generals from the early days of the Yongyi reign had all fallen into obscurity. Thirty years had gone by in a rush, and those high-spirited youths with boundless enthusiasm had all returned to the lands they belonged.



Xiao Chiye was a picture of calm after Xiao Fangxu's burial. His howls and cries seemed to have been buried in that bout of heavy snow, vanished without a trace after he seized his father back. He ate and changed his dressing as usual, but at night, Shen Zechuan could not hear Xiao Chiye's breathing.

He seemed to have fallen into a certain kind of deep slumber, languishing as he greeted each new day.

"I'll now give you an account of the ambush that snowy night." Jiang Sheng stood bandaged in the hall and said to the commanding generals. "On day eight of the twelfth month, while His Lordship was in the Shayi Camp, he decided to lay an ambush. He then personally led Squad Three of Shayi Camp up north. I was to go around from the back to provide support. The aim was to intercept Hasen in the east of the Tudalong Banner. The snowstorm was especially heavy that day. We waited until the hour of you before we encountered Hasen's elite forces. Both troops engaged in a battle, and we launched a head-on assault to Hasen's elite force, injuring nearly half of them in the process."

“While taking inventory of the remnants of the Biansha soldiers, we found that Hasen was not among them. At that time, it was already the hour of hai. We drew up a plan in the snowfield to branch out and search westward. As such, His Lordship and I split up into two. Then I came across the Biansha Cavalry to the east of the Tudalong Banner and was depleted of my remaining troops. By then, I had already sensed something amiss. Instead of continuing on westward, I took the decision into my own hands and turned back to join up with His Lordship.”

“His Lordship’s military strength had been similarly worn down, as the Biansha Cavalry kept engaging in guerrilla tactics in small groups. We stopped heading further in and decided to head back to the camp. Midway through, we arrived at the abandoned relay station of Changzhu Camp, where we met the scorpions disguised as the Libei Armored Cavalry.”

“Every one of them had the token of the Armored Cavalry at the side of their waists. They not only spoke the Dazhou language, but also with the Libei accent. They were able to answer readily and fluently. These people claimed to be subordinates of Zhao Hui’s Three Great Training Divisions of Liuyang, and having sustained severe losses from Hasen’s harassment and lost their way in the snowstorm, they were forced to stop over at the relay station.”

“How many of them?” With hands on his knees, Zhao Hui asked with a solemn expression.

“Sixty.” Jiang Sheng set the book in his hands on the table and looked towards Xiao Chiye, who was sitting at the very end. After a few moments of silence, he spoke up. “We compiled a register of names based on the tokens Second Young Master brought back. You can cross-reference it.”

Zhao Hui quickly read through the register. “These are all brothers who have died in battle.”

Guo Weili, whose voice had gone hoarse from crying too many times these few days, said, “Fuck his ancestors. They even took away the armor and tokens! We have to inform all the major camps as soon as possible to clean up the battlefields personally from now on.”

“It’s futile.”

Guo Weili immediately retorted. “How can it be fu...” His voice trailed to a stop when he saw Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye had brought back Xiao Fangxu, which made it impossible for Guo Weili to shoot his mouth off as he previously did. His expression

underwent several changes, but still, he could not hold it back, "... We have to deal with it, eventually. We can't give them any more opportunities."

"If Biansha can even equip themselves with iron hammers now, they are naturally able to counterfeit tokens as well." Zuo Qianqiu understood what Xiao Chiye meant. "The hardest part lies in how we can differentiate the scorpions from the rest."

With his cloak draped around him, Xiao Jiming contemplated it for a moment. "Recall back the tokens. We'll no longer use them. Continue with what you were saying."

Jiang Sheng continued. "Deceived by the scorpions, we lay down our blades, and that was when it all happened." At this point, he exposed half of his face. "That sort of iron hammer was custom made to go up against the Armored Cavalry. A sudden smash to the helmet will cause blurred vision, ringing ears, and blackout if you are lucky, or you'll die on the spot bleeding from the nose and mouth. My troops couldn't react in time at all, and I was knocked unconscious to the ground. I don't know what happened after."

This time, no one made a sound. They had learned about the scorpions via the private letter sent from Zhongbo, but no one could have imagined the severity of the threat that the scorpions posed.

Gu Jin bowed in greetings all around and took over from Jiang Sheng. "After an examination of the battlefield, my conjecture is as follows: Hasen failed to besiege his lordship, so he changed his tactics to outflank his lordship from both sides on the snowfield with his elusive elite troops and had his lordship trapped in the heavy snow. This consequently led to the total annihilation of Squad Three."

"Damn you. I don't believe it. His Lordship is invincible in the fields." Guo Weili stood up and irritably paced up and down. Eventually, he said with reddened eyes, "What is Hasen?! He was still sucking on milk when His Lordship was already the implicit king of the northern battlegrounds. We've been fighting in the field with Biansha for almost twenty years; there's no way the Armored Cavalry led by His Lordship can lose!"

Guo Weili was promoted by Xiao Jiming himself, but he had enlisted in the army alongside Xiao Fangxu. He could not accept this. The tactics he used to fight against Huhelu in the field when he was stationed in Changzhu camp had been learned from Xiao Jiming, and while Xiao Fangxu had



never taught him before, Guo Weili's style of combat was obviously picked up on the sly through his observations of Xiao Fangxu.

The sound of discussion in the hall increased, and the noise gradually grew to a crescendo.

They were presently like a node on the brink of collapse. Every person's nerves were stretched taut with tension as they struggled to preserve the current stability of the Libei Armored Cavalry, but the sense that they were inching towards a complete breakdown still pervaded the atmosphere.

The Prince of Libei was dead.

This phrase was like a nightmare weighing down on everyone's mind, crushing them. They were helpless against Hasen. It was as if it was only at this moment that they came to the harsh realization that the Libei Armored Cavalry had already fallen a long way behind Amu'er.

Xiao Chiye found it noisy, but he did not utter another word other than that "futile" comment of his. It was here he sat, with a splitting headache. The injuries on his shoulder and arm simultaneously assaulted his consciousness on both sides. He heard Hasen, Hasen—this name being shouted everywhere.

This word was a shadow haunting him relentlessly.

At night, Shen Zechuan could not sleep well. He had to wake up every now and then to make sure Xiao Chiye was still there, but when he awoke this night, Xiao Chiye was not inside. Shen Zechuan got up and hurried over to the doorway, where he found Xiao Chiye standing in the courtyard, dressed only in a single layer of garment.

It was snowing again.

Xiao Chiye's shoulders were blanketed with a thin layer of snow. On hearing movements, he looked back and smiled faintly at Shen Zechuan with an expression meant to reassure.

Shen Zechuan gazed at him.

Xiao Chiye's eyes gradually reddened under that gaze of his. Shen Zechuan watched Xiao Chiye's tears slide down slowly. He understood everything; to this day, Xiao Chiye was still lost in his memory of that blizzard. The wolf pup that had run alone for dozens of li had not returned at all.

Shen Zechuan pushed open the door without even putting his shoes on.

Xiao Chiye had already begun to choke with sobs. It was as if he finally found release from all that he had suppressed within him as he watched Shen Zechuan approach. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he called out, “Lanzhou...”

Shen Zechuan embraced Xiao Chiye hard and stood on tiptoe to cover the back of Xiao Chiye’s head, as if he was a barrier, taking the physically and emotionally battered Xiao Chiye completely into the protective shelter of his arms.



NOTICE:

New updated [Character Chart](#) from the QJJ Simplified CN Physical Copy! Check out the [Character Glossary](#)!

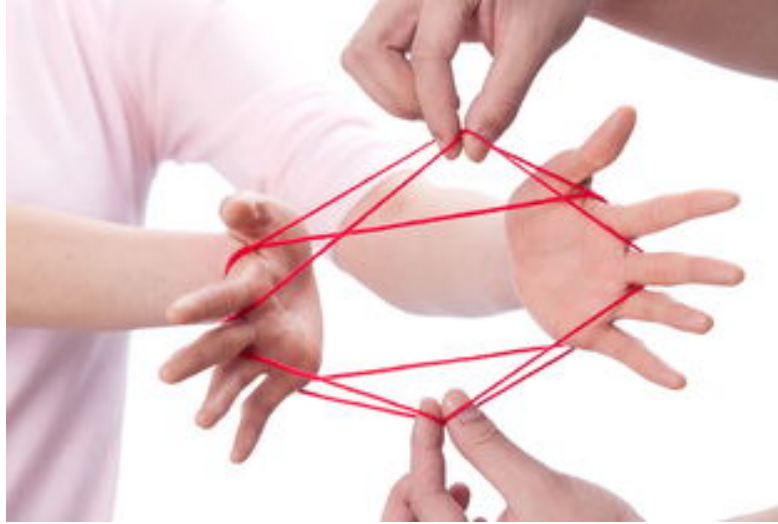


萧策安

2. 王八 refers to a tortise or pimp, but can also refer to bastard or son of a bitch (as in 王八蛋)
3. 法不责众 i.e., when the law cannot be enforced because everyone is an offender.
4. 黄册 *Huangce* or yellow registers/yellow book served during the Ming Dynasty to provide basic data for taxation and recruitment based on the household's classification according to their occupation. It was mainly divided into three categories: civilian, military, and craftsman.
5. 以战养战 using the manpower, food provisions, weaponry/armory, money, one obtained from an invaded and occupied city to fund the next battle.
6. 过年 celebration of the lunar new year.



- 7.
8. 洞门 An opening in a wall separating different courtyards within a residence or palace. It's also known as a moon gate (月亮门).
9. A play on 宝剑赠英雄, 红粉赠(送)佳人 give a precious sword to a hero, gift rouge powder to the fairer sex; i.e., give gift according to the recipient
10. 姨娘 *yiniang*, which means maternal aunt, is also a term of address for the concubines of one's father.
11. 军屯 military troops (mostly in border regions) who carry out garrison duties and farm crops to supply the border garrisons with grains.



- 12.
13. Cat's cradle, a game which involves making string figures with the hands.
14. 寒衣节 Hanyi Festival, or literally winter clothing festival, which is also called the ancestor worship festival, falls on the first day of the tenth lunar month, where winter clothes made of paper or cloth are burned in memory of the deceased ancestors. It also marks the arrival of the severe cold winter.
15. 清谈 *Qingtān* is a Chinese philosophical movement and social practice among political and intellectual elites where the literati engaged in highly sophisticated intellectual and philosophical discussions on lofty and non-mundane matters.



16.

17. 道袍 *Daopao*; not to be confused with a Daoist priest robe. This was a common robe typically worn by men in the Ming Dynasty.



18.



- 19.
20. 襦衫 *Lanshan*, a Chinese traditional hanfu made especially for scholars
21. 万物不(无)以生将恐灭 from *Daodejing* (道德经) by Laozi (Lao-tzu, 老子), also known as the founder of philosophical Daoism.
22. 道 “the Way”, or the path, is a conceptual term used by the school of thoughts, although it has different connotations for Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Daoism embraces nature. The Way, or Dao, according to Laozi and Daoists, is the natural order of the universe, and Daoism emphasizes doing what is natural and “going with the flow” in accordance with the Way, with the aim of becoming one, or in harmony, with nature.
23. The concept of “gentleman” or “man of honor” (*junzi*, 君子) in Confucianism (a different philosophical stance from Daoism), is a virtuous man who is noble in character and an exemplar for his conducts, morals, principles, etc.
24. 无为而治, 道法自然 Specifically, “govern not by interfering in all that goes against nature, for the Way models itself on what is

natural.” i.e., man should observe the law of nature and go with the flow. From Daodejing (道德经) by Laozi (老子).

25. Full line 天下有道，以道殉身；天下无道，以身殉道。(未闻以道殉乎人者也。) Specifically, “*when the Way prevails in the empire, it goes where one’s person goes; when the Way is eclipsed, one’s person goes where the Way has gone. (I have not heard of one’s Way being dependent on their manifestation in other men).*”

i.e., One must live or die with his principles, acting for himself, not with regard to other men. The Way here refers to one’s principles.

Contrary to Laozi, Mencius (or Mengzi, 孟子) subscribed to the Confucius school of thoughts, which regards the Way, or *dao*, as the way human beings ought to behave with principles and propriety in society and government. (To put it simply :V)

26. 斩首 the word here used is decapitated or beheaded, although it also implied the slaying of the Xiao Fangxu in this context, leaving the Libei Armored Cavalry headless, or without a leader.



27.

28. 鬼头 kind of carving on the hilt of the blade. See examples [here](#) or [here](#)





## CHAPTER 188: OFFENSE & DEFENSE

Libei was still deep in grief when Biansha attacked again.

After this battle, Hasen had become the indisputable and irreplaceable “*esuheri*”- or *Hero* – of the Hanshe tribe. His reputation was almost comparable to that of Amu’er’s, but he did not have time to turn around and listen to compliments. He had to seize the opportunity to strike Libei where it hurt and shift the battleground to the west of the Tudalong Banner, so that he could have the Biansha Cavalry take over the fertile pastures along the eastern mountain range of the Hongyan Mountains before the start of spring.

Shayi and Sha’er camps suffered their most brutal attack of the year. With Jiang Sheng severely injured and unable to partake, Xiao Jiming deployed Zhao Hui and Guo Weili to hold the fort, but the appearance of the scorpions caused both of them to suffer heavy casualties one after the other.

The Libei Armored Cavalry was trapped in a predicament. Stripped of their heavy armor, they would have to face a swift and furious onslaught of slaughter from the elite forces of Biansha, and the inability of the battle steeds of Libei to catch up to the Biansha Cavalry at the same time also meant that they would be unable to escape the moment they were caught in a trap. But put back on their heavy armor, and that elite unit of scorpions would pursue them relentlessly.

Guo Weili lost the three battles he fought, each time surviving by the skin of his teeth.

In the month that followed, all the frontlines of Libei came under attack. It was as though Hasen wielded a scimitar in his left hand and an iron hammer in his right, with every strike he dished out capable of landing a blow right at Libei’s most vital point. And that was not just the most terrifying part about him; Hasen was also very clear about who his opponent was every time they crossed swords on the battleground. He was extraordinarily familiar with the battlefield and had committed all the commanding generals of Libei to memory, and so he could proactively adapt and deal with anyone that came his way.

Amu’er had taught all of his “changes” to Hasen without reservation, and Hasen executed them with great skill and fun on the northern battlegrounds.



Zhao Hui practically rolled off the back of his horse. The deputy general took off his helmet for him. Refusing to let anyone support him, Zhao Hui propped himself up on the ground and threw up everything in his stomach. Both of his hands were still trembling even now. He rolled over and lay on his back in the snow, panting hard.

“Shayi Camp’s commanding general, Zhao Hui, submits his military report.” He said from this position. “We came across the scorpions in the north. Their numbers far exceeded five thousand. Squad Seven, which acts as the left flank, was completely wiped out. The center was forced to retreat. We lost, again.”

This was swiftly recorded down by the personnel-in-charge. Urgent correspondences had to be immediately sent out of the camp with great haste and delivered to Dajing before tomorrow night. Xiao Jiming was unable to get on his horse and wield his blade, so all the military affairs could only be dealt with remotely like this. To guard against surprise attacks, he gave the commanding generals of the various battlegrounds the authority and power to self-mobilize troops in the face of danger. But this also meant that commanding generals like Guo Weili would have lost the chain holding them in check. Should they fall for a trap, they would probably never come back ever again.

Guo Weili came out from the tent and bent over with his hand extended. Zhao Hui waved his hand to indicate his inability to get up now. That sense of nausea caused by being smashed senseless would not recede, and lying in the snow felt a little more comfortable.

“Wu Ziyu is now guarding the Shasan Camp, and the Second Young Master has yet to recover from his injuries, so who is handling the task of transporting military supplies now?” Guo Weili fished out tobacco from his bosom and popped it right into his mouth to chew. He squatted beside Zhao Hui and asked.

“Chen Yang.” Zhao Hui spread out his arms and answered feebly. He seemed to know what Guo Weili was concerned about; thus, he continued, “Chen Yang has been by the Second Young Master’s side since six years ago taking care of the logistics, from the Imperial Army on a larger scale, to the residence’s backyard on a smaller scale. There’s nothing that can escape his calculations and planning. Chen Yang is currently in Bianbo Camp making a survey of the entire territory so that he can anticipate all the major and minor supplies in advance. As long as the bridle paths stay

unobstructed, he will be able to ensure that the various camps will have no lack of supplies.”

Looking at the fragments of snowflakes in the sky, Guo Weili said, “We are short of battle steeds.”

They had already been starting to lack battle steeds at the beginning of autumn. The depletion of the horses back then was not this serious, and the stables in Dajing could still cope with the demand. But now, the armor-wearing battle steeds could no longer withstand the heavy hammers, and their injuries were often far more severe than the soldiers. Then there was the bitter cold weather and environment; their horses could not endure the cold as well as the ponies.

The sky gradually darkened. Zhao Hui regained some of his energy and sat up. He reached out to wipe away a handful of blood, then said to Guo Weili, “That one smash from the hammer made my nose bleed. I couldn’t wipe it away in time and swallowed it all back down.”

“Gross.” Guo Weili, with his headful of messy hair, did not want to stand up either, having squatted until his legs went numb. He paused for a moment, then said in a low and hoarse voice, “In the past, I considered Huhelu as one of Biansha’s elites. But now that I’ve encountered Hasen, I realize Huhelu is a good-for-nothing.”

Zhao Hui brushed off the fragments of snow on his knees and said, “Hasen is bold in his deployment of people, and he has infinite tricks up his sleeves. He knows us inside out.” He let loose a sigh. “And this is where the difficulty lies.”

But they all tacitly knew that what was most formidable about Hasen had not even been put on display yet. Hasen had fought offensive and defensive battles with the Bianjun Commandery – the hardest of all to attack – in the south for several years. Compared to field battles, he was even better at attacking cities. Now that Libei had completely switched from offensive to defensive, the battleground camps had become rudimentary cities. It would not be long before they got a personal taste of Hasen’s barrage of attacks coming down on them like the torrential rain.

Guo Weili hated Hasen with every fiber of his being, but even he had to concede that Hasen was absolutely a genius born for the battlefields. To date, Guo Weili had never met a general who could hold and control the initiative so firmly in hand like this. He was just as unpredictable as a gale; he did not give Libei another chance to fight back at all.

“Whoever takes the initiative controls the rhythm.” Guo Weili spat out the chewed tobacco. “We have to disrupt his pace even if we lose. Otherwise, we won’t have to wait until the beginning of spring. In less than half a month, the battle zones will fall into their hands.”

The light from the flame in the distance flickered. Both men looked at it from afar in silence before suddenly scrambling to their feet.

“Fuck!” Braving the wind, Guo Weili pointed at the watchtower and bellowed, “Are you fucking blind? Who’s in the southeast?!”

The Armored Cavalry on the watchtower raised a palm to shield himself from the wind and heard the sound of horses’ hooves downwind. But a bridle path connecting to Sha’er Camp lay in the southeast, and he could not immediately determine in this short of a time who exactly was coming.

“The cavalry.” Zhao Hui took several steps back to pick up his helmet from the ground, then shouted with all his might, “It’s the Biansha Cavalry!”

“Sha’er Camp has fallen.” Guo Weili hissed through gritted teeth. “Hasen, that son of a bitch!”

In the chaos that ensued, they watched as that flame came charging right towards them. The night patrol squad did not sound the alarm, so it was highly possible that the southeast had already been cut off. Other than the sound of hooves, there were clearly other sounds mixed in too.

“The stone catapults...” The helmet in Zhao Hui’s palm slipped to the ground. He said in a daze, “We’re done for.”

“Dogshit!” Guo Weili hauled Zhao Hui up and shouted all around him as he strode briskly, “Extinguish the flames in the watchtower!”

Guo Weili suddenly shoved Zhao Hui and followed up with a punch that made Zhao Hui’s nose bleed again.

“What are you, a dog?!” Zhao Hui covered his nose and spat out the froth of blood.

“We are wolves.” Guo Weili turned back and stared viciously towards the southeast. “The hardest iron wall to fight in this world is not the Bianjun Commandery, but the Libei Armored Cavalry.” He pounded his own chest with a clenched fist and hollered all around him, “The battleground in the north belongs to Xiao Fangxu, and the Libei Armored Cavalry rule this expanse of battlefield! Whoever the fuck is a dog can jolly well eat shit! I

will never retreat! We are wolves!” His eyes were both red as he shouted in a hoarse voice, “Bite these motherfuckers to death!”

Zhao Hui wiped his nosebleed and kicked Guo Weili from behind.

Guo Weili, with stubble on his face, locked eyes with Zhao Hui and asked, “Isn’t Hasen the most adept at attacking cities?”

Zhao Hui picked up his helmet again and sniffled. “He won’t be adept at it soon.”

There was a “click” as the mechanism trigger kicked into action, and the baffles swiftly sealed off the crenels in all four sides of the camp walls, instantly turning Shayi Camp into an impregnable fort shaped like an iron drum. The Biansha Cavalry stopped a short distance away. Through the darkness of the night, Hasen saw the heavy crossbow mechanisms protruding from those city walls.

A few years before, Xiao Jiming had transformed Shayi, Sha’er, and Shasan Camps into heavy-duty ramparts. Just like how Xiao Chiye had felt when he faced the Shasan Camp, Hasen very quickly came to the understanding that this was the real impenetrable defense, one which did not leave a single opportunity for their foes to take advantage of.

The watchtower torches were extinguished, making it totally impossible for one standing outside to get a glimpse into what was happening within the walls or even try to figure out the layout within.

There were also two mounted crossbows forged by Qidong hidden away in Shayi camp. Xiao Jiming had gone to painstaking lengths back then to keep them from the prying eyes of Qudu. The Libei Armored Cavalry pushed out the mounted crossbows, and while the heavy arrows were in the process of being loaded, Biansha’s stone catapults had already kicked into action. Boulders as heavy as a hundred jin came hurtling through the air, smashing into the walls of the camp.

The crenels<sup>22</sup> in the walls of Shayi Camp were reserved as stations for archers; in order to seal these up during special circumstances, a more mobile parapet had been selected. But parapets were made from wood and could not withstand the force of bombardment.

Hasen clearly had his eyes on this weakness.

“Release the arrows, release the arrows!” Guo Weili took large strides, slapping the backs of the cavalry as he passed by them.

A storm of short arrows shot forth. Zhao Hui saw through an opening<sup>23</sup> of the battlement that the cavalry had long retreated, and the infantry had

replaced them in front. They erected a dense array of iron shields in the face of the hail of arrows. The arrows rained down on the surface of the shields, but could not inflict any damage on anyone at all.

“That’s the iron shield of the Qidong Garrison Troops.” Zhao Hui said. “He swallowed up the advantages of the battlefields in the north and south whole.”

“Is he a jackal or what?” Guo Weili said at the top of his voice as he supported himself against the wall and listened to the intensifying sound of smashing rocks. “That’s no longer a cavalry!”

He was right.

Having expanded their infantry with iron shields, they were no longer purely a cavalry. The commanding generals were not wrong in predicting that Biansha had, in the past six years, acquired resources they could not even begin to imagine. This was the source of the changes Hasen was able to make.

The loading of the mounted crossbows was time-consuming. Dozens of men simultaneously exerted their strength, but for some reason, this crossbow simply would not move just before it was fired.

“Is it spoiled?” Guo Weili lifted the man away, stomped on the crossbow, and pounded on it irritably a few times. “Bloody hell, Qidong’s contraption—”

Before Guo Weili could finish his words, that crossbow trigger “clicked” into action, and the heavy arrows shot forth. Guo Weili’s outfit got caught on to an arrow, and in that instant it went flying, it dragged Guo Weili over, causing him to fall flat on his face.

The jarring sound of those iron-headed heavy arrows slicing through the wind followed close on the arrows’ trail as they hurtled through the air. The iron shields of Biansha were erected once again, but it was a futile attempt as the force of impact caved the shields in. And as the soldiers were standing too close together, the resulting shock wave caused the two rows of people in the rear to topple over to the ground in unison.

Zhao Hui wanted to report the good news, but before he could open his mouth, the baffle beside his head exploded. Reacting quickly, he crouched down with his hands covering his head and was nearly stabbed in the eye by a flying wooden splinter.

The baffle was destroyed!

“Damn it.” Zhao Hui muttered to himself with his head and face covered in dust. “I’ll have to tell the Hereditary Prince to get them changed to iron ones.”

The whistle outside sounded all of a sudden, and the saker falcons swooped down through the thick clouds.

Guo Weili followed suit and blew the whistle. The falcon cage beside the stable drew open with a swoosh. Each of the falcons that had been preserving their strength these few days was brimming with energy. Meng flapped its wings as the ropes on its claws rattled.

The soldiers taking care of the falcons untied the ropes. Meng, who would not listen to the whistled command of others at all, soared into the sky, circling among the dancing snow to break through the layers of clouds. The next instant, it began to dive. Iron claws clutched at a saker falcon’s flesh and feathers, tearing it into pieces in the air.

At this critical juncture, Guo Weili heard the sound of the back gates opening. He immediately turned his head back, but he did not get to shout out, for a column of light cavalry was entering swiftly. The cloak of the person in the lead flapped in the wind as she got off her horse before Guo Weili.

“Yo.” Qi Zhuyin greeted Guo Weili in her usual tone. “Busy fighting?”

Zhao Hui turned over to jump down and trade looks with Guo Weili in between breaths. Not knowing Qi Zhuyin’s intent for coming, he said, “Commander-in-chief...”

“Don’t call me that.” Qi Zhuyin took off her cloak and drew out the executioner blade<sup>24</sup> at the side of her waist. She stabbed it into the ground by her feet with a “thud” and said with a laugh, “I shall have to inconvenience you guys to hook up with me tonight.”

Guo Weili promptly covered his chest and stared at Qi Zhuyin as she surveyed the surroundings.

“Let’s see,” She said calmly, “who is tougher—your Libei Armored Cavalry, or our Qidong Garrison Troops.”

**Note:** a few parts in this chapter (mainly description of the fortifications of the wall) have been cross-referenced against the simplified Chinese physical copy. I’ll do a final check/edit again based on the uncensored, traditional Chinese physical copy once it’s released. Meanwhile, thank you for bearing with us!





## CHAPTER 189: SNOWTROOPER

Zhao Hui originally thought Qi Zhuyin had brought along reinforcements from Qidong, but he only saw a few dozen personal guards behind Qi Zhuyin and could not help but ask in bafflement, “Commander-in-chief, this...”

“I’m not here to fight the battle for you,” Qi Zhuyin started wrapping a strip of cloth around her right hand so that the hilt of her blade would not easily slip off when it was soaked with blood, “but to use you people to fight. From now on, you and this buddy of yours will be demoted in place. I’ll take over the post of Shayi Camp Commanding General for the time being.”

Not only was Zhao Hui stunned the moment this statement was made, but even Guo Weili also froze for a moment before rebutting, “That won’t do!”

Qidong and Libei had always maintained friendly relations, and they had joined forces during the fourth year of Xiande to intercept the advance of the Biansha Cavalry and recover the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo, but even so, they were as different as chalk and cheese. Never before had they overstepped their authority in each other’s jurisdiction. They could address Qi Zhuyin as commander-in-chief, but that did not mean they would be willing to heed Qi Zhuyin’s deployment orders.

On hearing that, Qi Wei took out an authority token from the cloth bag at the side of his waist and tossed it to Guo Weili. Guo Weili caught it and turned it over for a look—it was Xiao Jiming’s authority token.

The smashing rocks had already destroyed all the baffles facing the southeast. Single-branch cannons<sup>25</sup> took over their place on the crenels. Although these were called “cannons”, they were actually catapults, with a leather nest for loading rocks set up on a long pole to be launched by manual manpower. They were less powerful compared to the catapults Hasen had brought. The infantry Hasen had positioned in front hoisted up their iron shields. In order to move forward at the risk of being smashed by the falling rocks, they had no choice but to slow down.

On seeing that Qi Zhuyin had already pulled out her executioner blade, Zhao Hui quickly followed after her and said, “Shayi Camp only has 8,000 men left, while the range estimate of Hasen’s force puts it at 10,000 cavalymen. Is the commander-in-chief going to lead us to put up a defense

until reinforcements arrive? With the fall of Sha'er Camp, however, we will have to wait until the day after tomorrow at the latest before there will be reinforcements. During this period..."

"What are you worried about? The walls of this camp are as thick as four *zhang*.<sup>26</sup> Even if all the baffles were to go down, they would not be able to breach and take down the camp. You have sufficient kerosene, and even two..." Qi Zhuyin saw the mounted crossbow and said with delight, "... mounted crossbows forged by our Qidong."

"We don't have enough heavy arrows." Seeing as Qi Zhuyin meant to get on her horse and head out of the city, Zhao Hui hurriedly piped up, "We can't get back arrows we have already shot, and the reserves in the camp will not last until tomorrow. Commander-in-chief, what are you lifting Zhujiu for?! Head up the city wall and give us the instructions. We can fight."

Qi Zhuyin's blade was called Zhujiu. With Zhao Hui blocking her way, she said, "Hasen's 10,000-man army has to shoulder the load of military weapons they never had before. To maintain the speed of their advance, it would be necessary for him to cut down on the rations they take along with them. So, he can't fight a protracted war right now. As long as you can keep your patience in the city, you can wait until he retreats."

Qi Zhuyin took a few steps back as she spoke and raised her voice, "But miss the opportunity tonight, and you will no longer find another opportunity like this again. Hasen regards you people as a stepping stone to temper his new recruits by trampling over the military prestige of the Libei's iron wall. Stop being silly, gentlemen. The so-called iron wall is merely a fig leaf. You can't call yourselves the Armored Cavalry if you stick your butts up like this to take a beating."

Guo Weili clenched the token tightly, and Zhao Hui felt the foreboding tension in the atmosphere.

Qi Zhuyin raised her hand to point at the southeastern camp gate and turned to stare at Guo Weili with eyes brimming over with unbridled madness. "Don't you want to go out there and have some fun with me?"



The opponent Hasen faced up against in the southern battlefield was Lu Guangbai. The Bianjun Commandery Garrison Troops were just like a stubborn rock stuck at that opening which would not budge the slightest no matter how the Biansha Cavalry rained a torrent of attacks on them. But

Hasen understood the name “Qi Zhuyin” better, for he had long traded blows with Qi Zhuyin during that “Wind Guiding the Scorching Plains” surprise attack battle.

Hasen was of the mind that Qi Zhuyin was two people.

Qi Zhuyin’s styles when she assumed personal command in the commander’s tent and when she straddled her horse with her blade in hand were completely different. She could switch with ease between “commander-in-chief” and “commanding general”. She differed from the calm and steady Lu Guangbai; she could act according to changing circumstances as well as bring down her opponents with the external factors at her disposal. Otherwise, she would not have achieved the feat of burning down the thirteen camps of Biansha.

She was the “adaptable” type.

The city gate was tightly shut, and as the amount of rocks being thrown reduced, the iron shields of Biansha pressed in to within 500 paces. Not only could their iron shields protect the human body, but also the battering ram. This kind of wagon was equipped with huge wheels, and once they reached the front, the soldiers could join forces to ram down the camp gate; it was a powerful weapon for attacking cities.

Hasen’s cavalry was ready and raring to go. They were split into the scorpions unit with the iron hammers and the elite squad with the scimitars. When the need arises, the scorpions could even switch over to scimitars. Hasen was very patient. He would not give Shayi Camp any more time to delay. He wanted to ram the camp gate open, then slaughter the remaining soldiers Libei had left here with these cavalries of his.

The iron shields worked well, and the Biansha infantry gradually quickened their pace with their shields hoisted, keeping the battering ram intact under their shelter. When they reached the camp gate, dozens of them exerted themselves in unison to slam the huge wheel against the gate, sending dust raining down on them.

Hasen raised his hand, all ready to charge.

The camp gate made a muffled noise as cracks appeared on the area which bore the force of impact from the battering ram. In order to allow the soldiers in the center to better exert their strength, the infantrymen of both sides shifted down their iron shields. They shouted out as they stepped back, then rammed into the gate again in unison. The camp gate finally burst open with a “BANG”, looking visibly on the verge of collapse.

Zhao Hui stepped on the ruined battlement and poked his head out against the wind to look down. He shouted, "Release!"

Earthen jars suddenly came crashing down from the top of the wall. Amidst the sounds of shattering, kerosene poured down along the walls, spilling all over the Biansha infantry from head to toe. Flames lit up with a "whoosh" and leaped onto the Biansha Cavalrymen's bodies like a nest of venomous snakes. Their iron shields could not ward off fire, and in no time, blood-curdling screams rose all around, and the smell of burning flesh permeated the air.

The camp gate suddenly moved as it was hoisted up with a dull, heavy rumble to reveal the battle steeds waiting behind, along with the Libei Armored Cavalry clad in their armors. Qi Zhuyin, heading into battle lightly armored, had Zhujia in hand as she charged forth like a meteor in tandem with the hot puffs of air of her battle steed.

The next moment, the thunderous hooves of the Armored Cavalry reverberated through the snow. They followed Qi Zhuyin and stepped over the iron shields before the gates. It was as if they had risen from the ashes as they stormed in an assault towards the Biansha Cavalry, who had stopped behind the infantry.

The scimitar-wielding elites promptly retreated, while the scorpions sat firmly on their battle steeds and moved their shoulders at the sound of Hasen's whistle to meet them face on with the iron hammers. They had used these hammers to teach the Libei Armored Cavalry their harshest lesson yet, and they could still smash the helmets of the Armored Cavalry into pulps tonight.

Zhao Hui stood at the top of the wall overlooking the battlefield with his chest heaving rapidly. Even his breathing had grown ragged.

A scorpion lifted his hammer and swung it at the head of the Armored Cavalry in the wind—but then, the tip of a blade thrust right in from the side, intercepting it. With both hands on the hilt, Qi Zhuyin made use of the forward momentum of her battle steed to lift away the hammer with her blade and knock the scorpion straight off his horse.

At the same time this scorpion tumbled off the back of his horse, the heavily armored Armored Cavalry reined in their horses and retreated in unison. They were both deft and methodical in their withdrawal. Hasen heard the sound of horses' hooves behind those heavy armors before he saw the gaps between the scattering cavalry filled up with a blade-brandishing

light cavalry—*no*, not light cavalry; they were the Libei Armored Cavalry, sans heavy armors.

Guo Weili had never been this light before. He concentrated all his pent-up frustrations these days into both hands and let loose a bellow along that deserted path until he was hoarse. His long sword<sup>27</sup> cleaved down on the scorpion head-on. Blood spattered. Meanwhile, he had already charged to the very front. The familiar heat returned to his palms once again. Guo Weili was so overcome with emotion that his hands were trembling.

“Damn...” Guo Weili gasped heavily. He was almost on the verge of tears as he shouted with all his might, “Commander-in-chief—this is exhilarating!”

Even Zhao Hui was about to shed tears at this shout.

Qi Zhuyin burst into hearty laughter. At the same time her battle steed raised its hooves, she lifted Zhujiu high and stabbed it into the scorpion’s body as the battle steed landed back on the ground.

Was the Libei Armored Cavalry no longer the Libei Armored Cavalry when they took off their armors? Perhaps so. But that was the Xiao clan’s Libei Armored Cavalry, not Qi Zhuyin’s Libei Armored Cavalry. The Libei Armored Cavalry kept retreating again and again in defeat on the snowy plains in the north, and one of the reasons was that they could not catch up with the ponies. But now, Hasen’s cavalry would have to run into the blades of the Libei Armored Cavalry themselves if they wanted to attack Libei’s fort.

Guo Weili pierced through the scorpion; he was no longer afraid of the iron hammers. Having removed his heavy armor, the scorpions’ swinging of their hammers here appeared particularly sluggish. What’s more, the scorpions also had a weakness, and that was, they had not donned armors in order to maintain their speed. As long as they lost their advantage of the iron hammers, their blood would still splatter over the battlefield in the face of the long swords.

Qi Zhuyin let out a breath of warm air as she stared down Hasen. Even at such a far distance away from him across the blood-spattered battlefield, the glare she had locked on Hasen was particularly malevolent.

As the scorpions were valuable assets, it was imperative for Hasen to react. He wanted the scorpions to retreat, but as long as he gave the command, Qi Zhuyin would follow suit and have Guo Weili stand down and change into heavy armor. Although she appeared to be passive and

reactive, she was, in fact, the active and proactive player who had the upper hand firmly within her grasp this one night. There was no need for her to give chase; she only needed to stand on a certain boundary line on this battlefield and wait. If Hasen wanted to continue, he would have to hand up their heads on silver platters. Before Qi Zhuyin, all that was invincible about them amounted to nothing.

Bring it on.

This was how provocative the expression in Qi Zhuyin's eyes was; she even threw a taunting smile in his direction, and while she was at it, casually shook off the beads of blood on the surface of her blade.

"Retreat." Hasen promptly decided not to persist in fighting.

But Hasen had brought military weapons with him, and these were all things that he had gone to painstaking lengths to acquire and transport out of Zhongbo. It would be a loss for him to leave these here when he retreated. Should he delegate part of his troops to transport the weapons, a portion of the cavalry would be forced to slow down, encumbered by the supplies.

Qi Zhuyin leveled her blade and patted her horse onward, leading Guo Weili to give chase amidst the flying snow. She knew that Hasen's elite troops would surely be the first to withdraw; this gesture was more like coaxing a child as she led the Libei Armored Cavalry who had been ousted all day by the Biansha Cavalry to give chase close behind the Biansha Cavalry's asses to oust them. From time to time, they would even intimidate the other party.

Guo Weili finally got his chance to vent his frustration. With his adrenaline pumping, he wanted to continue giving chase, but Qi Zhuyin yanked him back by the back of his collar.

"Go home." Qi Zhuyin looked at that snowfield and curbed her smile. "Leave the camp, and you will fall again into the same predicament as before. Hasen is not someone who will run away with his tail between his legs. Don't give him the opportunity to rally his forces."

Guo Weili, having been won over, naturally heeded Qi Zhuyin's advice. At the same time he turned his horse around, he said excitedly, "Commander-in-chief, let's fight like this too on the snowfields in the future. Hasen doesn't count for shit!"

"Hasen has no need to attack cities during battles on the fields, so he won't charge forward but encircle you people instead." Qi Zhuyin pondered

it over. "... But from the way it played out tonight, it seems that the changes he has made need to be refined too."

Hasen was upping the amount of leverage the Biansha Cavalry had, but he was too greedy, as evident from the iron shields this night. This batch of infantry did not give the Biansha Cavalry an advantage. On the contrary, they could be considered a liability. They could not outrun the battle steeds on the snowfields at all. The moment they fell behind, all that awaited them was death. They could only be used to attack cities.

Guo Weili still had something to say, but then Qi Wei suddenly blew the whistle and spurred his horse over from the scouts to Qi Zhuyin's side. "Commander-in-chief, there are still soldiers approaching!"

The snow intensified in the wind, brushing past against fur collars as the infantry trudged unevenly across the snowdrift. Their hair had gone all white from the snow, courtesy of the wind, and they had been walking with their heads lowered for an unknown amount of time. They seemed exhausted, yet they were highly cohesive and could quickly prostrate themselves as soon as they heard the sound of horses' hooves. They were infantrymen most skilled in the art of ambush in this world. Before traversing the desert, they had been called the Bianjun Garrison Troops.

Qi Zhuyin dismounted and stood facing the man at the head of the group through the heavy snow. She was so familiar with this army that she could recognize who he was just from Qi Wei's detailed report.

The man with stubble took down the strip of cloth covering his face and stood there gasping for breath. He had left for so long it felt like a different lifetime. He smiled a little and said wearily, "... Commander-in-chief, I am the reinforcement."

It was the deserter, Lu Guangbai.<sup>28</sup>



#### **NOTICE:**

New updated [Character Chart](#) from the QJJ Simplified CN Physical Copy!  
Check out the [Character Glossary](#)!

1. 法不责众 i.e., when the law cannot be enforced





## CHAPTER 190: NIGHT TALK

The Bianjun Commandery Garrison Troops stopped to rest at Shayi Camp. They gathered around the bonfire, stripped off the cloth they had used as protection from the snowstorm, and started to wolf down their food. While Qi Zhuyin was removing Zhujiu, she noticed their spears were not the same as before. She took her seat before passing the hot tea over to Lu Guangbai.

For a long time, Lu Guangbai held his silence while holding on to the hot tea. "His Lordship..."

Sipping the tea, Qi Zhuyin hummed in affirmation.

Lu Guangbai asked, "How are Jiming and Ce'an doing?"

"Not too good." Qi Zhuyin deftly sliced the roast meat with a dagger and popped it into her mouth. "Jiming can no longer ride on horseback ever since he fell from his horse. All he can do now is to sit still in Dajing and oversee battle operations on the ground, which is a tremendous disadvantage when facing up against Hasen. Ce'an received a heavy blow when he gave chase to recover His Lordship, and his injuries are rather serious. The battlefield in the north is now desperately short of a commander-in-chief. Libei is on the brink of an imminent crisis."

"I want to head back to Dajing with the Commander-in-chief," Lu Guangbai looked at Qi Zhuyin. "I discovered the Biansha Cavalry's weakness while traversing the desert. There are several things that can only be discussed in the Commander-in-chief's and Jiming's presences."

"Who knows if you are a spy?" Qi Zhuyin wiped her fingers. "This is Libei, not Qidong."

"I'll hand over the troops to Zhao Hui and have them remain in Shayi camp as part of the garrison troops." Lu Guangbai gently placed his own spear by his feet. "I can offload myself of my troops and armor and let the Commander-in-chief escort me back to Dajing."

Qi Zhuyin jabbed the dagger back in place. As she stared at that blazing flame, she said, "I'll be heading back tomorrow. You can come along."

When the day broke the following day, Qi Zhuyin brought along Lu Guangbai on her journey back. By the time they had made it back to Dajing, it was in the dead of night two days later. Without alerting anyone else, Xiao Jiming stood in front of the steps to receive them.

Light snow was falling when Lu Guangbai dismounted his horse. He regarded Xiao Jiming with a gaze that was both familiar yet foreign. Qi

Zhuyin tossed the reins over to Qi Wei and patted him on the shoulder when she walked up the stairs as a signal for him to follow. They stood ahead of him, silently urging him on.

River of Ice Armored Cavalry, Xiao Jiming. Wind Guiding the Scorching Plains, Qi Zhuyin. Fire Beacon Amidst Blowing Sand, Lu Guangbai.

They chased one another in those years of their youth, all too shy to bring up their ambitions. It was as though no matter how much time passed, they would always remain shrouded under the radiance of their fathers. But the churning waves toppled over those walls that had previously kept them sheltered from the elements, and now, they finally reunited again amidst the heavy snow.

Lu Guangbai met their gazes and took a step towards his journey home.



Lu Guangbai first paid his respects to Xiao Fangxu, then followed them into the courtyard. The heated, sectioned-off room was located in a remote area that was connected to a ground heating system<sup>25</sup> within, which ramped up the temperature until it was hot inside. Qi Zhuyin shed off her coat when she entered and crossed her legs to sit down. The opened side door faced a small pond, and the scattered rocks in between were all blanketed with a layer of fresh snow. A few branches of green plum edged along the snow-white paper of the door at an oblique angle across the night sky—the only embellishment in this secluded quietness.

After a moment of silence, Lu Guangbai spoke up, “Half a year ago, I left the Bianjun Commandery and headed east to the desert. I wanted to wipe out the Qingshu Tribe and take over their pastures so that the Bianjun Commandery and I could mutually watch out for each other. But I failed, and so, I was forced to continue going deeper into the desert. In the fifth month, I reached the eastern side of Gedale, where I saw Amu’er’s granaries.”

“As expected, Amu’er’s supply lines are really in Zhongbo.” With chopsticks in hand, Qi Zhuyin absent-mindedly took a few bites. “Having the granaries placed in the middle is the most suitable if the intent is to supply the northern and southern battlefields.”

“Amu’er’s fields are there too.” Lu Guangbai held the teacup with his fingers and looked at both of them. “He reclaimed the wastelands there, and

had the Liaoying Tribe farm the land the way we do at the same time that they send out the falcons to hunt. The Qingshu Tribe down south is merely a ploy to mislead Qidong. Amu'er has partitioned the land east of Gedale into an undisturbed region. He carried out a new experiment there, imitating our garrison reclamation system.<sup>26</sup> He is presently working on establishing a new city."

Xiao Jiming and Qi Zhuyin were both taken aback.

"We must unify the lines of battle in the north and the south." Lu Guangbai said slowly. "We even have to tell Qudu to cease the infighting. Amu'er has already grown into a behemoth. He wants to become the great ruler on both sides of the Chashi River."

"There are three objectives for my trip up north this time." Qi Zhuyin set down her chopsticks and paused for a moment before continuing. "The first is to see what exactly the scorpions are all about, the second is to evaluate whether the Libei Armored Cavalry can still be salvaged, and the third is to persuade Jiming to call a truce and make peace with Qudu."

"That's impossible," Xiao Jiming retorted in a mild tone. "Libei has its own supply line now. Considering that we have formed an alliance with Zhongbo to the south, making peace with Qudu would mean handing over the advantages we have in hand now."

"If Libei refuses to give up being antagonistic to Qudu, then Qudu will not render any assistance to Libei," Qi Zhuyin said. "As you know, the empress dowager is a stubborn old mule."

"I will never..." Xiao Jiming stared at Qi Zhuyin and said, decisively and resolutely, "ever hand my younger brother over to them again, as well as my wife and my son. No one can ever take them away from me again. Libei does not need Qudu's help. The empress dowager should first get the Eight Great Training Divisions to ensure her own safety."

Xiao Jiming was rarely this blunt. His overly scholarly and refined appearance often made people forget that he was the one who established the Libei camps. Half a year before, he was also the commander-in-chief of the northern battlefields.

Lu Guangbai was worried that they might get into an argument, so he said in an attempt to appease, "We can..."

"It's pointless to discuss it again," Qi Zhuyin raised herself up a little to look at Xiao Jiming, "I know Xiao Jiming will not agree."

Lu Guangbai sighed and called out in resignation, “Commander-in-chief.”

“I just want to remind you that, before the unification of the battle lines happens, we are no longer in the same camp. If both armies form an alliance, then whose commands do we all heed?” Qi Zhuyin waved her fingertip between herself and Xiao Jiming. “Libei still has to be wary of the regards Qudu sent. If, and I mean if,” Qi Zhuyin said cruelly, “the Libei Armored Cavalry were to lose their commander-in-chief again, then who is going to assume responsibility for the battlegrounds in the north?”

Qi Zhuyin had long warned Libei of how dangerous it was to pin the faith of the entire army on one person. Libei was a rigid iron wall with impenetrable defense that padlocked its commanding generals to its camps. Zhao Hui had to bring along his Three Great Training Divisions of Liuyang when he headed up north, and Guo Weili had to take along his Changzhu Camp when he headed down south. The swapping of battle lines was both time-consuming and labor-intensive. If the commanding general died in battle, then the probability of launching a counterattack was akin to zero.

As a matter of fact, all the military camps had this problem in the earliest days when Dazhou set up defenses at the frontier. Due to geographical constraints and varying recruitment stipulations at the various areas, the specifics of the military camps all turned out differently. The commanding general was the heart of the soldiers, and the soldiers were the limbs of the commanding general. If both parties wanted to have a flawless tacit understanding with one another, then they needed years or even decades of learning to get along with one another. For this reason, it was a major taboo to change generals just before the battle.

Qidong was the first to realize this problem. They were not like Libei, who had to face the open grasslands and the complicated swamps. They had the Tianfei Watchtower and Suotian Pass on both sides to shield them. As long as they could keep up with the defenses of their one and only opening that was Bianjun, they would be able to rest easy. Thus, during the reign of Yongyi, Qi Shiyu set the recruitment standard for the entire territory of Qidong. Their soldiers did not need a specific commanding general; everyone was familiar with the same battlefield. When Qi Zhuyin took office, she set up the Generals’ Barrack in the Cangjun Commandery. More than ten of the commanding generals under her command went whenever they were deployed, which made it fairly easy to swap across battle lines.

Even if anyone was unfortunate enough to become a casualty, it would not affect the overall war situation.

But with gain comes loss. Qidong did not have generals with such distinctive personalities as those from Libei. Their monotonous selection criteria already determined that generals with such individual styles would remain a rarity in the years to come.

Xiao Jiming said, "There is still Zhongbo between the northern and southern battlefields. It's not possible for us to merge as one, and there's no need for anyone to decide whose command to heed. Qudu is now intercepted by Huaizhou, Cizhou, and Chazhou to the northeast. Before they can send their regards to Libei, they would have to first talk to Shen Zechuan. As for being the commander-in-chief, Zhuyin, I have long since lost my qualification to be Libei's commander-in-chief."

Xiao Jiming held up the teapot with his long, slender fingers as he brewed tea with deft movements. There were no signs of self-pity or self-reproach to be found in his expression under that thick steam.

"When Hasen took away my father's head, he told A-Ye that he was returning the favor tit for tat." Xiao Jiming's hand paused. His expression was indifferent as he looked at Qi Zhuyin, "I know you think that the way we control the Libei Armored Cavalry is too centralized, but at this point in time, I have to stick to the old path. We will still use the most direct method to fight back, and that is, an eye for an eye. Our faith does not lie in my father. If that's what Hasen really thinks, then he's grossly mistaken, for our faith lies beneath our feet. Hasen defeated my father, but he can never defeat Libei. Thirty years ago, my father gained the strength from the land beneath his feet to march forward courageously, and it was with this strength that Libei has come this far today. We will never concede defeat at this point. The new alpha wolf is young, strong, and competitive with the desire to win. He can stand at the very front and take my father's place. When we start to fight back, he can swiftly rally together the hearts and minds of those who have lost morale. I am not that man, but I have taken over the heavy responsibility of tempering him. I want him to shine in all his glory and brilliance when he emerges from his sheath."

Qi Zhuyin went on to say, "But as far as I know, he has not truly engaged with the various major camps. Your chief commander of Libei isn't the obedient puppy of Qidong. He hasn't won over Libei at all."

“But he is familiar with the whole Libei territory,” Xiao Jiming said, “He has run through all these roads in these six months; he knows the swiftest paths to delivery supplies, the most direct routes to mobilize reinforcements and the consumption status of the various camps at the sites of battles. These are all gifts my father gave him. Zhuyin, all he lacks is a little time.”

“And here’s where... I come in.” Lu Guangbai timely picked up the thread of conversation. “How to go about unifying the battle lines is for you both to deal with, but how to deal with Hasen ahead and buy time for Libei is the other matter I want to talk about.”

“You modified the spears of the Bianjun Garrison Troops.” Qi Zhuyin remembered those spears.

“That’s right. After my defeat to the Qingshu Tribe, I encountered the other tribes one after another.” With hands on his knees, Lu Guangbai paused for a moment before continuing with a heavy expression, “I lost all the battles.”

“Oh,” Qi Zhuyin racked her brain to console him, “That sure isn’t easy.”

“What’s more, I was fighting on a hungry stomach. I could only scurry between them for the sake of our daily meals. We kept trading blows, and it was from these exchanges of blows that I discovered the cavalry’s weakness.” As Lu Guangbai spoke, he turned back and brought the spear on his back to his knees. He undid the strip of cloth to reveal the body of the spear within.

“You increased the length of the spearhead.” Xiao Jiming measured with his finger. “... but isn’t this a tad too long.”

“You even added barbs.” Qi Zhuyin examined it. “How did you secure them on?”

Lu Guangbai smacked their hands away and fondly caressed the spear like a prized possession. “I’m an infantryman. Back at the Bianjun Commandery, when we fought battles with the Biansha Cavalry, we relied on the terrains for our ambushes. But in the desert, there are only sand dunes. With all the previous advantages we possessed gone, I was forced to go head to head with the cavalry. At first, I wanted to create some distance between us and the cavalry to give us time to make our escape, and so I lengthened the spear. But as it turned out, the spears were too long, which made it hard to hold our direction when brandishing it, and being unable to

turn around in time to meet the cavalry's onslaught of attack would mean being cut down to the ground."

Lu Guangbai realized during this process that the cavalry were circling them, since they had no way to attack from the front as they had to avoid the spearheads.

"So I changed the pole of the spear back, but increased the length of the spearhead." Lu Guangbai looked at both of them and smiled, "As long as the battle formation is fixed so that the spearheads face outwards on all four sides, it is a mobile 'battering ram'. If they charge over at high speed, they will be stabbed off their horses by my soldiers. The excessively long head of the spear also made it impossible for them to wrest it away from the other end. Once they get hit, it'd be hard for them to survive."

Xiao Jiming and Qi Zhuyin fell deep in thought.

Lu Guangbai continued, "But the cavalry was quick to react. They no longer launched linear assaults but encircled me to hem me in. This feels to me like fishing, so I proceeded to secure the picked daggers I had grabbed from them to the side of the spearheads with hemp rope. Even if we didn't get to stab them when both sides engaged, we could still make use of the barb to drag the cavalry off their horses. However, hemp ropes wear out easily, and that is why I will have to borrow money from you guys to add barbs to this batch of spears."

"I don't have money." Bringing up this matter was all it took to get Qi Zhuyin mad. "I'm a commander-in-chief, but I own a buttload of debts. I even threw the rouge expenses of my father's concubines in to pay them off. I will lose my shit with whoever talks to me about money now."

Lu Guangbai looked at Xiao Jiming.

Xiao Jiming said, "Our Libei... Shen Zechuan is presently at home too. How about you discuss it with him?"

Lu Guangbai wrapped up the spear. He made as if to speak, but then hesitated. Eventually, he only asked, "Why is he here? Didn't he used to tread on a path different from us in the past?"

"The world is in a state of chaos," Qi Zhuyin said. "Shen Zechuan is now the Tiger<sup>27</sup> of Zhongbo who has a close and mutually dependent relationship with Libei up north and who steers the Yan clan of Hezhou's ship down south. He has erected a wall around himself northeast of Qudu. Basically, he can be summed up in one word."

Lu Guangbai said, "Which is?"

Xiao Jiming answered demurely, "Rich."

"Zhongbo lies between the north and the south, and the issues we have to discuss now all come back to Shen Zechuan—we can't skirt them around him." Qi Zhuyin said, "Besides, the so-called unification of the north and south also requires effort on Zhongbo's end. Now is a good time to cut off that supply line of Amu'er."

"He will bring his advisor," Xiao Jiming sipped his tea, "during the in-depth discussion tonight."

"I only have one question." Qi Zhuyin held up her teacup with both hands. "What exactly did you Libei used to convince him with?"

This question stumped Xiao Jiming. After a moment of silence, the Hereditary Prince replied, "... Looks, I guess."

Silence momentarily descended upon them.

"Back to the topic. This spear can go up against the cavalry, but it's not suitable for the Libei Armored Cavalry." Qi Zhuyin steered the subject back to the matter at hand. "During my time in Shayi camp this time, I discovered the scorpions were not as strong as I had expected. The iron hammers are only effective against your Libei Armored Cavalry. Put them on the battlefields in the south, and they become a liability. They don't pose a threat to our Qidong Garrison Troops, so, in my opinion, Amu'er will not remove these scorpions from the northern battlefield. But if they remain here, the Armored Cavalry can only cower back into the campgrounds and fight defensive battles. They won't be able to continue fighting battles in the fields."

"Before we find a way to deal with the iron hammers," Xiao Jiming said, "defensive battles can buy us time."

"Hasen is aware of what you're planning to do." Qi Zhuyin recalled the details of the defensive battle at Shayi Camp. "He added iron shields to the cavalry, and equipped them with military weapons meant for sieges from Dazhou. Perhaps he is still adapting to them, but he will soon find his own direction from actual battle experiences. In half a year at most, Hasen will be able to make use of them proficiently. By then, not even defensive battles will be enough to protect Libei."

"Which is why we need the aid of the Qidong Garrison Troops." Xiao Jiming knocked on the teapot. "I'm guessing that Amu'er's crop fields on the eastern side of Gedale have not reached the point where it is enough to supply the four tribes. He remains dependent on the grains from Dazhou."



Shen Zechuan will completely choke off Amu'er's supply lines in Zhongbo. The Qidong Garrison Troops only need to head out of the Bianjun Commandery and go on the offensive against the Qingshu Tribe. Increasing the pressure on Amu'er in the south will suffice."

Qi Zhuyin's head started to hurt. She had to obtain approval from the Ministry of War in Qudu to deploy troops eastward. This was not the same situation as not handing over Lu Pingyan; if Qudu broke off their supply of military provisions as a result of this, she would have to deal with the aftermath on her own. But she did not mention this and merely nodded as an indication that she had heard what he said.



The next day, Xiao Chiye received Meng in the courtyard.

After remaining at the site of the battle for multiple days, Meng was covered all over with snow, and its claws were filthy beyond recognition. Xiao Chiye let it perch on him and cleaned up its feathers and talons. Gu Jin entered the courtyard and softly reported a few words. Xiao Chiye looked back and saw Lu Guangbai standing in the light snow.

Lu Guangbai had just kowtowed to Lu Pingyan. Instead of entering the building after coming in, he sat beneath the eaves and watched as Xiao Chiye approached. He could not help but sigh with emotion, "You brat... Did you grow taller again this past six months?"

"At this age," Xiao Chiye released Meng and sat by Lu Guangbai's side to undo his arm guard. "I won't be growing any taller."

Lu Guangbai, who was drenched in snow, looked at him. "You will become stronger still."

Xiao Chiye stroked the arm guard and said nothing.

"Ce'an, let me tell you a few things, okay?" Lu Guangbai addressed Xiao Chiye by his courtesy name. He no longer called him A-Ye, which implied that Xiao Chiye was not a wolf pup anymore; he could sit as equals at the same table with Lu Guangbai, not just as his little brother.

Lu Guangbai looked towards the courtyard. "You know of your brother's past, but definitely not the Commander-in-chief's. During the earliest years, when we were in Qidong, the Qi clan didn't have an heir of lawful birth. Qi Shiyu decided to find a capable person among his sons of common birth, but to no avail. It was at that time the Commander-in-chief said she wanted to be a general. Qi Shiyu took it as a joke, as did I. I thought there was no way a woman could become a general; it was good

enough that she could hold an embroidery needle. But she was so insistent that Qi Shiyu put her under the Cangjun Commandery Garrison Troops, right under his nose.”

Qi Zhuyin threw herself into it with great enthusiasm, but she quickly realized that it was pointless. She did not fit in; there was no one here who was willing to accept her, much less be willing to listen to her orders. They were polite with her, but that was only on account of Qi Shiyu.

“She then insisted on being transferred to the Bianjun Commandery.” Lu Guangbai continued, “Qi Shiyu entrusted her to my father, but she was a very disobedient one. At that time, my brothers were still at home, and I had no wish to become a general at all. After she came, I assumed I would finally no longer come in last, but who would’ve known that she was so tough she left us all trailing behind her in the dust.”

Qi Zhuyin treated herself with the patience she used on embroidery. She got used to hearing the ridicule and even knew what they said about her behind her back, but she never seemed to get angry and continued to remain in the Bianjun Commandery.

Lu Guangbai brushed off the snowflakes on his knees. “Qi Shiyu seemed to let her be, and so she was left in the Bianjun Commandery. Many people wanted to take advantage of her when we were in the desert. Those people yanked her by her ankles and told her to scram back home, but all she would say was ‘no’. She crawled out of the yellow sands with her hands and feet, and even her teeth, falling until she was badly bruised and battered all over. She really looked like she was about to eat up those people then.”

But when Qi Zhuyin stood on the sand dunes, she burst into tears. She was on the verge of a breakdown as she shouted, “*you pieces of shit!*”. She grabbed Lu Guangbai by the collar and questioned him over and over again in anguish, “Which part of *me* isn’t good enough?!”

The trepidation from the past still lingered as Lu Guangbai continued. “I almost died of fright then.”

Xiao Chiye asked, “What happened after that? Did Qi Shiyu take her back?”

“And then she wiped her snot and tears clean and dragged her blade back to the camp.” Having said to this point, Lu Guangbai laughed together with Xiao Chiye, but he followed up closely with a sigh. “Afterwards, she made a small meritorious service. According to the rules, she should have been promoted to squad commander. My father agreed, but no one was

willing to go under her command. She sat there from dawn to dusk. Finally, she asked one of the soldiers why he was unwilling to follow her. The latter answered it was *'because you can't even lift the executioner blade.'*"

The Bianjun Commandery Garrison Troops did not use executioner blades. Such blades were heavy and bulky, and there weren't many people who could truly carry it onto the battlefields. However, Qi Zhuyin seemed to believe it. From then on, she abandoned the slim blade<sup>28</sup> she had previously been using and switched over to the executioner blade.

"It was too ludicrous. Back then, I thought she was stupid. It was as if she could never understand that the reason why everyone rejected her was not that she was not capable enough, but because she was a woman."

The words this world had uttered the most number of times to Qi Zhuyin were *"a pity you're a girl"*, but she herself had never possessed such a sentiment. She thought that there was nothing bad about being Qi Shiyu's daughter, the same way she thought that there was nothing surprising about how some people enjoyed embroidery and others, being on the battlefield.

Lu Guangbai looked at Xiao Chiye again and said, "Qi Shiyu eventually took her back. She didn't give up when she returned to the Cangjun Commandery and tagged along with Qi Shiyu's commanding generals to learn the ropes. Her spectacular talent had already been put on display a long time back, but there was no one willing to appreciate it until that battle that year, when her brothers had all abandoned Qi Shiyu, and there was no one in the Cangjun Commandery willing to step forth and face up to the enemy head-on."

"That night, Qi Zhuyin rode over to countless homes on horseback, only to have too many doors slammed shut in her face. Against all odds, she left the Cangjun Commandery and attempted to persuade the various major garrison troops until her voice went hoarse, and she did so regardless of whether anyone heard her. Finally, she took her father home just as you did. That was the beginning of her rise to prominence. It propelled her forward into the limelight from then on. Qudu was unwilling to confer upon her a noble rank or title, and many people assumed she would be intimidated because of this. But, Ce'an, I never again saw her cry in anguish the way she once did in the desert. She matured quickly after going through all these trials and tribulations. Qi Zhuyin could assume the position of Commander-

in-chief of the Qidong Five Commanderies' military forces not because she was forced to, but because she *can*. That is where she should be standing."

She was born to be on the battlefield.

"The same goes for you too," Lu Guangbai said.



## CHAPTER 191: LUNAR NEW YEAR'S EVE

At the hour of xu in the evening, the north and the south gathered.

Xiao Chiye lifted the curtain, and Shen Zechuan led Xiao Xun by the hand as he bent over to enter. The discussion in the hall came to a temporary halt. Xiao Xun took off his fur collar and oversleeves himself, then handed them over to Gu Jin before making a beeline to his father's side, where he sat on his heels.

In this interval, Qi Zhuyin turned aside to whisper to Lu Yizhi, "You couldn't have given your son away to him, could you?"

Before Lu Yizhi, who was holding the teacup with both hands, could answer, she saw her son turning his head to look at Qi Zhuyin as if he had sensed what she had said. She whispered back, "Oh, no. Xun-er heard you."

Xiao Xun bowed in greetings to Qi Zhuyin, who drank her tea sheepishly.

Xiao Xun resembled Xiao Jiming, but he was not as refined and easygoing as his father. He did not like to smile, and when he kept his little face straight, he appeared particularly solemn.

Lu Yizhi ruefully said, "Who exactly does he take after?"

On the other side, Shen Zechuan had already taken his seat, with Xiao Chiye and Yao Wenyu to his left and right respectively. To the left of Xiao Chiye were those from the Libei camp, and to the right of Yao Wenyu were those from the Qidong camp. Those of them who were from Zhongbo had the fewest number of people, but they were also the ones with a sense of presence that proved most difficult to overlook.

"Zhongbo still has three more prefectures it has yet to reclaim," Qi Zhuyin said to Shen Zechuan, "We hope that the Prefectural Lord will be able to complete the reunification of Zhongbo before winter next year."

"If the commander-in-chief is willing to go easy on Fanzhou and Dengzhou," Shen Zechuan said, "I'd naturally be happy to oblige."

"That's hard to say." Qi Zhuyin smiled. "I can't do anything about it if Qudu forcibly commands me to crush King Yi."

Yao Wenyu knew what Qi Zhuyin meant. It wasn't that she could not do anything about it; she wanted to use King Yi in exchange for next year's military provisions from Shen Zechuan, so that she could make sufficient preparations for going on the offensive against the Qingshu Tribe.

“The fact that the Commander-in-chief is now sitting in Libei,” Yao Wenyu said placidly, “means that abandoning the punitive expedition against King Yi is merely a matter of words.”

The battle lines in the north and south were going to be integrated into one, and Qi Zhuyin had successively turned a blind eye to Qudu’s deployment orders one after another. If she was truly afraid, she would not have come to Libei at all. But Qi Zhuyin simply had to take a stab at fleecing Shen Zechuan—she was already poor to this extent.

“I came to Libei without anyone noticing. This is not the same as going against the ruler’s commands. Your Cizhou is such a beehive of activity this year. If I delay taking down King Yi any further, your military drill ground is going to be set up right at the entrance of the City of Dancheng,” Qi Zhuyin said. “The address ‘Prefectural Lord’ is worth ruminating over too. The way I see it, it’s no different from the words, ‘King Yi’.”

“That’s a gross misunderstanding there.” Shen Zechuan smiled. “From Chazhou to Dunzhou, our Cizhou has been going by the book and playing by the rules. How remarkable a title is the ‘Prefectural Lord’? Nowhere in the current stipulated rules and laws is it said to be inappropriate. I’m merely a guest of Cizhou’s prefectural prefect.”

This was taking advantage of the loophole of not establishing his own banner to rise in revolt. In truth, Cizhou had long broken itself away from Qudu’s jurisdiction. It was just that Qudu had not dared to issue the official notice all this while. One of the reasons was that they feared Cizhou would really ally itself with Libei in a moment of desperation and fight their way to the City of Dancheng. The second was that they were afraid the other areas would follow suit. Yet, owing to their internal strife, they did not show any intent on delivering an offer of amnesty to Shen Zechuan if he pledged loyalty to them. As a result, Qi Zhuyin could only count on King Yi to threaten Shen Zechuan.

If this threat had been made a month ago, Shen Zechuan would have had to think of a way to deal with it. But now, he was the key of all present here to decide if the establishment of the northern-southern battle line could come to pass. Money and grains became his greatest playing cards. He wanted to exchange what he had in hand for maximum benefits. Just like how Qi Zhuyin wanted to fleece him, he similarly wanted to fleece Qi Zhuyin too.

“Han Jin is in your hands,” Qi Zhuyin said. “Cizhou is guilty of a crime just based on this alone.”

“Han Jin.” Shen Zechuan enunciated these two words with no traces of fear in his eyes. “Who knows whether or not he’s in my hands?”

This was why Qi Zhuyin was usually loath to go to Qudu. It was too exhausting dealing with these kinds of seasoned schemers like Shen Zechuan. They would talk in circles without making any progress and pass the buck around until everyone was at the end of their ropes. This simply reminded her of the feeling when she had to demand money from the Ministry of Revenue before.

“Even if I let off Fanzhou and Dengzhou and let you eat them up, what about Duanzhou?” Qi Zhuyin then changed direction. “You have less than 40,000 soldiers on hand, of which 20,000 are new recruits. Don’t you think you are being a little too hasty in trying to recapture Duanzhou back from the Biansha people?”

By this, she meant for Shen Zechuan to plead with Qidong to dispatch troops and help them.

But Xiao Chiye piped up, “I’ll head over to Duanzhou by the second month at the very latest.”

“Although Zhongbo doesn’t need Qidong’s assistance for the time being, the ability of the Qidong Garrison Troops to deal a blow to the Qingshu Tribe concerns the situation on the battlefields in the north,” Yao Wenyu continued. “So Cizhou is willing to help share the Commander-in-chief’s burden. Before coming over to Libei, the Prefectural Lord has considered the issue of the military provisions on the Commander-in-chief’s behalf. As long as Qudu really dares to cut off the Commander-in-chief’s supply of military provisions, then half of Qidong’s military provisions next year can be borne by Hezhou.”

Yao Wenyu was merely embellishing his words. When Shen Zechuan was fleecing Yan Heru the Sheep in Dunzhou, Yan Heru said that he would also shoulder the burden of Qidong’s military provisions. Shen Zechuan took out a part of it and ordered Yan Heru to think of a way himself to supply Qi Zhuyin. So what they said at this moment could also be considered the truth. The only thing was that they slightly omitted some key details and erased Yan Heru from the picture.

Acting in accordance with Shen Zechuan’s aim of seizing every opportunity available to maximize their own benefits, Yao Wenyu continued



after a moment's pause, "The Commander-in-chief is right. Zhongbo only has 36,000 men now that can be considered 'soldiers', which is negligible compared to both parties present. But Duanzhou is the gate of Zhongbo facing the east. If it's not shut tight, then there's no way we can cut off Biansha's supply line, let alone the possibility that Biansha will use the chance to erode Zhongbo from within and sever the connection between the battlegrounds in the north and south to catch Libei in an encirclement trap."

Qi Zhuyin inwardly thought, so—

Sure enough, Yao Wenyu continued, "So, we hope to establish a bridle path with direct access to Libei and Qidong next year and obtain some pointers regarding regimentation of military camps."

Regimentation of military camps was a reserved and subtle way of putting it. Qi Zhuyin felt that what he actually meant to say was that Shen Zechuan would like to obtain the help of the Qidong's commanding generals in training a garrison troop capable of heading into battle on behalf of Zhongbo next year. Libei was all cavalry, and the Garrison Troops of Zhongbo was infantry; he could only ask Qidong for help with this matter.

This revealed much ambition on his part, or at the very least, that was what everyone present could intuitively sense. It made clear that Shen Zechuan did not want to rely on the Libei Armored Cavalry nor simply borrow soldiers from Qidong; he sought to restore Zhongbo's line of defense and establish his own armed forces.

Money truly makes the mare go.

Everyone in attendance unanimously sighed with emotion. The conversion of military provisions into silver, coupled with the expenses for the bridle path, equipment, rebuilding of the city, and so on would add up to as much as several million taels for the year. In the past, Qudu would come up with all kinds of excuses to fob them off because they had no money, yet here Shen Zechuan was, getting down to action right off the bat.

"Also, about the cavalry the Prefectural Lord and His Lordship discussed in detail previously," Yao Wenyu questioned, "will Libei still be able to supply the battle steeds at the beginning of spring next year?"

There was currently a severe deficit of battle steeds on the battleground. If Libei was unable to bear the burden of supplying the battle steeds when the pastures sprang back to life at the start of spring, then he could postpone it as per Shen Zechuan's wish.

Xiao Jiming replied without pause, "Yes, but Zhongbo has to let us use Mount Luo as a riding stable."

This was what Xiao Jiming was planning. The only general in Xiao Chiye's hands was Tantai Hu, and stationing him in Dunzhou was equivalent to giving him to Shen Zechuan. When Xiao Chiye headed for Duanzhou in the second month next year, it would be inconvenient for him to switch battle steeds relying on the present Bianbo's bridle path. But if Libei were to establish a new riding stable on Mount Luo, it would not only ease the strain on the Bianbo Camp in transporting supplies but also allow Libei to build up a minor line of defense in Zhongbo. Even if Duanzhou were to fall, or if Shen Zechuan were to turn against Xiao Chiye, Libei would not immediately fall into the position of a defenseless, passive player.

"Is Duanzhou planning to establish a cavalry?" Lu Guangbai asked.

Shen Zechuan did not have that much of an opinion about this cavalry yet, so he merely answered, "Giving the light cavalry a try. I can only make a decision after obtaining the battle steeds next year. Is General Lu planning to remain on the battlegrounds?"

Lu Guangbai nodded. "Right now, Libei needs time. My troops can hold off the scimitars of Hasen's elite force on the battlefields for the Libei Armored Cavalry. I'm also rather intrigued by the scorpions."

"In that case, I have a request too," Qi Zhuyin said. "Since Lu Guangbai will be staying on the battlefield, then as an exchange, Xiao Chiye will have to head down to the southern battlegrounds during the sixth month next year and hold down the fort at the Bianjun Commandery on my behalf."

Xiao Chiye was stunned.

Qi Zhuyin tapped the desk and said nothing more. But Xiao Jiming and Lu Guangbai both understood the significance of her words—Qi Zhuyin was giving Xiao Chiye a chance.



On the banks of Chashi River, Heaven blessed the Liaoying tribe with a man called Amu'er. Then it bestowed upon Amu'er a son with extraordinary talents. They led the Biansha Cavalry to prominence along the river banks, relying on their strategies and scimitars to break down Dazhou. Perhaps, in Amu'er's eyes right this moment, the stage was all set to usher in an era of Biansha's reign. He saw the great curtains opening up

before him. Biansha would bid farewell to the pain and suffering of trudging barefoot across the snowstorm. After going through so many tumultuous ordeals, they were finally about to leave this barren land to establish their own dynasty on that fertile soil.

The territories of Dazhou in the east and west had thoroughly split apart this winter. Shen Zechuan's barrier barred access to the eastern and northern borders. He used half a year to complete this wall and bridge together the northern and southern battlefronts in the tattered mess that was Zhongbo. Even if he had yet to explicitly direct his weapon at Qudu, the way the scale had tilted had already exposed an inkling of his ambitions.

This year, Libei did not light any lanterns or set off firecrackers, but it was not utterly lacking. Here, Shen Zechuan got to enjoy a new year's eve dinner. While staying up that night,<sup>29</sup> he fell asleep. Xiao Chiye placed a new fan and a few copper coins by his pillow. When Shen Zechuan woke up, still half asleep, Xiao Chiye stroked his head, lulling him back to sleep again.

In the night, Xiao Chiye stripped off his shirt. His entire back was occupied by a wolf extending from his left shoulder all the way to his waist. All of the rage, howls, and anguish that tore him apart were engraved here in ink. This wolf was not a picture of perfection; the placement of its left eye was reserved for the injury at the back of his left shoulder. It looked as though it had been gouged out, making it appear unusually ferocious.

Xiao Chiye remembered the humiliation in that heavy snow.

Hasen was right.

Everyone ought to return the favor, tit for tat.

## **End of Book**

## CHAPTER 192: WHAT THE SNOW BECKONS

As soon as the new year was over, Zhongbo was hit by a blizzard. The sudden snow came so hard and fast that there were incidents of houses collapsing in the various prefectures. Fortunately, the repair of the bridle paths had been expedited before the new year, so communications from Chazhou and Dunzhou to Cizhou were not cut off. Luo Mu and Tantai Hu made timely reports of the casualties and dealt with the situation before dawn, keeping the damage caused by the disaster under manageable control.

The advisors in the study stayed up all night. Likewise, Shen Zechuan did not get any rest either.

“The previous year’s heavy snow was a disaster in our Cizhou, so before the snow fell, the *yamen* has repeatedly confirmed the inventory of the granary reserves.” Zhou Gui flipped through the book on the table. “Meanwhile, the reinforcement of residential dwellings is indeed a problem. We cannot wait to come up with a solution only when the houses collapse every year.”

“But,” Kong Ling sat opposite him, “where will this extra expense come from? There isn’t any money left to spare due to the war this year.”

Shen Zechuan had been pinching the center of his brows until it was now a little red. His head was spinning as he sat in the main seat. The clicking sounds of abacus beads being flicked in the partitioned area had never stopped once; the people in there were all assistants who had been specially transferred over from the shops in Hezhou and Juexi to assist with the accounts. Charcoal braziers had been set up inside the study as it had been chilly the past few days, but after several hours with that many people crammed in the room, the study grew unbearably stuffy.

“The war is of crucial importance,” Shen Zechuan said, “so let’s not cut down on the military expenses for the various prefectures. Have it allocated from the taxes and duties paid by the merchants last year.”

“The period before spring is a hurdle we have to overcome. As long as we can survive these three months, things will naturally take a turn for the better once the snow melts.” Yao Wenyu made a slight attempt at reassurance. “The tea the merchants obtained from the mutual market has also been selling well at Yongyi Harbor, so we can increase the commercial tax by an appropriate amount this year.”

“If we are going to keep the copper mines in Juexi going, we have to deal with the Provincial Administration Commission of Juexi.” Shen Zechuan turned his folding fan and pushed aside the cooled tea beside his hand. “Whether things can still keep running smoothly after spring this year will depend on how Qudu decides to play their hand.”

Jiang Qingshan personally assumed command of Juexi, so he was most well-acquainted with the business dealings coming and going in the territory. If Qudu ordered him to choke off this tea trade route running through the northwest, it would be indeed a blow to Cizhou.

“On the bright side,” Kong Ling rubbed his knees, “the timely snow augurs a good harvest.”

“That’s indeed the case for our three prefectures, but the commoners of Fanzhou and Dengzhou will suffer.” Shen Zechuan had been thinking of Fanzhou these days. “King Yi seized the granaries of the two prefectures for himself before the turn of the year, and many people have starved to death even before the snow fell. I’ve been having sleepless nights turning and tossing over this matter.”

“We are going to pit our troops against Duanzhou in the second month,” Zhou Gui said. “So it’d be best to settle the issue with Fanzhou and Dengzhou now.”

Cizhou Garrison Troops had only 20,000 soldiers. Including Dunzhou, they had 30,000. They had to face up against the Biansha Cavalry from Duanzhou in the second month, as well as split their energy and attention to dealing with King Yi. As such, there would be a void in Cizhou’s defenses. If the Eight Great Training Divisions came feeling their way over from Dancheng during that period of time, they would be really overwhelmed.

“It’s also an opportune moment now to take down Fanzhou.” Yao Wenyu brushed aside the tea foam. “King Yi is so insatiably greedy that the commoners in Fanzhou have long been voicing their discontent. He can’t last for long. Why don’t we make the first move and issue an official denunciation-cum-proclamation of war?”

“It’s different from the ‘bandit suppression’ situation a year ago now that Cizhou has reached an agreement with the northern and southern battlefields. Assuming we make the first move to issue an official proclamation and King Yi refuses to surrender and insists on fighting, it will give Qudu a reason to deploy their troops.” Kong Ling, who had always placed priority on “stability”, was not in favor of the idea.

“Mister Chengfeng has a point, but the Prefectural Lord has already been appointed before the new year, so there is no benefit to keeping an outward show of peace with Qudu.” Yao Wenyu did not take a drink of his tea. He looked at Shen Zechuan. “In my opinion, Qudu will not dare to dispatch their troops now even if they have a reason to.”

Kong Ling was still of the opinion that it was inappropriate. “If the crime of rebelling against the state is substantiated at this moment, the business in Juexi this year is bound to be affected. All things aside, if Jiang Qingshan were to make use of this opportunity to seal the Xi clan’s copper mine, wouldn’t our losses far outweigh the gain? Your Lordship, in my humble opinion, the better tactic would be to send troops to Fanzhou on the quiet.”

“His Lordship’s occupation of Zhongbo is already a foregone conclusion. Even without this proclamation, Jiang Qingshan will still think of a way to seal the Xi clan’s copper mines.” Yao Wenyu said.

Both men differed in their views and held fast to their own arguments.

Shen Zechuan tapped his folding fan against his fingertips and said a moment later, “Shenwei, draft up the proclamation.”

They discussed the entire night in the study. Seeing as the arrangements had been more or less made, Fei Sheng called for the attendants to serve breakfast. Everyone helped themselves to the meals and hurried back for a rest, considering that they were going to continue with the in-depth discussion of the plans for the deployment of troops at night.

When Kong Ling rose to his feet and saw Yao Wenyu about to head out, he turned aside to lift the curtain for him. Yao Wenyu bowed to him, and Qiao Tianya entered to push him away. After everyone had left, Zhou Gui trotted along the corridor, panting for breath as he caught up with Kong Ling.

“Oh, my!” Zhou Gui rubbed his chest with one hand and reached out with the other as he shouted, “Chengfeng, Chengfeng!”

Kong Ling stopped in his tracks to wait for him. “You should have called out to me earlier if you have something to say. This walkway is extremely slippery. If you were to fall in a moment of carelessness, it would take you a long time to heal!”<sup>30</sup>

Catching his breath, Zhou Gui lamented with a wave of his hand, “I could still run several *li* along the fields the year before last, but I really

can't do it anymore this year. It's truly the case that time flies, and old age now beckons."

"Look at the rush you are in." Kong Ling tightened his fur collar around him to keep out the bitterly cold wind. "Are you here about what happened earlier?"

"It has been a long time since I last enjoyed the snow with you." Zhou Gui tried to cover it up only to make his intent all the more conspicuous. "My wife has been keeping a close watch on me these days, and I have been looking after my grandson the whole day in the residence. Today's just perfect."

Kong Ling sighed and said ruefully, "You'd do better not to learn to be so furtive like the others." He drew back his hands and took shelter from the wind before continuing, "there's no need to persuade me. I will not change my opinion."

Zhou Gui could only say, "Still, don't harbor a grudge against Yuanzhuo because of this."

"Do you take me for a kid?" Kong Ling walked side by side with him. "The fact that Yuanzhuo can speak frankly without reservations shows that he has a clear conscience. A difference in political views is only inevitable; it's mindlessly playing along that's taboo. I understand that, and so does Yuanzhuo, and that's the Prefectural Lord's stance on the whole matter given that he didn't seek us out for a private discussion."

Zhou Gui had been castigating himself because of Gao Zhongxiong's incident. He no longer took decision-making into his own hands and always had to ask Shen Zechuan before taking action. During the recent discussions of official business, he also told the advisors on his payroll not to be complacent, fearing that they would clash with Yao Wenyu again.

Zhou Gui saw a branch of the withered willows in the courtyard snapped, and the wind sent it falling into the snow and over to the corner of the wall. Having caught his breath, he said dejectedly, "I'm just afraid it will cause us to be even more estranged from one another..."

"Water which is too clean has no fish."<sup>31</sup> Kong Ling raised his hand to brush away the snow on his white temples. He schooled his expression and said with all seriousness, "Which *yamen* in the world is truly without blemish? You've been the prefectural prefect for so many years in Cizhou, and you know that it's equally complicated both in the upper and lower echelons. There is no end to vices such as corruption and bribery, and they

can never be fully eradicated. You have done a good job managing it the previous years, and the Prefectural Lord understands that too. From start to end, he has never blamed you or taken it out on you. Killing those two advisors was merely a reminder to you, not a warning. Your cautiousness of late will only serve to remind him of this matter.”

Tough was the governance of one’s subordinates, as was deference to one’s superiors.

Zhou Gui took a few steps and said despondently, “... My father-in-law was reluctant to recommend me for an official post in the capital also because he assessed that I was not cut out for it. I have no sense of propriety when it comes to certain matters, and I have to rely on fumbling my way through trial and error in order to determine whether to tighten my control or relax my approach. This is too difficult for me.”

“Since you have not done anything against your conscience, why do you have to be so terrified?” Kong Ling shook his head slightly. “Don’t make a conscious effort to give way to Yuanzhuo anymore. He is intelligent and quick-witted, so how can this little thinking of yours escape his eyes? You’ll only end up creating a genuine rift over time.”



It was gusty when Shen Zechuan was on the way back to his residence. Fei Sheng held his arm out to hold up an umbrella to shield Shen Zechuan from the wind, but the wind was so strong that it sent Shen Zechuan’s coat flapping all over.

With his back to the wind, Fei Sheng said, “Master, let’s switch to a sedan.”

Shen Zechuan could barely open his eyes from the intense wind, and he was so freezing cold that the tips of his ears had gone red. “It’s just a few steps; why would we need a sedan for that?”

But it’s cold!

Fei Sheng was worried that Shen Zechuan would catch another cold with just these few steps. He had been exceedingly careful these past few days both outside and inside the residence. Even the hallways in the courtyard had thick, heavy drapes hung up, the bottom of which the attendants would weigh down whenever they entered and exited to keep the cold out. For prudence’s sake, the ground heating system inside was also kept running at all times.



After much difficulty, they made it through the main entrance. Ding Tao, who had been waiting in the side room flanking the principal room, immediately jumped out. Along with Li Xiong, he stood in front of Shen Zechuan like a block of wall.

As they shuffled along slowly, Shen Zechuan said with a headache, "You may stop shielding me from the wind. Let's leave quickly. All we're getting standing here is a draught of wind. It won't be long before one of us collapses."

Ding Tao had grown taller again during this period of time. "Master's instruction was to shield you so that no wind can pass through, or he's gonna whip me." He patted Li Xiong and shouted against the wind, "Daxiong, move faster!"

By the time Shen Zechuan finally reached the veranda, his cloak had already been soaked through with snow. It felt uncomfortable to have it covering his neck, all dripping wet, so he raised his hands to undo it. Fei Sheng took it in a fluster and called for the maidservant to dry it. He was also about to drape a new cloak over Shen Zechuan, but the latter simply went on ahead without even looking back.

Fei Sheng had been in such a state of elation after having gotten the assignment of recruiting new members back in Dunzhou that he even found Qiao Tianya pleasing to the eyes when he saw the latter upon his return. During the period of time Shen Zechuan was in Libei, he remained at home with Ji Gang, mulling over the Ji Clan's Boxing Style while listening to the latter. Now that Shen Zechuan had returned, he was like a mother hen going all out to take meticulous care of Shen Zechuan in every way possible.

The Marquis has to run around the battlefields now, see!

Fei Sheng thought as he followed behind Shen Zechuan.

So long the Prefectural Lord did not fall sick, the Marquis would be happy and would not send dirty looks his way later. Everyone was going to be a family in the future. He could not always remain a thorn in Xiao Chiye's flesh.

Shen Zechuan entered the main hall and huffed into his hands as he took his seat. Fei Sheng asked, "Master, are you going to drink the medicinal decoction simmering over the stove now?"

Shen Zechuan did not want to drink it. He had not been ill the past few days, and he was concerned that he might get a nosebleed from the over-nourishment should he continue taking all these tonics and medicines.

Moreover, there was no one at home other than Ding Tao who had candies. So he pretended not to hear and continued to flip through the documents on his table.

Noting that Shen Zechuan's expression remained unchanged, Fei Sheng waited by the side. After a moment, he spoke up again like clockwork. "Master, the medicine—"

Shen Zechuan patiently raised his head and looked at him.

Fei Sheng pretended not to comprehend the expression in Shen Zechuan's eyes. There was not only Xiao Chiye but also Ji Gang backing him on this issue, and they were both people that Shen Zechuan could not afford to offend.

Shen Zechuan could only relent in resignation. "Go bring it over."

Fei Sheng swiftly left to get the medicine, but a moment later, it was Qiao Tianya who lifted the drapes to enter.

"Yan Heru is here." Qiao Tianya did not put the drapes back down and turned around to look again. "This jabbering brat ran over to Yuanzhuo to make a ruckus. I've brought him over."

Shen Zechuan dipped the brush in ink and said, "he's here to deliver the silvers. Treat him with a little more courtesy."

Before they could finish their conversation, a person came in from under the drapes. Yan Heru was all decked out from head to toe in a brand new, vivid red and golden-threaded brocade robe with embroideries of, unsurprisingly enough, golden ingots. There was a string around his neck, with a brand new abacus hanging off of it. It was so tightly strapped on that a red mark had formed on his nape, but even so, he could not bear to take it off.

The eyes on this lad's fair face curved into crescents as he jovially exclaimed, "Here I've come to extend my new year greetings to Your Lordship! Happy Spring Festival! I wanted to come and pay my respects to Your Lordship a while ago, but alas, it turns out you were in Libei! See, the moment you came back, I rushed right over. I've not only prepared precious gems and jades for the Marquis but also picked out for Your Lordship a number of pretty—"

Fei Sheng, who was carrying the bowl of medicine behind, locked eyes with Qiao Tianya. With a raise of his arm, Qiao Tianya held Yan Heru down.

Libei was in mourning, and Cizhou had not gaily decorated its streets for the festivities this year either. Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye themselves were both dressed in plain, mourning clothes, and Shen Zechuan had even removed his jade earring during this period of time. Who would have known that Yan Heru would be so insufferable the moment he opened his mouth? He was simply asking for a beating.

Shen Zechuan wrote “REJECTED” on the paper and did not even spare Yan Heru a single glance.

Credit: Thanks to MaruChan for pointing out the typo! <3



## CHAPTER 193: MISGIVINGS

Yan Heru corrected himself at the last minute and finished up his words, “—pretty *ruyi* scepters!”<sup>32</sup>

“How polite of you to have prepared a gift.” It was then Shen Zechuan set down his brush. “Show Young Master Yan to a seat.”

Qiao Tianya released his grip, and Fei Sheng pushed Yan Heru in while saying, “Quick, quick, quick. Serve tea to Young Master Yan!”

Yan Heru suffered an enormous loss this time. He had carefully selected many a number of people from Cuiqing, all of them exceedingly good-looking young boys and girls. He originally meant to get on Yao Wenyu’s good side by letting Yao Wenyu take his pick first so that it would be a lot smoother when he dealt with Shen Zechuan later, but he did not even get to see Yao Wenyu at all. On entering this courtyard, he thought of giving them to Shen Zechuan. After all, which man did not love beauties? It was not like Xiao the Second was some ravishing beauty that could put flowers to shame.

Yan Heru stroked the back of his head and marked Qiao Tianya down in his book of grudges, then held up the hems of his robe to take his seat. He still wore an amiable expression, but his smile was restrained as he said with some melancholy, “The Prince of Libei was a hero of all times. Who doesn’t know of his exemplary military achievements? I was simply worried that the Prefectural Lord and Marquis would be overwhelmed with grief. If your health were to suffer, you would be doing a disservice to the late prince who was ever the compassionate man. See, that’s why I rushed over playing the jerk, all just to amuse a smile out of the Prefectural Lord! My deepest condolences, Your Lordship.”

Yan Heru spoke in officialese with a hint of Hezhou accent. He could not change his habit of adding words like “*see*”, “*yes?*” or “*no?*”, and the likes, which made him sound like a spoiled child using them. However, it was indeed quite impressive to be seeing him say words of comfort in such a well-mannered way now.

Shen Zechuan thanked him for this kindness. After all, the expenses in the entire territory this year were massive, and Yan Heru was inextricably involved in every single account. While Yan Heru was speaking, Shen Zechuan took the medicine from Fei Sheng and drank a few mouthfuls. With a gentle expression, he said, “When I was in Libei, I heard you

supplied Bianbo Camp with tens of thousands of taels for the repairs of the bridle paths.”

“Those were just chump changes,” Yan Heru said. “Nothing of significance that the Prefectural Lord should keep in mind. Besides, the battle lines are now unified, yes? Libei and Qidong are both fighting against the Biansha baldies. I’m but a mere merchant who can’t be of help in any other way. This is just a small gesture of my goodwill.”

Fei Sheng scoffed to himself in secret, marveling at how this lad was not much worse than himself when pretending to be a decent human being. Look at how he was going on about the unification of battle lines now, yet he did not show the slightest twinge of guilt earlier in Dunzhou when he led the merchants to do business with Biansha.

Shen Zechuan finished his medicine and spoke after a moment’s pause, “What’s the nature of your business in coming to see me today?”

“That’s exactly it, to see Your Lordship.” Once again, Yan Heru flashed a smile. “Your Lordship is now like my own kin elder brother. I’ll miss you like crazy if I don’t see you for one day.” Acting without thinking, he straightened up in his seat and said, “Why don’t you take me as your younger brother? I’ll kowtow twice to you.”

Yan Heru was indeed shameless. He addressed Cai Yu as “pa”, Lei Changming as “big bro”, and even Lei Jingzhe as “eldest nephew” the last time he came across him. Now that the tides had turned in Shen Zechuan’s favor, putting him in control of the entire situation, he wanted to pass himself off as Shen Zechuan’s younger brother. Was it a big deal to remain in a lowly, subservient position? It was nothing compared to money — this lad saw it more clearly than anyone else.

“Sure,” Seeing Yan Heru getting all delighted, Shen Zechuan continued, “Kowtow twice to Shen Wei first, and we can be considered to hail from the same clan.”

Yan Heru almost spat out loud in disdain. He was not a fool. Being associated with Shen Wei in any way would ruin his reputation, and he would be cursed by all in both the east and west. He beat a retreat and said with waning interest, “Then forget it. We have rules at home, so kowtowing to Shen Wei is definitely a no-no.” He said to Shen Zechuan, “Your Lordship. Your Lordship~”

“Hm?” Shen Zechuan said.

Yan Heru perked up and said, "Well... I have something else to discuss with you. Hasn't Qidong already come to an agreement with our Cizhou? There will definitely be no problem with the commander-in-chief's military provisions this year. I'll make up for it. All of it."

In no hurry to respond, Shen Zechuan drank the tea to rinse his mouth.

Sure enough, Yan Heru continued, "Qudu is afraid of you now. You have powerful military forces all around you. If you were really to come to blows with Qudu, how would the Eight Great Training Divisions be able to hold their own against you? But lowering their heads like this isn't the way forward either, so I'm thinking, Qudu will cut off our business to Juexi from this year onwards. At least, they won't leave the Xi clan's copper mines and fleet of ships in your hands."

The fleet of ships at Yongyi Harbor concerned the business of Libei's mutual trade market. Unrefined tea was worth nothing in Juexi, and it was only through export with this fleet of ships that profits could be made. Yan Heru did not feel bad about the seizure of the Xi clan's properties. In any case, those were not his shops. The Yan clan could no longer trade in grains in Zhongbo now, and Yan Heru had to find a substitute to fill in this void. He was eyeing the harbor.

"What do you have in mind?" Shen Zechuan set down the lid of the teacup. "Give it to me straight."

"I think we should," Yan Heru plopped down on the table, "forgo Yongyi Harbor."

While tapping on the tea lid, Shen Zechuan raised his eyes to look at Yan Heru and saw the ambition in the latter's eyes. Shen Zechuan did not reply immediately. He remained in his seat patiently, and in no time, he figured out Yan Heru's plan.

Yan Heru blinked. "We can... build a new one."

The Yan clan of Hezhou occupied the waterways in the south of Dazhou. This was the key reason its businesses could spread all over from east to west. But after their goods arrived at Juexi, they had to be handed over to the Xi clan's fleet of ships at Yongyi Harbor for trading. That was why the largest share of profits from this route did not go into Yan Heru's pocket, but Xi Hongxuan's—which was now also Shen Zechuan's pockets. Yan Heru had been feigning civility with Shen Zechuan all this while in all kinds of brazen attempts to cooperate with Shen Zechuan because he saw the trade route in the whole territory shrinking. He had to keep up with

Shen Zechuan's speed. To Yan Heru, Juexi's intent to seize and seal off the copper mines and Yongyi Harbor this year was an opportunity to capitalize on the timeliness of it all and get a step ahead.

A few years ago, it was tough going for Yan Heru to venture up north. Libei would not collaborate with him, so he simply established a small trade market in Dunzhou and made use of the pawnshop to launder money for officials around the world. It was the same now; he was still just as gutsy. Giving up Yongyi Harbor meant that the Xi clan could no longer hold back the Yan clan in the west. Yan Heru wanted to hold sway over the internal and external waterways and put himself on equal footing with Shen Zechuan in this turbulent time.

Shen Zechuan stroked the edge of the tea lid with his fingertips. "How are you going to get around Jiang Qingshan?"

"You are holding a handle against Juexi in your hands." Yan Heru grinned, revealing his canine tooth. "In the past few years, the merchants have gone to Dunzhou to launder money on behalf of the local officials, and there are plenty of officials from Juexi in that name list. If the account books in the pawnshop were to fall into Jiang Qingshan's hands, they would have hell to pay even if they don't die. I've dropped countless amounts of bribe money in Juexi in order to gain access to the market there, and now it's time for them to repay the debt."

There were hundreds of officials and lesser functionaries in just one region alone. Even if the prefectural prefect himself was upright and impartial, there was no way he could ensure that all his subordinates under him were uncorrupt. The administration of a prefecture and a city were extremely complex, and there were only so many Investigating Censors Circuit in the various areas. There were simply too many unseen blind spots from top to bottom falling through the cracks, and all of these were openings Yan Heru exploited. Yan Heru was able to do business on such a large scale next to the Xi clan in Juexi because these people were his subjects who had rendered meritorious service by protecting him, and now the same people were all stepping stones who would pave the way ahead for him.

Shen Zechuan was going to have to re-evaluate Yan Heru anew now.

Yan Heru had always appeared quite the shameless one from the time he was in Dunzhou. Even when he had been given the cold shoulder, he could continue on with a broad smile, making others forget he was the



helmsman of the Yan clan of Hezhou who had profited off others' misfortune in Zhongbo just a few years ago. He had also been quite decisive when he abandoned Lei Jingzhe, and was even willing to encircle and kill Lei Jingzhe in Dunzhou to win Shen Zechuan over.

No matter how sweetly Yan Heru addressed said person, he would not waver in the slightest when it came to taking their lives. He was truly a money-grubber. Just like how he would never go out without a golden carriage, he would not even show his face if the person sitting across from him did not have enough bargaining chips of interest.

"Liuzhou, which lies along the coast, is a land with auspicious *fengshui*.<sup>33</sup> Its location is remote, and it lies quite a distance away from Yongyi Harbor. What's more, it's a crescent-shaped bay, so the fleet of ships will not lie exposed on the outside. As long as we seal the mouth of Liuzhou's Prefectural Prefect, You Tan, we'll be able to continue doing business." Yan Heru rapped that golden abacus of his. "Make good use of that list of names, and the merchants headed towards Juexi will no longer need to pay tax and duties to Jiang Qingshan. You will have the final say over the tariffs and inland commercial tax... In the future, when you come to reign supreme and take all thirteen cities of Juexi under your command, these corrupt officials will be the first gift I present to you. Kill them when the time comes and wash the land all over in blood, and we'll see who still dares take bribes on your watch!"

Exploit all resources to the fullest, and get rid of them once they outlive their usefulness!

Yan Heru had not even come of age<sup>34</sup> this year, yet he was already well-acquainted with the words' ruthless and merciless'. He flicked away noisily on his little abacus with that harmless, innocent face of his, calculating with it not just money, but also lives.

Shen Zechuan had no reason to reject Yan Heru; he indeed needed a new harbor to avoid Jiang Qingshan. He was not even willing to concede over the copper mines. The various expenses were increasing this year because of the war. By the time he took back the remaining three prefectures, the costs would no doubt skyrocket again.

"You are a far-sighted one," Shen Zechuan sighed with emotion. "I cannot compare to you when it comes to doing business."

After Yan Heru took his leave, Qiao Tianya set his hand on the chair's handle and looked on as the door hanging screen rose and fell. "This lad

should be killed.”

“He is resourceful and extremely good at getting on a person’s good side,” Shen Zechuan glanced at that gently swaying hanging screen too. “In time, he will become trouble.”



Yan Heru walked out of the residence and stepped on someone’s back to get onto the horse carriage. As the carriage began to sway, he took off the golden abacus around his neck and tossed it onto a satin cushion. Rubbing the back of his neck, he asked, “have you found Hairigu?”

Yan Miao lifted the curtain of the carriage and entered to kneel at the side, “Everyone in the Shen residence keeps their mouth tight, and the Imperial Bodyguards are everywhere; I can’t find him at all.”

Yan Heru was a little displeased. He ticked off the beads on his abacus and threw a tantrum. “What Imperial Bodyguards? They’re just a bunch of beggars who hung up their hats to become lackeys in Cizhou after leaving Qudu! Because of the Liuzhou harbor matter today, I’ve caused Shen Zechuan to have misgivings about me. Who knows? He’s probably plotting my death right now.”

Yan Miao happened to be the messenger for the pawnshop in Dunzhou; in fact, he was also the shopkeeper who handled the incoming and outgoing accounts for the pawnshop in Dunzhou. He might have been the son of a servant<sup>35</sup> serving in the Yan clan, but the fact that Yan Heru had him stationed in Dunzhou a few years ago was evidence of Yan Heru’s trust in him.

Yan Miao lifted his head slightly to speak up by the dim light. “From what I can see of Shen Zechuan’s actions in Cizhou, he doesn’t seem to be as vindictive as the rumors have it. The war is of utmost urgency now, and both the northern and southern battlefronts are borrowing on his strength. Little Young Master, you mustn’t lose your head and ruin your relationship with him.”

“He had me take responsibility for providing for the two prefectures’ granaries at the start of spring.” Yan Heru slid the abacus bead back and forth. “That’s essentially serving me with a warning, no? Do you think he isn’t one to seek revenge over a small matter? I think it’s just the opposite.”

“Kong Chengfeng rejected him thrice, yet he didn’t fly into a rage and continued to treat Kong Ling with respect.” Yan Miao said, “We’ve supplied the grains for the two prefectures, along with the military

provisions for Qidong this year. We will also be providing the funds and labor for the construction of the new harbor in the west. He ought to have taken notice of Little Young Master's sincerity."

Yan Heru suddenly swept away the abacus on his knees. He endured it for a moment before opening his mouth. Eventually, he said, "A-Miao, you don't understand. Shen Zechuan treats Kong Ling well because Kong Ling is still willing to do his best for Cizhou despite being unwilling to work under Shen Zechuan in an official capacity. Kong Ling was the one who negotiated the business in Huaizhou before autumn, and it was also Kong Ling who played the peacemaker when there was animosity between Shen Zechuan and Zhou Gui's advisors before the new year. How else do you think a blockhead like Zhou Gui can still get to be an official in Cizhou? Shen Zechuan is making the best of his resources; he knows to put these two men together as a team. Not only will they not turn against him, but they will also put up an unassailable defense of Cizhou on his behalf. As for me, if he genuinely and sincerely wants to have a long-lasting partnership with me, how could he tolerate the lapdogs by his side barking at me time and time again?"

Yan Heru was about to say something else when Yan Miao suddenly straightened up and warned in a low voice. "Little Young Master!"

Yan Heru promptly paused. After a momentary silence, he heard the sounds of horse hooves outside of his carriage. He picked up the abacus and crawled over on his knees to the side of the carriage drapes. In a soft whisper, he asked, "Who's that?"

Yan Miao answered, "The Libei Armored Cavalry."

Yan Heru felt a sudden pang of fear. He clutched his abacus tightly, wanting to take a peek while the carriage swayed, but then, the carriage came to an abrupt stop.

Lang Tao Xue Jin slowed down and stopped by the side of the horse carriage. Against the entire sky of snow bearing down on him from above, Xiao Chiye cracked his whip in the air, and Chen Yang and the Libei Armored Cavalry behind him followed suit and came to a stop too.

Yan Heru patted his cheeks with both hands and pulled the carriage curtains open. "It really is the Second Master! I've been thinking of you on the way."

Xiao Chiye turned his head slightly to sweep a glance at Yan Miao, who was kneeling inside, before looking at Yan Heru, "You've been to see

the Prefectural Lord?”

Yan Heru gulped. He had heard that Xiao Chiye had run in the snow for half a night in order to retrieve the Prince of Libei, and that he had not only escaped freezing to death but even broke the necks of more than a dozen men. Yan Heru did not know if it was because of the rumors, but he felt Xiao the Second's sense of presence swell suddenly. That imposing and intimidating aura assailing him was so overwhelming that he involuntarily broke out into a sweat all over.

“I did, yes.” Yan Heru looked as though he was feeling very warm as he wiped the sweat on his forehead. “I brought some gems and jade for you. If you find them acceptable when you see them on your return, let me know. There are plenty of them in Hezhou.”

Xiao Chiye had just come over from Bianbo Camp, and he had no wish to engage in idle chatter with Yan Heru, so he merely nodded on hearing him and left with his men. The Libei Armored Cavalry passed by them like the wind, and it was only then that Yan Heru dared to rub his arms and shudder a few times.

As if remembering something, Yan Miao said to Yan Heru, “this Second Master has been looking for the Venerable Yideng.”

“Is that so?” Yan Heru tilted his head to look at the fine spray of snow kicked up by the Libei Armored Cavalry. His gaze gradually sharpened, and he said with a smile, “... But having Shen Zechuan sick is far more reassuring to me than letting him recover.”

## CHAPTER 194: SOUND SLEEP

Qiao Tianya had still yet to leave the room. Shen Zechuan said, "When you return later, let Yuanzhuo know about Liuzhou's harbor. We'll discuss it in detail later. The weather has been cold recently. Keep the ground heating running. Don't let him fall ill again."

Qiao Tianya, who was more at ease before Shen Zechuan than Fei Sheng was, answered, "I'm keeping my eyes on it."

Shen Zechuan thought for a moment. "There are quite a number of people this year sending in their visitation cards<sup>32</sup> with requests for a meeting in the hope of seeking a prospective career here. Ward them off these few days until Yuanzhuo recovers from his illness. You did well today. Yan Heru has ulterior motives. Don't let him in next time too."

Qiao Tianya fished out a folded paper from his sleeve and pushed it before Shen Zechuan. "I'm here about this matter, actually. There are quite a number of scholars with a literary reputation among those who sent in their visitation cards. Yuanzhuo has taken a close look at them and prepared two lists of names for you."

"Two?" With warm fingertips, Shen Zechuan brushed the paper open for a look.

"This is a list of those you can retain but cannot use." Qiao Tianya pointed to the left. "While this is a list of those you can retain and use."

Shen Zechuan looked over the list of those that could be retained but not used; they were all scholars who were rather well-reputed. Of these people, few were usable, because what Zhongbo was in urgent need of at present were practical doers who would actually get things done. But these people came all the way from afar to throw in their lots with Shen Zechuan. For reputation's sake, Shen Zechuan could not slight them either. He had to keep them in his residence as literary retainers. On the contrary, those of use in the other list were basically all unknown nobodies.

"We need a group of people after early spring," Shen Zechuan said. "When the time comes, include the talents picked out from Zhou Gui's end and draw up a name list for the various prefectures to make arrangements to settle them in."

Shen Zechuan intended to reclaim the remaining three prefectures before spring. That way, he would be able to make it in time for the spring plowing. Otherwise, he would have to stress over the provisions again at the end of the year.

Qiao Tianya acknowledged his order. On hearing the sound of footsteps under the eaves, he rose to his feet and announced with a smile, "The Second Master is back."

After Xiao Fangxu's demise, Xiao Jiming became the Prince of Libei, and calling Xiao Chiye "Second Young Master" was no longer appropriate, so they simply changed their address of him to "Second Master".<sup>33</sup>

Xiao Chiye stood still under the eaves as Chen Yang and Gu Jin each stood to his left and right and helped him take off his coat. The maidservant waiting in attendance at the side presented a hot handkerchief to him, which he took to wipe his hands. Ding Tao hurriedly lifted the hanging screen for Xiao Chiye to enter.

Ever the tactful ones, Qiao Tianya and Fei Sheng promptly made to retreat, but Xiao Chiye asked, "Where's Hairigu?"

Fei Sheng cast a sideways glance at Shen Zechuan and answered only when he saw Shen Zechuan give his tacit consent. "To reply Second Master, he's at our Beiyuan military drill grounds." Taking his cue, he bowed to take the handkerchief from Xiao Chiye's hands. At the same time, he said, "Master has made arrangements for the Imperial Bodyguards to do a daily headcount to prevent them from running all over the place."

"Gu Jin," Xiao Chiye looked back and said, "Make a trip to the Beiyuan military drill grounds later and look for Hairigu."

Shen Zechuan was sitting right behind, so naturally, Fei Sheng would not speak out of turn and ask why. He bowed again to Xiao Chiye and withdrew with Qiao Tianya. As guards, they could not very well stand under the eaves and converse with each other with their master still inside, so the few of them simultaneously headed to the foot of the veranda at the side to discuss matters.

It was warm inside the room. As Xiao Chiye removed his blade and undressed, Shen Zechuan gazed at him from where he was seated. Xiao Chiye, having ridden his horse non-stop from the battlefield to Bianbo Camp, and from Bianbo Camp to Zhongbo, found it all worth it to see the expression in Shen Zechuan's eyes. He leaned over, his body completely blocking off the chair from view. "*Losing* weight now, are we?"

Shen Zechuan was still holding the brush. He caressed the smooth shaft of the brush with the pulp of his fingers and whispered back softly as if he could not understand his words, "*Kissing*, where?"

Xiao Chiye lifted a hand to pinch Shen Zechuan's chin to prevent him from shying away, then moved his head close and pressed him up in the chair for a kiss. When Shen Zechuan tilted his head up like this, he would reveal his bobbing Adam's apple as he absorbed all of Xiao Chiye's iciness and dissolved it into nothingness. Not wanting the brush anymore, he slid his hands up along Xiao Chiye's arms. At the same time, Xiao Chiye picked him up and wrapped them around Xiao Chiye's neck.

There was no consolation in a lover's kiss—that was a sentiment that could also be bestowed upon by others. Only the insatiable desire laid bare during moments in which they sought each other out was the real deal. This was a lick like no other between lovers. Xiao Chiye needed such a dependency that was both secretive and extreme. That was where he belonged; it was also his territory.

Shen Zechuan was burning up from the kiss. Xiao Chiye set him on the table and braced himself against the table with his arms to gaze at him with all the seriousness he could muster. It did not take long for the flush from the tips of Shen Zechuan's ears to spread rapidly to the corners of his eyes. He seemed as if he could not hold up against Xiao Chiye any longer; he could not even withstand such an invasive gaze. That was, to him, a different kind of... devastating seduction.

Both of them were evidently intimately familiar with one another. Even with their eyes closed, they could find each other's most sensitive spots. But at present, Shen Zechuan could still feel his heartstrings stirring from Xiao Chiye's tantalizing gaze. The quickening of his breath brought on tiny beads of sweat that trickled across his smooth, satiny back.

Xiao Chiye looked so very dangerous, as if he would ravage Shen Zechuan like a tempest once he was freed of the shackles holding him back. He needed Shen Zechuan way too much, but he was remarkably restrained. Desire surged like magma under thin ice. Through Xiao Chiye's eyes, Shen Zechuan sensed a love so doting and gripping it would physically hurt.

This was the change elicited by the suppression of desire.

Very slowly, Xiao Chiye kissed Shen Zechuan and reached his arm out to toss his outer robe into the chair. "I'm going to the bathhouse."

Shen Zechuan brushed off Xiao Chiye's fine sweat with his fingertip, then pulled away and blinked to motion for him to go on ahead.



By the time Xiao Chiye came out again, he had already changed into a clean set of attire. He was wiping his hair in the inner chamber when he saw a small box on the table. He opened it—it contained jades Yan Heru had sent over.

Outside, Chen Yang was talking to Shen Zechuan. “I have to return to Bianbo Camp three days later, but Master will be staying.”

Shen Zechuan seemed to be looking at the documents and was slow to answer. “The second month is right around the corner. Is the location to build the stables on Mount Luo already decided?”

Xiao Chiye picked up a piece of red jade and caressed it.

Chen Yang answered, “Yes. Once we reclaim Duanzhou, we can begin construction.”

Shen Zechuan said, “The new spears General Lu wants will be more or less ready at the end of the second month. When the time comes, transport it via the new bridle path to avoid taking another detour.”

The rest were all about trivial and tedious duties. As Xiao Chiye listened, he thought of the defensive battle a few days back.

Xiao Chiye was now leading the Imperial Army to guard Sha’er Camp in Jiang Sheng’s place. Guo Weili and Zhao Hui were both transferred back to their original camps, while Zuo Qianqiu and Lu Guangbai were jointly in charge of guarding Shayi Camp. Xiao Jiming’s intent with this arrangement was obvious—the Libei Armored Cavalry had given up on advancing and was now relying on the two men who were best at defenses to face Hasen’s attacks. Libei had completely switched from going on the offensive to being on the defensive.

Not only that, but Xiao Jiming had also made an adjustment to the battlegrounds. In the past, a change of general was equivalent to a change of battle line in which the Armored Cavalry in the same camp had to be swapped out as well. It was different now. Other than Zuo Qianqiu, who would remain in place, the other three commanding generals of the three camps would all be irregularly rotated. This gave Guo Weili a headache. Soldiers he was used to leading would no longer follow him, and there was even Zuo Qianqiu to keep an eye on him when he fought defensive battles. It was like his chain had shortened to the point it was strangling him by the throat; it made him uncomfortable all over. Xiao Chiye had to break away from the Imperial Army and learn to adapt and get along with the Armored Cavalry of the remaining two camps. This was even more so for Lu



Guangbai. He had to familiarize himself with the cavalry and reverse the way he thought as an infantry on the ground... Everyone seemed to have been tied up by the limbs as they crashed into one another, unaccustomed as they were to fighting battles in this way.

But the effect was evident.

Since the rotations were not in order, Hasen could not be sure who exactly his opponent was each time he launched an attack. Without Xiao Fangxu, the morale of the Libei Armored Cavalry was indeed low, but even so, the Biansha Cavalry did not get their wish. Hasen not only faced Zuo Qianqiu, who used to guard Tianfei Watchtower, but also had to guard against the Bianjun Commandery Garrison Troops, who could conceal themselves in the snow.

Hasen had no idea what happened to Libei behind that wall, except that victory did not come as he expected, and both parties had instead fallen into some kind of unsettling stalemate. It was here Hasen finally got a taste of how formidable Xiao Jiming truly was. The new Prince of Libei was totally poles apart from Xiao Fangxu. He seemed to have cowered back and holed himself up, but in reality, he had delimited a battle line in the east, making it impossible for Hasen to press forward even the slightest.

Xiao Chiye put aside his distracting thoughts and closed the box.

Chen Yang had already taken his leave, and Shen Zechuan was still writing something. The rustle of ink and brush blended into the sound of the snow. Xiao Chiye did not go out to disturb him. He knew Shen Zechuan was in a rush to take down King Yi before the second month. What's more, Shen Zechuan still had to go to the study later to further discuss the deployment of troops. Xiao Chiye set down the handkerchief at the side and fell back onto the bedding.

He did not know if it was intentional or not.

But Shen Zechuan did not let the maidservants clean up the bed when he got up last night, and Xiao Chiye could still seem to catch a whiff of Shen Zechuan's scent as he rested his head on it. It relaxed him enough to dispel the heavy, depressing mood that had tagged along with him from the battlefields.

Xiao Chiye closed his eyes and fell asleep before his hair had even dried.

At the hour of you, Fei Sheng came to call Shen Zechuan, who extracted himself from his work and said, "open the windows. It's rather

stuff.” As he rose to his feet, he remembered something else and added, “Never mind, wait for me at the door.”

Fei Sheng retreated out of the room with his head lowered.

Shen Zechuan’s nape was aching from having bent over the desk for too long. He lifted the hanging screen of the inner chamber and heard Xiao Chiye’s steady breathing when he entered.

Xiao Chiye lay on his side, with half of his face burrowed in the bedding. He was in such a deep sleep that it was apparent he had been exhausted for a long time. The injury on the back of his shoulder had yet to fully heal, and he seemed to feel nothing even though he was pressing down on it in his sleep. Shen Zechuan leaned over and gently pulled away the back of Xiao Chiye’s collar for a look. Afraid that Xiao Chiye might aggravate the injury by pressing his weight down on it like this, Shen Zechuan pushed him over so that he laid on his stomach.

Xiao Chiye, smothered as he was in the bedding, was still not fully awake, and it was in this way he remained sprawled on the bedding and murmured, “military intelligence report...”

Shen Zechuan leaned in closer to Xiao Chiye’s ear. “No military intelligence. Go back to sleep.”

Without opening his eyes, Xiao Chiye turned his face to the side to breathe. Shen Zechuan lowered his fingers to wipe his sweat for him very carefully, with exceedingly gentle movements. Xiao Chiye grabbed that hand of his and grasped it in his palm, refusing to let it go.

Shen Zechuan murmured admonishingly, “I’ll be back real soon, hm?”

Whenever he used to speak in this tone back in Qudu, chances were that he was miffed at Xiao Chiye. But now, the way he said it was so light and so gentle, like the caress of a soft feather. Not even hundreds of Yan Heru could hold a candle to him.

But Xiao Chiye did not let go.

Fei Sheng waited for quite a while at the door. Seeing as it was getting dark, he feared that Shen Zechuan would catch a cold should the snowstorm intensify at night if they delayed any further, so he hurried in and said softly across the hanging screen at the door, “Master, it’s almost time.”

After a moment’s pause, Shen Zechuan replied, “Go stop Yuanzhuo from heading over to the Zhou residence and tell him to come straight here instead. Then send someone to summon Zhou Gui and Chengfeng over.”

Fei Sheng could tell from his words that he meant to discuss official business at home tonight. He asked, "Then, shall I invite the various gentlemen to the side hall?"

Sitting at the edge of the bed without lighting up any lamps, Shen Zechuan said, "Let's hold the discussion just outside of here. We'll just keep our voices down."

Fei Sheng nodded and took his leave, aware that the operative phrase here was "keep our voices down". Hence, before the gentlemen made their way over, he called for his subordinates to quietly set up a screen in the hall, moving the venue of the discussion off to the side corner.

Zhou Gui and Kong Ling did not see Shen Zechuan when they came in. As they looked at each other, Fei Sheng hurriedly guided them behind the screen. Keeping his voice low, he said, "Master is in the inner chamber."

Kong Ling lowered his voice, "The Second Master too?"

Fei Sheng nodded slightly. As if still not reassured, he added, "He's sleeping."

They were in the middle of brewing tea when Qiao Tianya pushed Yao Wenyu in. Fei Sheng had laid out a rug inside earlier so that the wheelchair would not make any noise when it entered. As Kong Ling watched, he could not help but let loose a laugh, thinking Fei Sheng to be truly a genius.

Yao Wenyu did not inquire about Shen Zechuan's whereabouts after settling in. Handling the teacup with care, he said, "Shenwei's proclamation was published today. There should be activity from Fanzhou later on; I will have to trouble Your Excellency to keep a close eye on the matter."

The three of them did not have loud voices, so they were all rather at ease gathered here. Zhou Gui nodded his head in answer. "Fanzhou has now been surrounded. King Yi and Mount Luo have not come to an agreement, and the troops under the former are too weak to resist. My guess is that he will not put up a fight to the death, but he will definitely make use of the opportunity to bargain with us."

"It would be best not to have to deploy troops." As someone who had suffered the ravages of war, Kong Ling would rather resort to reason. "King Yi made a series of boasts to the citizens of Fanzhou during his rise to prominence, yet he has achieved not a single one of them to this day. He should also be aware of just how powerless he is to resist."

"The only concern is that the men under King Yi will not concede even if King Yi himself is willing to." Yao Wenyu thought about it and said,

“Fanzhou and Dengzhou, where King Yi is sitting, both have a major banditry problem, one that is even worse than it is in Chazhou. Then, there’s also interference from the brothels where Cuiqing and the likes are selling women from decent families; these people all know that surrendering is akin to a death sentence.”

Shen Zechuan raised his hands to cover Xiao Chiye’s ears as he listened to their discussion in the darkness.

Yao Wenyu was right; whether for official or private reasons, there was no way that Shen Zechuan would let off these bandits and brothels. These people were the root cause of the decay in Fanzhou and Dengzhou, and keeping them alive would mean retaining a scourge of calamity that would hinder the two prefectures’ progress, so Shen Zechuan would never go soft on them when he started killing them.

“What if we pretend to pardon them when our troops are at their gates?” Zhou Gui said, “Then make the arrests after the city gates are open?”

Kong Ling shook his head and said as he served the tea. “Have you ever considered that if they make use of the opportunity to incite the common folks of both prefectures, it will equate to tarnishing the Prefectural Lord’s reputation?”

Shen Zechuan was presently treading with caution everything he did. It was imperative they took Shen Zechuan’s reputation into consideration while striving to take over the world. In order to overwrite Shen Wei’s notoriety, every move they made from Chazhou onward had been conspicuously one of benevolence and magnanimity. That was why they had to have a justifiable reason for his deployment of troops into battle; there must be no involvement of any kind with the bandits. Otherwise, even if they occupied Zhongbo in the future, Shen Zechuan would not be able to establish a virtuous reputation for himself.

Shen Zechuan was listening to their conversation when there came the sound of footsteps beneath the eaves. Fei Sheng had gone to the kitchen to call for someone to brew the concoction, so how was Gao Zhongxiong supposed to know what was happening inside? He patted the snow off him and called out as he entered. “My greetings to Your Lordship, that proclamation—”

The three people who were off to the side turned their heads towards him in unison and shushed him.

Gao Zhongxiong was so freezing cold his cheeks had gone red. He immediately stopped talking and shrunk his neck back. He was still feeling trepidation when he saw Zhou Gui beckon to him, but seeing as none of the gentlemen said a word, he gingerly tiptoed over to them and bowed down to say in a very soft voice, "I'm here to submit my report to His Lordship."

Unsure how to go about explaining it, Kong Ling could only say, "Later. Why don't you take a seat first and have some tea?"

## CHAPTER 195: MASTIFFS

Gao Zhongxiong did not dare to ask any further and sat at the side, all prim and proper. The freezing cold had gotten to him quite badly on his way here. It was gradually getting better now, with some sensation restored in those ears that had been frozen numb.

Seeing as Gao Zhongxiong's robe was still old, Zhou Gui said, "It's bitter cold in Cizhou. You're way too flimsy dressed."

Gao Zhongxiong looked a little embarrassed as he clenched the hem of his clothes and answered in a small, mosquito-like voice, "Yes... yes."

Kong Ling could see that something was up. "As someone in a *yamen* with limited funds,<sup>34</sup> you're in a far worse position than the others with lucrative posts. Money that passes through your hands are all bits and pieces of silver. What's more, you have only just arrived in Cizhou, and it isn't easy for you to settle down in a whole new place. If there's anything you need, don't hesitate to bring it up."

The show of concern put Gao Zhongxiong at ease. His eyes misted over, and he hurriedly stood up. "You have all shown me utmost solicitude, and His Lordship, too, has treated me with such tremendous kindness..."

Zhou Gui immediately waved his hand. "Take a seat. There's no one else here tonight; there's no need to be so formal."

Gao Zhongxiong had no wife, children, or relatives in Cizhou. No one dared to let him pick up the tab during the usual *yamen*'s social functions either. By all logic, his monthly salary should have been sufficient. However, he dared not tell a soul that his money had all gone to finance Han Jin.

Last autumn, Shen Zechuan released Han Jin from prison and put him up at the side courtyard. Han Jin had a hard time in prison, and with adequate food practically guaranteed on his release, he ate and drank to his heart's content for quite an extended period of time. There were people in the courtyard taking care of his needs, and when he was back in the pink of health, a young male servant even came over to play with him. The lad took him along to throw dice and hold cricket fights, keeping him so entertained he abandoned himself to pleasure. In less than two months, he forgot all about returning to Qudu. Then he got addicted to gambling. Unable to remain in the courtyard, he started venturing outdoors with the lad, having the whale of his time drinking and having fun without a care in the world.

But there was only so much monthly budget Shen Zechuan allocated to Han Jin. Since he could not stop himself from gambling, he had to think of a way on his own. And so, he set his sights on Gao Zhongxiong again. He ran to Gao Zhongxiong's house almost every day, shouting "*disloyal, turncoat slave*" <sup>35</sup> as loud and clear as he possibly could and stood in Gao Zhongxiong's path, demanding money.

Gao Zhongxiong could do nothing about him, and he was embarrassingly low on funds, so how would he still have the money to buy winter clothes?

Inside the inner chamber, Shen Zechuan's fingertips had already gone numb from being grasped by Xiao Chye, although he was as perspicacious as ever as he listened to their conversation.

The wind had picked up again at night, sending the cotton-like snow dancing all over the sky and the wind chimes under the eaves tinkling ceaselessly. Fearing that the din would disrupt the discussion within, Gu Jin, who had just returned from Beiyuan military drill grounds, called for someone to take them down. As he swept away the snow from his hair, he saw Fei Sheng walk over to him from the walkway.

"Looking for the Second Master?" With medicine in hand, Fei Sheng motioned to the room with his chin. "He's resting. Master doesn't allow us to call for him. The journey has been hard on all of you."

"It's snowing so hard that just spurring on the horse alone is enough to be the death of me." Gu Jin had just gotten off his horse, and his ears had gone so numb from the biting cold wind that he could feel nothing in them. "Second Master hasn't had a decent night's sleep for half a month running."

Fei Sheng sighed.

Gu Jin made way for him. "Go on ahead. Don't hold the Prefectural Lord up from taking his medicine."

Before Fei Sheng entered the room, he said in a hushed tone, "I think everyone will be busy for quite a while, and there's no need for anyone to guard this place too. When Chen Yang and Qiao Tianya come over later, go to the duty room with them for a break. I'll get someone to serve snacks and hot tea. Just make do with these first to fill your tummies."

It was hard to say when Xiao Chiye would wake up, and when he did, he would no doubt want to discuss official business. They had been on the go for several days running, and they would not be able to withstand

standing like a pole here under the eaves with the wind blowing. This was indeed very thoughtful of Fei Sheng. The duty room was just a stone's throw away from the courtyard, and they would be able to come over right away without any delay if they were called.

Accepting his kindness, Gu Jin cupped his fists to say his thanks and held up the hanging screen for him.

Shen Zechuan did not let them light up the lamps, so Fei Sheng naturally did not carry one. He entered with the tray in his hands and ladled out the medicine into a porcelain bowl. They were still speaking softly in the outer room at a volume Shen Zechuan could hear. Shen Zechuan took the spoon with the hand he could move and drank it slowly.

Fei Sheng tried his best not to make a sound, but Xiao Chiye still woke up.

With brows furrowed, Xiao Chiye took a moment to orient himself before he sat up in one swift move. His black shadow abruptly enveloped Shen Zechuan, giving Fei Sheng a fright. Xiao Chiye was still drowsy from his sleep. After a moment of silence, he looked at Shen Zechuan and asked in a hoarse voice, "What time is it now?"

Shen Zechuan set his spoon down and looked at Fei Sheng.

"Second Master, it should be the hour of hai now," Fei Sheng answered.

To Xiao Chiye's surprise, he had slept for almost six hours, and he was still holding onto Shen Zechuan's hand. As he lowered his head, he rubbed his nape with his other hand and asked, "Is Gu Jin back?"

Fei Sheng took Shen Zechuan's medicine bowl and answered, "Just did. They are all currently in the duty room. If Second Master wants to call for them, I'll get someone to summon them."

"Do it." Xiao Chiye said right at once. "Tell them to go over to the side hall. I'll be there in a while."

On hearing the sound of talking in the inner chamber, those outside stopped conversing. Fei Sheng stepped out with the empty bowl, signaled to the various gentlemen with his eyes, and made his way out under the hanging screen to get someone to summon Chen Yang and the rest over.

Shen Zechuan moved his numbed fingers that had reddened from Xiao Chiye's grip. At the same time Xiao Chiye put on his outer robe, he asked, "Have you been sitting here all this while?"



All Shen Zechuan could feel in his mouth was the bitterness of the medicine. He was still thinking over the matters in Fanzhou, so he half-heartedly replied, “been sitting until my waist ached.”

Xiao Chiye poured himself a cup of cooled tea and held it in his mouth as he dressed himself quickly. When he saw Shen Zechuan stand up, he stood in Shen Zechuan’s path, refusing to let him leave. As Shen Zechuan looked at him questioningly with raised eyebrows, Xiao Chiye pinched the latter’s chin and fed him the tea, mouth to mouth, taking away that lingering bitterness.

Shen Zechuan was not tall enough to reach up to Xiao Chiye to begin with, and Xiao Chiye did not lower his head when he held Shen Zechuan’s chin, so Shen Zechuan could only stand on tiptoe. Xiao Chiye led Shen Zechuan into his arms, and Shen Zechuan gripped Xiao Chiye’s sleeves as Xiao Chiye created such havoc in his mouth that Shen Zechuan felt weak all over. Unable to hold in the tea and sensing that it was about to spill, Shen Zechuan had no choice but to swallow it down hastily, only to choke on it and burst out into fits of coughing.

Those in the outer room had already drunk their fill of tea. Listening to the coughs, Zhou Gui was worried that Shen Zechuan had caught another cold. He was about to voice his concern after a moment when Kong Ling interrupted him.

“The ground heating system is making this room too warm. I’ll push Yuanzhuo to the door to get some air.”

Yao Wenyu wrapped his overcoat around himself and said, “Then I shall have to trouble Mister Chengfeng.”

They whisked Zhou Gui outside and stood under the eaves for less than an incense time<sup>36</sup> when they saw Xiao Chiye lift the hanging screen and step out. The group bowed in obeisances and greeted, “Second Master.”

Xiao Chiye’s chin was red from being bumped against. Seeing as Chen Yang and the rest had arrived, he returned the greeting and said, “I’ve been busy on the road these few days and inadvertently ended up holding all of you back from your discussions. I’m truly sorry.”

“Second Master has been working day and night tirelessly on the battlegrounds. It’s time you take a rest.”

They bowed once more to Xiao Chiye. Without further ado, Xiao Chiye stepped away and led his men over to the side hall.

Zhou Gui felt cold standing in the same place. He swept a glance around the rest and asked in bafflement, "Shall we go in?"

Yao Wenyu sighed softly at Zhou Gui, but he could not help but smile as he lifted his hand in a gesture and replied, "Let's go in. Your Excellency, you first."



While Cizhou was having discussions through the night, Fanzhou had already received the proclamation.

This was not the first time King Yi had received a denunciation-cum-declaration of war from Cizhou, but the few times it happened last year had all been all talk and no action. Shen Zechuan did not have the intention to mobilize his troops to fight him, so he took the proclamation this time as an empty threat too and did not think much of it.

Fanzhou's *yamen* had been expanded and renovated anew; King Yi housed all the gold, silver, and treasures he plundered from the two prefectures here and called it the state treasury. He claimed to be saving them to purchase grains and lands after spring, but in reality, he had appropriated them for himself and was using it to fund his debauchery.

With the snow as heavy as it was this year, the number of common folks from the two prefectures who either starved or froze to death was beyond measure. A few days ago, the residential dwellings in multiple locations had also collapsed and crushed even more people to death. The lower ranks reported this to King Yi, but he had turned a deaf ear to them all and continued to indulge in the company of women.<sup>37</sup>

A bunch of those who had stood by King Yi's side from the very beginning of his revolt had been slaughtered in the fight for crop fields, and the majority of people who still remained were bandits from the two prefectures. When King Yi was establishing his position, he had once promised the scholars of both prefectures that he would change the current situation of the prefectures and restore the livelihoods of its people. But he wielded his blade the moment he took control over the *yamen* and slain the scholars who remonstrated against him.

Many of the commoners of the two prefectures, finding themselves in a perilous situation, attempted to flee under cover of the snow, but they were executed on the spot by the soldiers under King Yi's command. Even if someone was brought back alive, they would be branded with a mark on the

chest and set aside in Fanzhou's prison as "animals" for King Yi's winter hunts.

It was after the third night watch at midnight, and King Yi, with his potbelly, lay on satin cushions drinking himself drunk under the music of reed pipes. He lifted his golden cup high and said, "Fill it up!"

Two scantily clad women on both sides of him poured the wine for him. King Yi held his arm up and muttered, "Keep pouring! Keep pouring!"

The red pomegranate-like wine spilled over the rim of the cup, and the woman twisted aside to cover her face seemingly bashfully as King Yi roared with unbridled laughter. King Yi had long lost his sense of propriety and was now exposing himself with a public display of his degenerate, gluttonous self. Due to his obesity, he had difficulty moving, and he even had to open his arms as wide as he could to hug the women by his sides.

Cuiqing was sitting in the seat to the bottom left of King Yi. She had a new face with dashing looks holding her pipe for her. As she smoked, her eyes darted down below his waist. "I escaped death by the skin of my teeth and fled back from Dunzhou. What will Your Highness reward me with? I think this one will do. He is going to be incredible after a period of training from me."

This man was a handsome one with an unpowdered face, broad shoulders, and a narrow waist. Kneeling before Cuiqing, he raised his head to look up at her upon hearing her. The expression in his eyes was sultry and frank, and it was so titillating that it sent an electrifying tingle through Cuiqing's body and made her heart itch.

King Yi, being too obese, needed the woman serving him to help him turn his head. He cast a glance at that man and sneered. "You have got a good eye. Do you know who this is?"

Cuiqing lifted a foot to step on the man's chest, feeling the solidness underneath. "I've never seen such a character... Honey dear, would you like to leave with me?"

King Yi roared with laughter and hissed maliciously, "His surname is Huo. He's Huo Lingyun, the eldest, lawful son of Huo Qing, the Garrison Troops Commander of Dengzhou who was bitten to death by dogs. Back then, when I wanted to take over Dengzhou as its master, Huo Qing would rather die than yield and killed my second younger brother during the battle. After his capture, I had him tortured for seven days and seven nights before dumping him at the hunting grounds to let the dogs tear him to pieces!"

Cuiqing uttered an “oh, my” in surprise and moved in to scrutinize Huo Lingyun. With a cackle, she said, “Then Your Highness is truly a magnanimous one to have kept him by your side and raised him to be so well-built.”

“I initially wanted to kill him,” King Yi said contemptuously. “He looks the part of a gentleman, but he’s as timid as a mouse. When he saw his old man being eaten by the dogs, he immediately kneeled down to hug my thighs and begged me to spare his life. For that, he was even willing to slave like an ox or a horse for me, so I kept him by my side as a dog.”

Cuiqing started feeling up Huo Lingyun, and Huo Lingyun showed her an ingratiating smile. She tenderly gave him a push and said, “Good dog, show me exactly how obedient you are.”

King Yi tossed aside his golden cup and said, “There is nothing he can’t do, and he holds up pretty well. I sent him over to Chief Fang for seven or eight days to have fun with, and he was still alive when he returned.”

The expression on Cuiqing’s face frosted over, “Old Fang the Ninth is already so advanced in age, and yet he’s still so despicable! He can’t even control his bowels anymore, yet he still wants to vie with me over a man! Baby, look at me. I’m much better looking than Old Fang. It must have been hard on you serving an old macaque like him.”

Huo Lingyun’s chest heaved. He was in a partial state of undress, with his clothes secured around his waist. He was all docile and obedient as Cuiqing came pressing in towards him. The interior of this hall was already a lewd scene, made even more obscene by the whiny moan Cuiqing let loose at being fondled by Huo Lingyun. She fell back onto the cushion and motioned for him to continue.

King Yi, having over-indulged in carnal pleasures, was presently only bothered with drinking his wine. He loved wine as he did his life, and he drank himself bloated in this rowdy ruckus as he rested upon the tender, fragrant bodies of the women serving him while they massaged his shoulders and kneaded his legs. His snores boomed like thunder.

The snow outside the hall fell for half the night, and the people inside were all dead asleep by the time it was almost dawn.

King Yi, his arms spread out, exhaled stale air that reeked of wine. Huo Lingyun wiped down his body and cleaned up the sweat. He looked at King Yi a short distance away from him amidst the undulating snores, then

soundlessly stepped over the others to make his way over to squat down next to King Yi's pillow.

King Yi did not like to bring his guards along when he was making merry. He feared death, so the guards, armed with their blades, all had to stand outside the doors. Huo Lingyun had served as a plaything under King Yi's command for an entire six months, suffering all kinds of humiliation imaginable before he managed to get such an opportunity.

He looked at King Yi as if he was looking at those dogs that had bitten his father to death.

Three soft knocks sounded, right outside the door.

And that was when Huo Lingyun knew that the matter had been done. He did not stand up, however; instead, he patted King Yi's cheek at the same time he picked up the cushion.

King Yi's snores were cut short in his throat. He reached out a hand to brush away that empty golden cup, and as the cup clattered noisily to the floor, he opened his eyes. On seeing Huo Lingyun, he broke out in a cold sweat and reproved in a stern voice, "Get away—"

Huo Lingyun had already burst into action. He ruthlessly held down the cushion over King Yi's head. King Yi struggled violently, and the flailing of his thick limbs startled the others in the hall awake. Huo Lingyun held down that pasty flesh with pudgy rolls of fat; under the cushion, King Yi was still gasping for breath.

Cuiqing woke up, but she did not realize what was happening around her.

The terrified King Yi shouted in a muffled voice in between heavy breathing, "Men, men, save me—!"

Huo Lingyun started laughing even as King Yi was struggling. He suddenly released his grip, abandoning his attempt to smother the latter. King Yi tried to scramble up in a panic from under his hands, but he was too fat, and he sank into the cushion, shouting himself hoarse, "Men! Come quick!"

Huo Lingyun touched something from the bunched clothes around his waist. He followed after King Yi.

King Yi crawled on the ground naked like a maggot, gradually coming to a realization amidst his shouts. It was as if the guards outside the door were dead—they were indeed dead.

King Yi started to cry. He moved his obese body with stacks and rolls of fat and prostrated himself at Huo Lingyun's feet. "Ling, Lingyun!" He reached out to pull over a woman and shoved her towards Huo Lingyun. "Don't kill me, and I'll give you Fanzhou. I'll give you everything t-that's mine! I'll even give you the title of King Yi too!"

With his chest heaving, Huo Lingyun bent his head down and yanked King Yi by the hair to drag him towards himself. King Yi did not understand how the situation could have changed so abruptly. Everyone from top to bottom in Fanzhou was still at his command before he had fallen asleep. He kicked out his legs and squealed loudly like a pig being slaughtered.

It finally hit Cuiqing what was happening. She fumbled for her clothing in a fluster. Seeing Huo Lingyun dragging King Yi towards herself, she hurriedly shook her head. "It has nothing to do with me! Nothing to do—"

A blast rang out at this instant, and the thunderous sound of something blowing up on impact roared in Cuiqing's ears and made her ears buzz. She cried out involuntarily, her eyes wide opened as she froze in place, stupefied, and with a face splattered full of red and white filth.

The area between Huo Lingyun's thumb and the index finger was hurting intensely from the recoil of the bronze gun.<sup>38</sup> The burning sensation thrilled him. King Yi's head was just like a watermelon being trampled into pulp.

Deadly silence descended upon the hall, and then Cuiqing suddenly shrieked out loud and crawled on all fours like a madwoman. Clutching her clothes, she ran barefoot across the hall and lunged at the doors. The doors opened, but Cuiqing stepped back and fell on her buttocks, her eyes on the doorway where there were firearms everywhere.

"You abducted women for him." Huo Lingyun stood in the gloomy darkness and sent the splattered gore from King Yi into his mouth. He promptly spat it out. As he stared at Cuiqing, he said in an icy voice, "You even reared mastiffs you held in captive for him."

Cuiqing shook her head and covered her body as she scooted across the floor. She heard the sound of barking and saw those mastiffs boring their way out between the gaps of the humans' legs.

Huo Lingyun stepped on King Yi's corpse and said as though he was sizing up meat on the chopping board, "All of you ought to get a taste of it."

Cuiqing's eyes widened. She wanted to run, but she had gone weak in the knees. She could only watch helplessly as those mastiffs broke free of their chains and pounced on her at the same time she screamed uncontrollably.

Under the sound of the mastiffs tearing and devouring, Huo Lingyun draped his wide-sleeved robe over his shoulders. He picked up the proclamation that King Yi had flung away and promptly proceeded to crumple it.

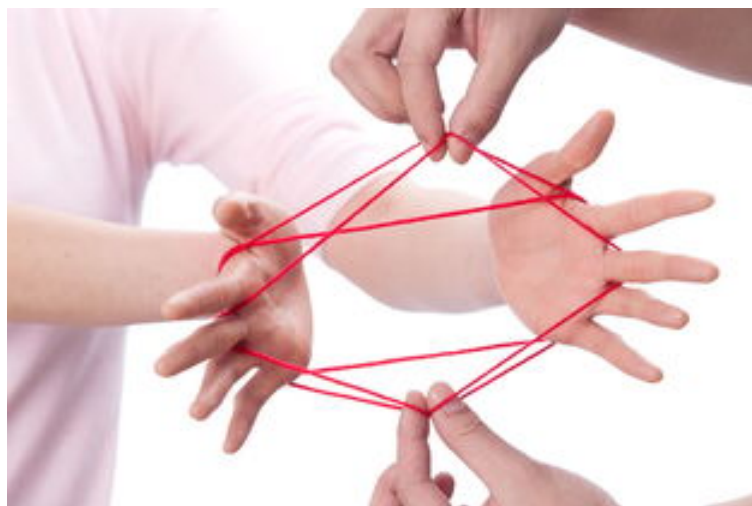


### NOTICE:

New updated [Character Chart](#) from the QJJ Simplified CN Physical Copy!  
Check out the [Character Glossary](#)!



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Footnotes



- 1.
2. Cat's cradle, a game which involves making string figures with the hands.
3. 寒衣节 Hanyi Festival, or literally winter clothing festival, which is also called the ancestor worship festival, falls on the first day of the tenth lunar month, where winter clothes made of paper or cloth are burned in memory of the deceased ancestors. It also marks the arrival of the severe cold winter.
4. 清谈 Qingtan is a Chinese philosophical movement and social practice among political and intellectual elites where the literati

engaged in highly sophisticated intellectual and philosophical discussions on lofty and non-mundane matters.



5.

6. 道袍 *Daopao*; not to be confused with a Daoist priest robe. This was a common robe typically worn by men in the Ming Dynasty.



7.





- 8.
9. 襕衫 *Lanshan*, a Chinese traditional hanfu made especially for scholars
10. 万物不(无)以生将恐灭 from *Daodejing* (道德经) by Laozi (Lao-tzu, 老子), also known as the founder of philosophical Daoism.
11. 道 “the Way”, or the path, is a conceptual term used by the school of thoughts, although it has different connotations for Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Daoism embraces nature. The Way, or Dao, according to Laozi and Daoists, is the natural order of the universe, and Daoism emphasizes doing what is natural and “going with the flow” in accordance with the Way, with the aim of becoming one, or in harmony, with nature.
12. The concept of “gentleman” or “man of honor” (*junzi*, 君子) in Confucianism (a different philosophical stance from Daoism), is a virtuous man who is noble in character and an exemplar for his conducts, morals, principles, etc.
13. 无为而治, 道法自然 Specifically, “govern not by interfering in all that goes against nature, for the Way models itself on what is natural.” i.e., man should observe the law of nature and go with the flow. From *Daodejing* (道德经) by Laozi (老子).

14. Full line 天下有道，以道殉身；天下无道，以身殉道。(未闻以道殉乎人者也。) Specifically, “*when the Way prevails in the empire, it goes where one’s person goes; when the Way is eclipsed, one’s person goes where the Way has gone. (I have not heard of one’s Way being dependent on their manifestation in other men).*” i.e., One must live or die with his principles, acting for himself, not with regard to other men. The Way here refers to one’s principles. Contrary to Laozi, Mencius (or Mengzi, 孟子) subscribed to the Confucius school of thoughts, which regards the Way, or *dao*, as the way human beings ought to behave with principles and propriety in society and government. (To put it simply :V)
15. 斩首 the word here used is decapitated or beheaded, although it also implied the slaying of the Xiao Fangxu in this context, leaving the Libei Armored Cavalry headless, or without a leader.



- 16.
17. 鬼头 kind of carving on the hilt of the blade. See examples [here](#) or [here](#)



18.

19. 垛口 *duokou*, or crenels, empty space between two merlons



20.

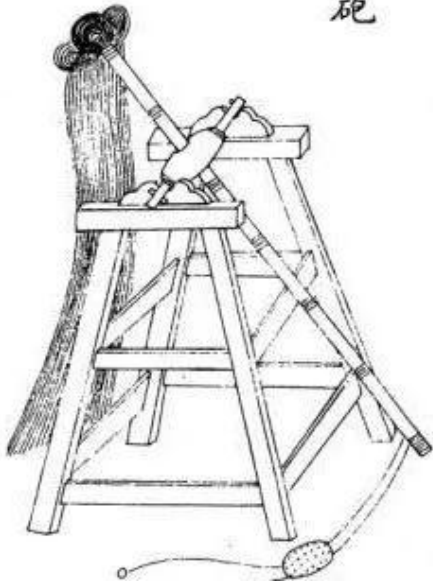
21. Specifically 悬眼 Xuanyan, a loophole opened at the base of a parapet in-between two crenels.



22.

23. 鬼头刀 literally ghost-headed blade. It's a kind of blade used for beheading people sentenced to death in old times.

單梢砲



24.

25. 单梢炮 Single-component catapults, or one-branch trebuchet

26. 丈 *zhang*; a measure of length, 1 *zhang* = ten Chinese feet (3.3m)

27. Specifically a *changdao*, or a two-handed, single-edged Chinese sword.



28.

29. Snowtrooper Lu Guangbai.



Thanks [Jia](#) for suggesting.

30. 地龙 *dilong*, an ancient method of warming with an indoor ground heating system, built by concreting circular flue underground where heat would flow from a fire pit outside through the channels to the entire room and raise the temperature indoors.

31. 军屯 military troops (mostly in border regions) who carry out garrison duties as well as farm crops to supply the border garrisons with grains

32. Tiger, also refers to an extraordinary man or hero. Tiger is a symbol of ferocity, agility, and courage.

33. 细刀, literally slim blade, although it may also refer to the *miaodao* (苗刀, image below)



34. 守夜 *shouye*, or 守岁 *shousui*, the tradition of staying awake until midnight on the eve of Chinese New year. It is said that if the children stayed up late, their parents would live a longer life in return.

35. 伤筋动骨一百天 literally, takes a hundred days for the bones to knit and for the tendons to heal.

36. 水(至)清则无鱼 literally, water which is too clean has no(/few) fish, i.e., one should not demand absolute purity, you cannot expect everyone to be squeaky clean.



37.

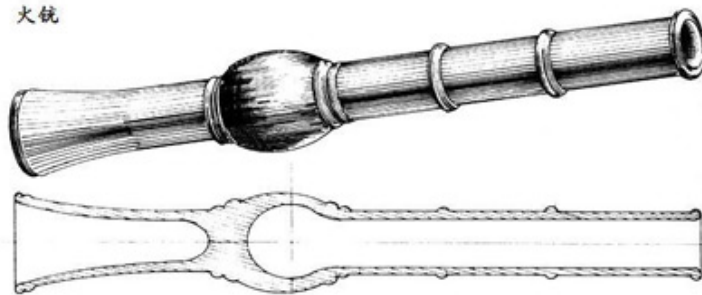
38. 如意 *ruyi*, an ancient auspicious symbol that served as a ceremonial scepter or a symbol of power, often given as gifts because of the good wishes they implied.

39. *Fengshui*, or the art of geomancy, is the traditional Chinese practice of selecting auspicious sites for buildings and tombs, believed to have a vital influence on the fortune of a family.

40. 及冠 a man's 20th birthday, i.e., coming of age at 20 for a male.

41. 家生子 Children of domestic servants or slaves. These children were also born in the household and also served as servants and slaves in the same household.
42. 名帖 (also 拜帖), a visitation card (or name card) written on paper or wood used by officials, nobles or distinguished people to notify the other party of their visit. It would usually indicate his name, position, and so on. It's like a name card in the modern world.
43. In this context, the “young master” would be Xiao Xun, since his father is now the “master” of the household, so it makes sense to call Xiao Chiye the second master (after Xiao Jiming) as calling Xiao Chiye young master would make it seem like he's Xiao Jiming's son instead.
44. 清水衙门 government office with low receipts or expenditures and hence little or no chance of corruption.
45. 三姓家奴 literally, a slave with three surnames. The term originates from the Romance of the Three Kingdoms 《三国演义》 and refers specifically to Lu Bu. It's used mockingly to refer to capricious, disloyal and unrighteous people who serve traitors.
46. 一炷香 the time an incense stick takes to burn. Some sources suggest one stick takes 30 minutes or one hour, but it really depends on a variety of factors (the environment, wind, length of the stick, etc).
47. 温柔乡 land of warmth and tenderness, or a place where a man can find solace in feminine charms, such as a brothel, etc.

火銃



48.



49.

50. 铜火铳 *Huochong*, or blunderbuss (according to baidu), or sometimes known as a hand cannon, is a tube-like projection firearm used as a gun. The *Huochong* gun was an important invention as the Ming Dynasty was creating weapons to defend themselves from attackers.



## CHAPTER 196: OLD MAN

After breakfast the next day, Xiao Chiye put on his heavy armor with the intent to head over to the Beiyuan hunting grounds. Shen Zechuan slept little these few days, and it was only until last night that he got a good night's sleep, so much that he was still a tad lethargic when he stood under the eaves to see Xiao Chiye off.

The snow had ceased today, and the sun shone so brightly the courtyard was practically glittering. Xiao Chiye let Meng perch on him and turned back to talk to Shen Zechuan, only to see Shen Zechuan standing sleepily in front of the door with an unhappy expression.

"When will you be back?" Shen Zechuan asked.

Xiao Chiye undid the chain on Meng's talons, and Meng promptly made to pounce on Shen Zechuan. Xiao Chiye held it down and answered, "I'll try my best to return earlier. If anything's the matter, send someone to call for me."

Being bathed in the sunlight also made Shen Zechuan sparkle. Avoiding the rays, he squinted his expressive eyes and called out, "A—Ye."

Xiao Chiye made to kiss this little baddie, startling Shen Zechuan. Capitalizing on his height advantage, Xiao Chiye raised his arm against the door frame and, when Shen Zechuan stepped back, led him back with a hand. The hanging screen covered the back of his head, although Xiao Chiye did not bother with moving it out of the way.

Shen Zechuan took a kiss to the mouth.

Chen Yang, busy mulling over the escort tasks they were about to return to Bianbo Camp to make arrangements for, was not paying attention to the movement on the other end. Gu Jin saw the hanging screen swing, and then both men were gone. He took off his gloves and said, "The Prefectural Lord and Master..."

Unable to find the right words, Gu Jin could only look at Chen Yang and hinted at the latter with his eyes.

Chen Yang knew Gu Jin had been alarmed by Shen Zechuan's discussions in the hall last night, so he closed the book and looked over too. After watching for a moment, he said, "Master has had it rough fighting battles on the battlefields after what happened with the former Prince of Libei. He may seem fine now, but I fear his heart is still healing like the

wound on his back... it's a good thing for them to stick together to each other like glue."

After that specific night, many people wanted to baby Xiao Chiye. They kept away from the heavy snow as much as they could and watched Xiao Chiye cautiously, as if Xiao Chiye had already lost his strength and was now no more than a fragile vase. Shen Zechuan was just the opposite. He said not a single word of consolation to Xiao Chiye, but the expression in his eyes spoke volumes of his dependence on Xiao Chiye. It was as if he would resent the weather for being cold and fault the medicine for being bitter if he so much as stepped away from Xiao Chiye by even half a step. In fact, Shen Zechuan was revealing another layer of meaning behind his extreme reliance on Xiao Chiye, and that was, Xiao Chiye was strong.

Xiao Chiye did not need to be treated as porcelain. He was iron. He was steel.

He was also Shen Zechuan's Hongyan Mountains.

And this was how Xiao Chiye responded to him too.



Before the discussion of official affairs, Shen Zechuan had Fei Sheng summon Gao Zhongxiong, who stood before the study waiting for Shen Zechuan. When Shen Zechuan arrived, he had him dispense with the formalities. "I had someone take your measurements last night. The winter clothes will be delivered to your residence in a few days. It's cold at present. Do you still have charcoal fire in your house?"

Gao Zhongxiong was formerly an adviser to Han Jin. When he first came to Cizhou, he knew Shen Zechuan would not employ him, and that was why he had taken such an ill-advised step. It was only because he came highly recommended by Yao Wenyu that he could get a job in the *yamen*. But Shen Zechuan rarely spoke to him, and this, in turn, made Gao Zhongxiong somewhat terrified to be speaking to him now.

Whenever Gao Zhongxiong was nervous, he would sweat and stutter—an unfortunate conditioned effect of being ridiculed too much when he was in Dancheng. He wiped away the beads of sweat, his chin lowered so low it was about to jab into his chest as he muttered, "It's as Your Lordship admonished. Your Lord, Lordship..."

The advisors in the room were all already in place. Kong Ling was presently standing under the eaves waiting for Shen Zechuan to enter. Gao Zhongxiong knew he was clumsy with words, and so he was even more

worked up with anxiety as he sweated buckets and tried to finish his sentence.

Shen Zechuan remembered how bold and spirited Gao Zhongxiong had been when he kneeled in the heavy rain a year ago to denounce the eunuch faction, so he listened in all seriousness for him to finish saying his piece before he added, “You are not married at present. If the monthly salary from the *yamen* is insufficient, just let the local government know.”

Gao Zhongxiong initially thought Shen Zechuan detested him and that it was only on Yao Wenyu’s account that Shen Zechuan did not voice it out. He did not expect Shen Zechuan to be so amicable today. For a moment, his emotions got the better of him, and he choked out a sob, “It’s all thanks to the grace and kindness of the Prefectural Lord that I could have a job in the *yamen*. Moreover, the salary is issued on time every month. How c-can I take more?”

With even more gentleness, Shen Zechuan said, “You are also a man of letters in my employ; it will be ill-advised for you to keep on belittling yourself anymore.”

A multitude of emotions welled up in Gao Zhongxiong’s heart as he wiped his tears. Shen Zechuan was willing to use him and even respected him. As the saying went, a gentleman would die for the one who understood and appreciated him on his own merits. He was truly willing to serve under Shen Zechuan. He was about to voice some words of gratitude, but Shen Zechuan raised his hand to stop him and gestured for him to keep up pace as they headed for the study.



Cizhou initially planned to borrow a general for their mobilization of troops to Fanzhou this time, but seeing as King Yi had long-standing public resentment stacked against him and that Fanzhou was internally empty, Shen Zechuan did not borrow one from the Libei Armored Cavalry. Instead, he appointed the commander of the Cizhou Garrison Troops, Yin Chang.

This Yin Chang was a high-ranking military officer of the Cizhou Garrison Troops before the defeat of the Zhongbo troops. After its commander died in battle, Zhou Gui promoted him to the post. Before Shen Zechuan came to Cizhou, Yin Chang was a one-man army commander.

This man was about the same age as Ji Gang. He was an avid drinker with a full beard, and he hated taking a bath the most in life. For this reason, he appeared particularly unkempt. He could be considered to be kindred

spirits with Qiao Tianya. Before Qiao Tianya quit drinking, they often drank together.

Looking hesitant, Kong Ling said, "Yin Chang is advanced in age, and he has not stepped into the battlefield for several years. I'm afraid he is not up to the task if he's sent into battle."

Surprisingly enough, Zhou Gui did not agree this time. "A veteran general has the advantages of a veteran general. If the Prefectural Lord is willing to assign him to deploy troops, he will definitely do his best."

"Other than Yin Chang," Shen Zechuan unexpectedly piped up, "Fei Sheng will also tag along during the deployment of troops to Fanzhou this time."

Yao Wenyu's wide sleeves bulged from the crouching cat underneath. He covered it with his hand and said, "Now that the bridle paths are accessible, the military provisions can be supplied by both Cizhou and Chazhou. It takes only one day to reach Fanzhou."

"That's right." Shen Zechuan set his fan on his lap. He looked at the others. "Time is of the essence now. It's imperative we obtain Fanzhou and Dengzhou. We will have to fight a quick battle for this one."

A chorus of acknowledgement in the affirmative rose, and with that, everyone began to discuss in hushed tones about the arrangements to be made for filling in the vacancies in Fanzhou and Dengzhou's *yamen* when the time came.



Yin Chang deployed his troops as he was commanded to, while Fei Sheng went along for the ride with forty Imperial Bodyguards as part of the entourage.

Fei Sheng had only met Yin Chang just before setting off. This commander's hair was even whiter than Ji Gang's. He was not at all tall, and he had a drunkard's nose that was a bright shade of red. Fei Sheng paid his obeisances to Yin Chang before the horse, although the latter seemed to have yet to sober up from his inebriation as he mumbled, "Rise."

Fei Sheng had specially taken a leaf out of Qiao Tianya's book and brought along some fine wine to show his respect to Yin Chang. Yin Chang opened it up for a sniff and shouted out "awesome" in a voice so booming that Fei Sheng nearly lost his grip on the reins from the force of it.

Seeing as Yin Chang was about to drink the wine now, Fei Sheng hurriedly raised his hands to stop him. With an apologetic smile, he said,

“Elder Yin, please hold on. This wine is strong, and it’d be hard to travel if you’re drunk. Let’s wait for us to return in triumph, and I shall play host and drink with you into oblivion!”

Yin Chang twitched his nose. While Fei Sheng was talking, he had already taken several consecutive gulps of the wine as though he was starving. The wine relaxed him all over, making his nose even redder. He breathed out several puffs of hot air and patted Fei Sheng heavily on the shoulder. Loudly, he said, “Lad, there’s no need for you to worry. I’ve traversed Zhongbo for over ten years, and I can find my way around even with my eyes closed! This wine sobers me up the more I drink it; a great perk-me-up for the journey!”

Fei Sheng estimated Yin Chang’s age. He was pretty tempted to leave right now had this battle not been to take down Fanzhou—*Which part of this senile old man looks like he can fight a battle?!* Although this was what he was thinking deep down, he still said with a smile, “Sure thing, I’m at your command this trip.” He led the horse over to Yin Chang and asked, “Shall I help you up the horse?”

Yin Chang tied the wine bag<sup>28</sup> to his waist, patted it, and grinned mischievously at Fei Sheng. “Heh heh, just you watch. I’ll get on myself—”

“Whoa.” Seeing Yin Chang’s foot slip off the saddle, the sharp-eyed Fei Sheng deftly supported the old man and hastened to say, “Steady there, man!”

Fei Sheng, in holding Yin Chang, realized that this old man boasted a pair of thick, sturdy legs that weighed a ton. He helped Yin Chang onto his horse, finding this old man to be quite the character; who knows, maybe he was truly capable. But not long after, Yin Chang felt sleepy on his horse and almost slid off the back of the horse numerous times. It was all thanks to Fei Sheng for having someone keep an eye on him that he did not tumble off.

Cizhou was not that far away from Fanzhou. It was just a two-day journey or so, yet Fei Sheng was on tenterhooks the entire way, fearing that the commanding general would first fall to his death before they had even made it to Fanzhou. Their journey was daunting but uneventful, and they finally arrived at their destination. After setting up camp, Fei Sheng waited for Yin Chang to make military plans for the siege. But never in his wildest imagination would he expect this old man to lie down and fall asleep the moment he entered the tent. In no time, his snores reverberated throughout

the tent like claps of thunder, and no amount of noise they made in their attempts to wake him up could stir him.

Fei Sheng stood outside of the tent and looked all around him. All the soldiers from the Cizhou Garrison Troops were new recruits; Yin Chang had not even arranged for a night patrol squad, and as such, they were all stumbling about like fools without so much a dignified air to them.

The hell they gonna fight this damn battle?

Fei Sheng spat, sorely tempted to write a letter to Shen Zechuan right there and then. In the end, the Imperial Bodyguards could only stand in for them and conduct the night patrol themselves. Fei Sheng guarded the camp until the day broke. Both of his eyes were bloodshot as he watched Yin Chang step out of his tent with renewed vigor. He forced a smile on his stiff, frozen face.

“Elder Yin, you sure had a good sleep, huh?” Fei Sheng rubbed his hands and feet together. “So, when do you think we should lay siege to the city?”

Yin Chang sat down and poured wine from the wine bag, although he only drank two small cups. “No rush. No rush.”

But the command Fei Sheng had received was to fight a quick battle, so he said, “There has been no wind or snow for the past few days. If we miss the opportunity, the battle will be much harder to fight.”

Yin Chang sipped the wine and looked in Fanzhou’s direction. His beard shook as he smacked his lips to savor the wine. “Whatcha’ in such a rush for? I don’t think it’s time yet.”

Fei Sheng guessed that this old man was afraid to fight battles. The man called Yin Chang did not exist in the Imperial Bodyguard’s records, and when Fei Sheng had been gathering intelligence and taking records, he had flipped through Cizhou’s archives; Yin Chang did not have any meritorious achievements prior to the case of the troops’ defeat. The reason he could be promoted to the position of commander was because the commanders of the Cizhou garrison troops were all dead. That, and the fact that he had the fortune to meet a nice fella like Zhou Gui who promoted him on the basis of his seniority.

Yin Chang had no sense of presence even after he was promoted to commander. He was drinking when Zhou Gui and Kong Ling reclaimed the wastelands, and he was still drinking when the bandits of Mount Luo led by Lei Jingzhe harassed Cizhou time and time again. Even when the Cizhou

garrison troops had been re-established, he still seemed like an ornament merely there for show; he had never played a role in any capacity at all.

Shen Zechuan's decision to deploy Yin Chang to war this time was because Cizhou did indeed lack generals, along with the fact that Fanzhou was easy to take down—there was nothing of difficulty for him to contend with. The Cizhou garrison troops needed an opportunity to stand on their own feet, and this was a good chance, for it did not require too powerful a commanding general to lead. All he needed to do was to go with the flow and capture Fanzhou when the right opportunity arose, and that would have sufficed.

As Fei Sheng thought things over, he saw Yin Chang sit down opposite him, kick off his boots, and start to scratch a foot. Fei Sheng wanted to speak up, but was too overwhelmed by the stench of the old man's feet to say a word. He hurriedly stood up and cupped his fists towards Yin Chang before running off to the side for some fresh air.

Yin Chang wiggled his toes and picked the crevices clean. He had gone without bathing for almost two months now, and even he himself could no longer stand his own stench as he held his foot and muttered to himself.



Hairigu was presently staying at the Beiyuan military drill grounds; Shen Zechuan had left all the Scorpions here. Initially, the Scorpions did not get along with the Cizhou garrison troops and were constantly subjected to verbal attacks. It was only after the Imperial Bodyguards mediated that both sides did not come to blows.

Hairigu had only just finished cleaning himself up from showering bare-back despite it being such a cold day today. On his way back from the well, he saw the gates of the camp open.

Dark and dreary suits of heavy armor swept in, stomping over the mud concealed beneath the thin snow and sending them splattering and splashing all over Hairigu when they passed by him. He cursed under his breath and wiped his face, only to see that the horse at the head had already turned around and was presently staring at him.

Hairigu recognized Lang Tao Xue Jin. He raised the wooden basin in his hand, toeing the line as he greeted, "hello, Second Master."

Xiao Chiye was so heavily armored up that not even his eyes were revealed. He cut an overwhelmingly intimidating figure with his tall, strapping stature on horseback. Lang Tao Xue Jin kept closing in towards

Hairigu, leaving the latter with no choice but to raise his head to look at Xiao Chiye.

“The Prefectural Lord said to keep me.” Hairigu was still wearing his cloth shoes like slippers, with heels treading down on the backs. He scanned the surrounding Libei Armored Cavalry, who was eyeing him menacingly, and looked at Xiao Chiye again. “... I think he’s right.”

“I’ll give you the horses today,” Xiao Chiye’s voice was low and deep. “Bring your soldiers to the military drill grounds.”

Hairigu understood what Xiao Chiye meant to do. In the past few days, he had been training here with the Libei Armored Cavalry. He put down the wooden basin and wore his shoes properly. “I can also bring along my iron hammers... if you would try out our new military formation.”

Lang Tao Xue Jin snorted hot puffs of air. The heavily armored horse inched closer once more, forcing Hairigu to retreat backward.

“New military formation?” Xiao Chiye asked.

Hairigu took a step back and immediately explained himself. “I learned it from an old man.” He raised a finger to point at his nose. “An old man with a red nose.”



## CHAPTER 197: (UN)EXPECTED

Fei Sheng could not figure out what Yin Chang was up to. The Cizhou garrison troops had arrived in Fanzhou for two days, yet no action had been taken. The few times Yin Chang went out had all been to take aimless strolls after his meals. Fei Sheng was burning with anxiety, but he was only part of the entourage and could not even be considered an army-inspecting censor.

Fei Sheng wanted to write to Shen Zechuan, but he was worried that Yin Chang might turn out to be really capable. If it so happened that the garrison troops were to return in triumph, then, before Shen Zechuan, he would become the real villain who made false accusations on the sly for his own selfish purposes. Even if he had been initially justified in doing so, he would still become the unreasonable one.

On this day, Fei Sheng lay down to rest. He slept until approximately the hour of xu when he was suddenly awakened by his subordinate.

“Bad news,” the Imperial Bodyguard said. “That old crook is gone!”

Fei Sheng swiftly sat up and picked up his boots. As he hopped and stomped his feet into them, he asked in disbelief, “Gone? He ran?”

Fei Sheng swiped the tent flap open and stepped out for a look. The entire campground was still illuminated, but there were only a thousand or so men left. His heart started pounding hard. *It's over*, he thought. If they lost the battle of Fanzhou, then his future was as good as finished too. But then, he thought, *that can't be right!*

No matter how he looked at it, they would not lose the battle of Fanzhou. Win this battle and take down Fanzhou, and they would be rewarded. Yin Chang could even cement his position as the commander with this one battle; there was no reason for him to flee. Besides, half of Zhongbo was already surrounded by Shen Zechuan. Even if Yin Chang ran, he had nowhere to go. Not unless he switched camps and threw in his lot with King Yi.

Fei Sheng looked up suddenly in Fanzhou's direction. “That old crook better not switch allegiance right before the battle...”

The Imperial Bodyguards on night patrol returned bearing their whips in hands and sounded the whistle before dismounting. “There are traces of troops on the move three *li* to the southeast!”

Fei Sheng took a few steps forward and asked, "The garrison troops or the Fanzhou traitors?"

"They are heading our way." The Imperial Bodyguards hung up their whips and righted their blades. "In all probability, it's a night attack."

Fei Sheng's heart sank. From Qudu to Zhongbo, he had never once served as a general, and he was no expert in mobilizing troops to war. He turned around to survey the campground. "So the commander fled. What about the next-in-command, the Platoon Commander? Call him out to fight!"

The Imperial Bodyguard following behind him answered, "He fled too!"

Fei Sheng was really regretting it now. If he had known that Yin Chang would be so unreliable, he would have dragged Gu Jin over. At the very least, Gu Jin would be able to stand in for the missing commander. He calmed himself down and asked his subordinate, "How many men do we have left?"

"One thousand." The Imperial Bodyguard pressed against the hilt of his blade. "The old man even rounded it up to a round number."

Fei Sheng hissed through gritted teeth, "well, I thank his entire family for that!"

Left without a choice, Fei Sheng could only brace himself and step into the role. He shouted for the soldiers to extinguish all the torches and prepare to evacuate. At the very least, they could not remain in the campgrounds as live targets for the enemy forces. Besides, they could still circumvent the enemies once they got to the snowfield. But they had only put out half the fire when he heard the sound of the enemies' running footsteps in the wind.

"Withdraw now." Fei Sheng knew just from the sound alone that he could not win this fight. "Retreat!"

The remaining soldiers buckled up and dragged their blades along to follow behind the Imperial Bodyguards. They ran with all their might, cutting a particularly sorry sight as they threw everything away while taking flight. Fei Sheng had a horse, but he dared not leave these 1,000 men behind and flee back to Cizhou by himself. The battle had not even been fought, and they had already lost the soldiers. Fei Sheng could already imagine Shen Zechuan's wrath.

Fei Sheng had not even run a few *li* when he heard the sound of troops surrounding them right ahead in the dark night. They had pitched camp here

for several days running, and the Fanzhou soldiers, having long gotten a clear grasp on the routes, had surrounded the front and rear of the campground in preparation of rounding them all up with one fell swoop tonight.

Fei Sheng was caught in a dilemma, with no room to advance or retreat. This situation differed completely from the situation a few months ago in Dunzhou. He was exposed in this wilderness with nothing to provide him with cover. Perhaps the 1,000 soldiers he had on hand might be able to ward off small groups of surprise attacks, but they were undoubtedly too powerless to resist an onslaught of attack from a force that far exceeded their own numbers.

The Fanzhou soldiers gathered together as they approached. These people were even more of a motley crew than the Cizhou garrison troops were; they had no armors or even standardized weapons. The circle of soldiers shrank as they closed in on them like an ant colony swarming towards them. Fei Sheng's horse and the garrison troops pressed up against each other. Enemy troops that were more than double their numbers were everywhere around them. The wave of enemy forces pushed against the wall of men, crowding the garrison troops so much that it was hard for them to even bend over.

The only way to get a slim chance of survival in such a situation was to do or die.

Gasping for his breath, Fei Sheng hesitated for merely a fraction of a second. He killed his horse with a slash, and as hot blood splattered, he raised his blade and shouted, "I am a trapped beast, just like all of you. If we cannot fight to the death and break out of this encirclement, then this can only be our burial grounds!"

The soldiers were already terrified when they were surrounded, and when they saw Fei Sheng riding on his horse, they were afraid he would abandon the troops and flee. That consequently made them even more unmotivated to fight. All they wanted to do was to kneel and beg for mercy. But now that Fei Sheng had slashed his horse dead and expressed his determination to advance and retreat with them, their morale was instantly boosted. Fei Sheng knew very well the effect of taking the lead in battle, and in the middle of his speech, he had already charged up to cut down the enemy's troops head-on as he led his men towards the northwest in a desperate fight to break through the encirclement.

Right at this moment, a bellow suddenly burst out from the southeast, and a file of soldiers charged into the ranks of Fanzhou soldiers like a sharp blade stabbing into their bodies, tearing them apart with terror and sending sprays of blood splattering all over. In no time, eight columns of troops had already penetrated their way in.

Yin Chang's face was so flushed from drinking that it was hard to tell if he was drunk or freezing cold. He blew his nose, so happy that he leaped in joy and boomed in a loud and clear voice to Fei Sheng across hundreds of men. "Oh, you're still alive!"

Fei Sheng kicked out at the enemy's chest without pulling his blade out. All the words he wanted to say condensed into one: "Fuck!"

He had been used as bait by Yin Chang!

Given that a total of 8,000 men from the Cizhou Garrison Troops were mobilized, there was originally no need to design such a tactic to take down Fanzhou. But Yin Chang sensed something amiss after their arrival in Fanzhou. He had long heard that King Yi did not permit the commoners in Fanzhou to flee out of the territory, and he had installed troops at the borders to stop these people. But they did not encounter any obstructions when they crossed into the border; in fact, they had not even come across a single Fanzhou soldier.

King Yi had already received the declaration of war. If he had the intent to surrender, he should have opened the gates a long time back to welcome them. But not only did he not open the gates, he even recalled the troops at the border. He was clearly concentrating his forces in preparation for a fight to the death with the Cizhou garrison troops.

Yin Chang guessed that Fanzhou would ally with the Dengzhou soldiers in order to emerge victorious. It was only when they had the numbers to crush the Cizhou garrison troops they would dare to meet Cizhou's attack in such a way. The old man was a crafty one. Knowing that he had not brought along enough men, he threw Fei Sheng out as bait for the Fanzhou soldiers to bite. He waited for the Fanzhou soldiers to assemble together in a group, then used the "dagger" formation<sup>29</sup> to launch a surprise attack from the back to break them up before destroying them one by one.

As Fei Sheng wiped away the blood, he saw those dagger squads<sup>30</sup> cutting through the enemy forces like hot knives cutting through butter, so much that the Fanzhou soldiers were unable to converge together again.

The blades of Yin Chang's squads were facing outward on all sides; it was a battle formation clearly drawn on the same one Lu Guangbai used to fight the Biansha Cavalry, although Yin Chang made some changes by lining these squads up in very narrow columns, turning them from Lu Guangbai's square-shaped "battering ram"<sup>31</sup> into a long-shaped "dagger".

Such dagger squads were ruthless and swift when launching a surprise attack from the back. The moment they pierced into the enemy camp, they would be able to tear the other party apart from within. The Fanzhou soldiers, who did not even have armors, had no time at all to cover their asses. In the blink of an eye, they were all cut down into bloody pulps of flesh.

This old man really is something!

Fei Sheng's confidence soared upon seeing victory within their grasp. But before he could open his mouth, he took a hit from Yin Chang's sweeping leg.<sup>32</sup> Yin Chang might have been advanced in age, but his martial art moves with his lower limbs were the real deal, and it caused Fei Sheng to fall headfirst. Fei Sheng had only just landed on the ground when a blade above his head sliced through the air with a "swoosh".

The Fanzhou soldiers were now beating a retreat. Dragging his blade along, Yin Chang chased after them and hollered, "Where are you running off to, lads!"

Since Fanzhou had amassed together its troops, then those who had turned up tonight were the main force in the territory. As long as they could defeat these people, there would be no more possibility of King Yi resisting. The morale of the Fanzhou troops was already crushed, while the morale of the Cizhou garrison troops was at an all-time high. This was the moment to fight and win a quick battle. Yin Chang would never let them return to the city.

Fei Sheng climbed to his feet and gave chase. But who could have guessed that this old man would have such amazing footwork? He was astonishingly fast as he ran and barged his way through in the night. Fei Sheng could only just about barely keep up. They chased for a few *li* when Fei Sheng realized that the direction was wrong. He was about to call out to Yin Chang when he suddenly heard the sound of horses' hooves.

"Reinforcements!" Fei Sheng's legs straightened as he came to a halt and tried to drag Yin Chang back. "Elder Yin, it's the reinforcements from Fanzhou!"

Fei Sheng was just the same as Gu Jin—he had a keen sense of hearing. As he had few opportunities to tag along with the army, he did not have Gu Jin’s ability to identify the type of soldiers from the sound alone. However, he had extraordinary observational skills, and he could tell that the sound of these horses’ hooves was slightly heavy; they did not seem to be ordinary cavalry.

The night was starless, with continuous stretches of snow dunes in the wilderness. Fragments of snow slid along the mounds, rustling in the wind as the wind blew them to the feet of the Cizhou garrison troops. Yin Chang, ever the obstinate one charging at the fore, could already see the small number of cavalry. With his sense of smell wrecked from inhaling the fumes of one too many wines, he failed to catch a whiff of the smell in the air even with the wind blowing in his direction.

Fine, delicate bits of snow pounced on Fei Sheng’s face. In that instant the snow melted, he caught the smell of gunpowder in the air. His hair promptly stood on end. He braked to a sudden stop, swung his arms apart, and said sharply to the Imperial Bodyguards beside him, “Firearms—!”

Before Fei Sheng’s voice even fully left his mouth, flames burst out of the darkness like that of a meteor shower. Without even thinking, Fei Sheng sprang into the air like a tiger and pounced onto Yin Chang’s back from behind, taking the old man along with him as he tumbled into the snow. That resounding “BANG” slammed into his ears like a blunt instrument smashing onto his skull, the sound so explosive that Fei Sheng nearly lost his sense of hearing.

What a miscalculation!

Fei Sheng’s back, which had been hit by shrapnel, was burning with searing pain. He propped himself up with an arm and shook his head hard. As he could not hear his own voice clearly, he could only shout with all his might at Yin Chang, “This stuff burns! Retreat, NOW!”

Fei Sheng had seen firearms in the armory of the Eight Great Training Divisions before. This instrument could only be equipped by the Chunquan Battalion of the Eight Great Training Divisions; it was restricted by the imperial court, with the blueprint to forge it left under the charge of the Ministry of War. Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan both had designs on firearms before, but neither of them had managed to get their hands on the blueprint.

No wonder this cavalry stood unmoving earlier—they were loading the firearms. Who knew how long the enemy had been observing them for the night? They were not here for the Cizhou garrison troops, but Yin Chang. As the saying goes, strike at the most vulnerable spot, much like hitting a snake seven inches below its head, and Yin Chang was the Achilles heel of the Cizhou garrison troops.

Yin Chang had been blindsided by this bullet. The old man struggled in the snow, covering his ears as he shouted in alarm at Fei Sheng, “Why the hell is there thunder?!”

Where in the world would Fei Sheng have the time to explain things to an old country bumpkin who had never seen the world? He got to his feet and dragged Yin Chang along as he ran back. Yin Chang shifted his palm away and cranked his head to take a look. Another explosion resounded from the cavalry behind them, and the barrage of fired projectiles scraped past Yin Chang’s buttocks, hurting Yin Chang so much that he yelled at the top of his lungs.

Fei Sheng thought Yin Chang had been hit. In a moment of anxiety, he said, “Don’t you die now!”

No matter what happened tonight, Fei Sheng had to keep this old man alive. He knew very well that Shen Zechuan was currently lacking generals, and Yin Chang would no doubt go on to be of great use in the future. The point was that if Yin Chang were to die here, then Fei Sheng, a stranger to warfare, would return in disgrace, and when that time came, it remained to be seen whether or not he could still retain his original post, let alone have a future to speak of. Shen Zechuan still had Qiao Tianya at his disposal; Fei Sheng was not his only option.

Therefore, Yin Chang must not die!

Frightened, Yin Chang took to his heels with his hands covering his head. He did not even need Fei Sheng to pull him along as he left Fei Sheng trailing behind in his wake after a few steps, repeatedly muttering to himself, “Strike anyone but me. This old man has never done anything unconscionable. Strike anyone but...”

Bullshit!

Following close on Yin Chang’s heels, Fei Sheng felt pissed. With a sudden burst of strength, he cursed Yin Chang as he chased him, “You old crook, you are too black-hearted! Weren’t you the one who threw me in the camp as bait?”

Yin Chang turned his neck around to refute, “warfare is all about deception, deception!”<sup>33</sup>

They dashed frantically through the wilderness without letting up. Fortunately, the enemy did not have the intent to pursue them, and they withdrew after chasing the Cizhou garrison troops away for half a *li*. After running for half a night and fighting with the Fanzhou troops for the other half, the Cizhou garrison troops were now utterly drained and exhausted. It was such a cold day, and yet they were all drenched in sweat and panting like an ox while propping themselves up.

As Fei Sheng wiped his sweat and caught his breath, realization hit him. He turned around. Looking at the first glimmer of dawn on the horizon, he spat hard and said, “We’ve been tricked.”



By the time the military reports made their way back to Cizhou, it was already the dead of night. Shen Zechuan had on in a loose-fitting robe as he finished looking over Fei Sheng’s report in the hall. The entire hall was utterly silent; no one dared to take a peep at the expression on the Prefectural Lord’s face.

Everyone had believed Fanzhou to be in the bag and had not expected to meet with a tough fight. The Cizhou garrison troops had prepared for half a year, and Shen Zechuan had previously invited Libei and the Imperial Army to train them, yet their first battle was so hopelessly botched. Anyone else would be infuriated.

It was so quiet in the study that one could hear a pin drop. Yao Wenyu covered his mouth and coughed for a long time. As he clenched his fist, he said, “Your Lordship, please be appeased for the time being. Firearms have always been prohibited by the court, so their appearance in Fanzhou is truly unexpected. Even though King Yi is in possession of such powerful weapons, his defeat is already cast in stone—he won’t be able to change the outcome.”

Yu Xiaozai, who had just returned from Dunzhou, had not even warmed his chair yet. Afraid that Shen Zechuan would severely punish the garrison troops because of this, he braved the solemn atmosphere and spoke up. “Chill, Your Lordship...”

Oh no, he forgot to switch to bureaucratic speak!

Yu Xiaozai slapped his knees in chagrin, and the advisors around him promptly bowed their heads even lower.



With this interruption from Yu Xiaozai, Shen Zechuan's fury cooled. He covered the letter, and his expression warmed up again. Only then did the rest of them dare to breathe.

"Yuanzhuo is right," Kong Ling continued in a soft voice. "Even with firearms in his possession, King Yi can't stir up any waves. Fanzhou is in short supply of grains. Even if he shuts the gates and stays inside, there is no way he can make it out alive."

As Yao Wenyu lowered his sleeves, he said, "But it's rather strange... if King Yi already had firearms in hand, how could he have been forced into a corner to such an extent? Just by reselling them to the Mount Luo bandits, he would have been able to earn enough to cover the military salaries for recruiting new soldiers. Moreover, the confrontation this time doesn't seem like King Yi's usual style."

Zhou Gui recalled the words Yao Wenyu said a few days ago, and the color promptly drained from his face. "Could it be that King Yi has already been killed by the bandits in Fanzhou as Yuanzhuo had anticipated? This battle feels rather odd to me when I look at it too."

Zhou Gui knew Yin Chang well. His promotion of Yin Chang was not what Fei Sheng thought it was. Rather, it was because he felt that Yin Chang had the capability to fight wars. If King Yi also had such an ability, then Fanzhou should have launched an attack on Cizhou a long time ago.

Kong Ling was also getting suspicious too. "As Fei Sheng said in his letter, it indeed doesn't look like what King Yi would do."

Silence gradually returned to the study as everyone waited for Shen Zechuan to speak. Shen Zechuan raised his eyes to look at the group with an icy expression in his eyes and said, "Reply and tell Yin Chang that either the garrison troops will return in triumph seven days later, or he will come and see me with his own head in hand."

Shen Zechuan gave the garrison troops abundant provisions and even equipped them with superior gear. If the garrison troops could not even take down Fanzhou, then there was no need at all to further consider his grand, ambitious plans to reign supreme.

A mountain cannot accommodate two tigers.

After this spring, Zhongbo could only have one master. Regardless of whether King Yi was real or fake, Shen Zechuan was set on taking Fanzhou.

**Author's Note:**

The bronze firearm is more like a shotgun or scattergun. It has an advantage only in the face of the enemy. It won't work from a distance away. For detail, please refer to chapter 37.

Thank you for reading.



## CHAPTER 198: YIN CHANG

Fei Sheng no longer dared to belittle Yin Chang. The power of last night's 'dagger' had been shockingly terrifying; Fei Sheng had never even heard of that sort of formation before. If not for the sudden appearance of the firearms, they would have already been in the city of Fanzhou this morning.

Having been startled out of his drunken stupor by the firearms, Yin Chang held the bowl in his hands and craned his neck to ask, "what the heck are those things?"

Fei Sheng was staking their victory entirely on the old man this time. Seeing Yin Chang's empty bowl, he hurriedly filled it up again. "Firearms. Have you never heard of them before?"

Yin Chang shook his head like a rattle drum.<sup>34</sup> He had spent half of his life in Cizhou, and the highest-ranking official he had ever met was Zhou Gui. He could not even list out all the Eight Great Training Divisions, let alone know of the Chunquan Battalion. He was truly an old country bumpkin, a barely literate man who had never read a single book on warfare and relied entirely on feeling his way through battles.

"What's that? It exploded with a 'bang', like a strike of lightning." Yin Chang crushed up the dry rations. "We'll get struck before even making it up to the front. How are we supposed to fight this war?"

"It can only play its users for fools." Fei Sheng drew himself closer to Yin Chang. Both of them were equally filthy and covered in blood from head to toe. With his fingers, Fei Sheng made a circle the size of a gun muzzle and showed it to Yin Chang. "The reason why the cavalry didn't move yesterday was because they were loading their firearms. It takes effort to get it to fire from this opening, and it only works if they're in close proximity. They blindsided us this time. Damn it. Now that I think about it, it's possible that those are all the firearms they have, and they used it just for the specific purpose of scaring us."

Yin Chang finally kind of understood it. "Oh! Aren't those firecrackers then?!"

"You're absolutely correct! Think of them as firecrackers; it can't hit you if you run far enough." Fearing that Yin Chang would be cowed by the firearms and would not dare to launch further attacks, Fei Sheng went to great pains to explain to him. "Think about it. If this stuff was really that

good to use, why did Chunquan Battalion only use it to perform for the emperor? It doesn't work as well in battles."

Fei Sheng did not lie. Why did the Chunquan Battalion set the firearms on the back burner? Precisely because it was hard to use. Loading them took time. Use them in street fights, and the firearms would probably still be in the midst of warming up even when the enemies' blades had already slit their throats. But pull away from the enemy, and the lethality of the firearms would plummet. Furthermore, the recoil would also make it difficult to aim accurately.

"It even burns asses." Yin Chang was still nursing a grudge over that fired round last night. He thought for a moment while staring at the campfire. "Are these things expensive?"

"Very." Fei Sheng soaked the dry rations in the bowl and gobbled it down whole. "Even the Imperial Bodyguards don't have the blueprint. They are manufactured by the Ministry of Works under the supervision of the Ministry of War. The quantity is limited every time, and they even come with numbers engraved on them."

Yin Chang promptly bared his stained, yellow teeth at Fei Sheng in a grin. "Then fuck it. I only fear that those firecrackers are cheap. Fanzhou is so brokeass poor now, so how would they bear to use expensive stuff as they please? It's great if its reach is limited. I don't for the life of me believe they can cower like tortoises in there for their entire lives."



Door panels swung and slammed under the intense howl of the north wind. The streets of Fanzhou were strewn with corpses all over. King Yi's tattered banner fluttered in the wind as beggars fought over it to keep themselves warm. The entrance of the yamen's wind shelter was crammed with hundreds of people, most of which were the elderly, weak, women, and children. All the young and healthy men in their families had either been abducted away by the bandits or hoodwinked by King Yi into joining his army. These people, so famished they were all skin and bones, were all here to beg for food.

This winter wind was so penetratingly freezing that people were dying of the cold every night.

"Brother Huo wishes to open the granaries and distribute the grains to the people." Yang Qiu, a bandit of Fanzhou sitting on the *taishi* chair<sup>35</sup> with his leg propped, said with a merry smile. "It's a good thing. We are all for it."

But the Cizhou garrison troops are right at our city gates now, and the soldiers in the frontline can't go hungry. As long as the soldiers don't starve, you can distribute the grains to whoever you want."

Both sides of the hall were packed with people standing or sitting; they were all bandits from Fanzhou and Dengzhou. Yin Chang was right in his guess. To guard against the Cizhou garrison troops, King Yi had assembled together the troops from both prefectures in the hope of bargaining with Shen Zechuan at the critical moment. But who knew? He invited a wolf into his own house and brought disaster upon himself instead. In the end, he was killed by Huo Lingyun and these people the latter was colluding with.

Sitting on King Yi's seat, Huo Lingyun said, "The city has run out of food, so I will have to borrow grains from my various brothers here."

"Shen Zechuan has sealed off the routes to the west, and the traveling merchants no longer dare to come this way anymore. After the tenth month, all I've been eating are fucking stale grains." Yang Qiu felt resentful just to bring up the matter. "I was even thinking of borrowing grains from all of you. Old Fang the Tenth, you were working hand in glove with King Yi, and must have had your fair share of licking his balls, so don't dare you sit here with us and pretend to be poor."

Old Fang the Tenth, who had a penchant for men, felt so self-conscious on hearing this that his face blanched with anger. He clenched his walnuts and sneered. "What a bunch of bull. Drop that hoodlum act of yours. My grains have long been used to make up for the military grains, feeding ingrates like you."

"The fuck we fighting a battle for when we have no grains." Yang Qiu said with ill intentions. "Might as well run while we can."

"Run?" Old Fang the Tenth spat. "The entire territory to the northwest has been choked off by Shen Zechuan. Either you go over to Tianfei Watchtower and surrender to Commander-in-chief Qi, or you go over to the Chashi River and work in cahoots with the Biansha people. Isn't Shen Zechuan going to attack Duanzhou in the second month? Say we mess up the game for him and leave an opening in Zhongbo, would he still dare to throw his weight around here?"

These people were bandits. At first, they heard Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye had killed Lei Changming in Cizhou, and then they got wind that Shen Zechuan had killed Cai Yu in Chazhou, followed by Lei Jingzhe in Dunzhou. All the big-name bandit leaders in Zhongbo had met their fucking

ends in Shen Zechuan's hands. Even if they thought with their feet, they knew Shen Zechuan would never let them off.

Yang Qiu initially thought Huo Lingyun was not qualified enough to hold down the situation. He had come here to fish in troubled waters; his plan was to haul King Yi's money vault away before the city was breached, but when he arrived, he found Old Fang and all these other people having designs on the money vault too. Everyone was presently sitting here mutually scheming against one another, each of them only too anxious for the others to hurry up and die.

Although Huo Lingyun was sitting at the head, he was willing to play second fiddle. Without showing any expression, he said, "On the contrary, there's no need to be overly anxious. Shen Zechuan sent an old man this time, one without prestige and capability. What's more, he's timid. He won't get anywhere."

It was true that Yin Chang had no reputation to speak of, but Yin Chang had disposed of nearly half of their soldiers with just one appearance. Huo Lingyun himself was the one who went out to fight last night's battle, the details of which he kept mum about. All Yang Qiu and Old Fang the Tenth knew was that they had suffered severe casualties.

Yang Qiu thought of Huo Lingyun as just a pretty face who was all looks and no substance, practically good for nada. Even so, he still had a smile on his face as he said, "That's right. Brother Huo comes from a distinguished family. The hell does an old country bumpkin like him think he is? I'm only worried about food, nothing else. If we keep up with this rate of consumption, we won't last until spring even if we repel the Cizhou garrison troops."

"Then what do you have in mind?" Old Fang the Tenth said sarcastically, "Let's hear your brilliant ideas."

Yang Qiu rolled his eyes at him and looked at Huo Lingyun. "Yan Heru still has shops in Dunzhou. Let's trade King Yi's family assets for grains with him. He doesn't acknowledge anything except money, so he will definitely do us this favor. As long as we can survive this winter, the throne of King Yi will be as good as Brother Huo's. It won't be too late for us to recruit soldiers and buy horses then."

Old Fang the Tenth listened to Yang Qiu's nonsensical boasts but did not speak up to warn Huo Lingyun. Huo Lingyun was exactly his type, but he had seen King Yi's mutilated corpse back at the *yamen*, which the dogs

had gnawed until it was all unrecognizable. He could not help but have the sense that he was not beyond sharing the same fate too.

Having remained close to King Yi these past six months, Huo Lingyun was not aware of the situation outside. Looking as if he believed Yang Qiu's words, he said, "but with the garrison troops besieging the city now, how are we going to conduct this business with Yan Heru's shop?"

"My people are most familiar with the areas in Dunzhou. I can use Liu'er's eyes too." Yang Qiu had some monkey business going on with Cuiqing, and he had tagged along for a few rides when Cuiqing went to Dunzhou for business in the past. "If Brother Huo is willing to trust me, I'll make a trip for you."

Old Fang the Tenth instantly turned hostile. "So you have it all plotted out, huh!"

They snapped at each other and incriminated one another, neither willing to give in. King Yi's money was future life insurance for them, and no one was willing to share it with the others. As such, they remained locked in a stalemate here, making the atmosphere rather tense and heavy.

Yang Qiu had no way to refute Old Fang the Tenth's words. He grew more and more restless with anxiety as he sat here, worried that Huo Lingyun could not hold up against the Cizhou's garrison troops, so he steeled himself, deciding to kill them all and grab the money tonight.



A Fanzhou soldier stationed on the city wall was relieving himself at a corner when he suddenly heard several whistles coming from below. He fastened his pants. Not daring to stick his head out directly, he glanced down from the middle of the battlement. A bonfire was blazing in the wilderness, and the Cizhou garrison troops had taken up formation in front of the city walls with their shields held up, yet they had not sounded the war horn.

Yin Chang stood at the very front and took a few gulps of wine before shouting, "Is King Yi here? Call him up the city wall. Let's have a little chat!"

The taste of being pierced by the dagger squads' sharp blades the night before was still vivid in the Fanzhou troops' minds. Yin Chang looked exactly like an old maniac when he chased after them, and the impact of that encounter still lingered. The Platoon Commander of Fanzhou, a bandit under Yang Qiu, had been specially assigned here by Huo Lingyun. He



leaned over the battlement and spat at Yin Chang. "Chat, my ass. Don't even think about tricking us out of the city."

Not to be outdone, Yin Chang cursed back. "All of you in Fanzhou are fucking wimps. Cowering cowards like you are not even fit to kiss my ass! Bah, little brats! Do you even have the balls to fight battles? Get your ass down here and carry our Prefectural Lord's shoes."

Yin Chang, having hung out in the streets in his youth, spontaneously blurted out all the obscenities that came to his mind. With wine to add to his fun, he could stand here and curse for three days and three nights without ever repeating himself. His words were crude and vulgar as he swore with great relish and led the garrison troops to jeer with him, having such a merry time it was as though he was celebrating the spring festival.

The Platoon Commander, having served under Yang Qiu, had become accustomed to throwing his weight around in Dengzhou. Even King Yi himself treated him with courtesy when he came to Fanzhou. Seething with resentment now, especially after getting chased all around by Yin Chang and even stabbed in the buttocks last night, he propped himself against the battlement and let loose a torrent of verbal abuse.

The moment the Platoon Commander retorted, Yin Chang waved his hand to instigate the Cizhou garrison troops behind him to holler back with a litany of curses. The Platoon Commander was unable to beat them in might, and his voice was drowned out. Furious, he pounded the wall hard and commanded those at his sides. "Shoot him!"

The Fanzhou troops swiftly put up their bows, and the Cizhou garrison troops below them promptly took to their heels. They cursed as they ran while the arrows rained down noisily on the shields they were equipped with. Once they were out of the Fanzhou troops' range, they stood at the perimeter and started to boo in unison at the top of the city walls.

Yin Chang leaped beyond the shooting range and raised both hands to signal for them to sound the war horn at the back. The old man's ruddy face was glowing as he yelled, "Fanzhou—"

The Cizhou garrison troops responded in chorus, "—is all as chicken as they come!"

Yin Chang shouted again, "And King Yi—"

The Cizhou garrison troops continued, "—is a fucking cur!"

The Fanzhou arrows could not reach them. Soldiers of all ranks leaned over the battlements, trying to get a swear word in as they cursed back. A

pity its effect was minimal. Yin Chang even composed a ditty for the Cizhou garrison troops, which they hollered at an earsplitting volume from where they stood.

Half of the Platoon Commander's body was already sticking out as he cussed until his face turned livid with rage. He bellowed across the air, "I dare you to repeat that, you old buffoon! I'll slice off your rotten tongues!"

"Bring it on." Yin Chang seemed to be drunk as he stepped on the snow and turned around in circles. As he clapped his hands, he said, "If you don't come, I'll take you as my daughter. Daughter, heh!" He pinched his fingers and twisted around to look back at the Platoon Commander at the top of the city wall, imitating the latter as he said in a shrill voice, "I'll slice off your rotten tongues and tear off your faces!"

Yin Chang was already advanced in years, and he had so many wrinkles on his face he could even make a flower pattern with them. Yet his imitation of a woman was absolutely spot on, having gotten that feminine charm more or less down pat as he stomped his foot and sent pieces of ice beneath it skipping all over.

The Platoon Commander's face blanched.

The composition of the Fanzhou troops was a rather complicated one; the men could not be considered soldiers at all. Sworn enemies and adversaries were even thrown into a squad together, so who knows? Perhaps they were all now laughing behind the Platoon Commander's back on seeing him humiliated.

The Platoon Commander had never before experienced such humiliation. He shoved aside the soldier next to him and ordered, "prepare the horse!"

The soldier hurriedly chased after him and said, "Huo—"

"Fuck that Huo," the Platoon Commander abruptly yanked up a soldier and barked at him. "I'm Chief Yang's foreman. Huo Lingyun was still a wee kid wetting his pants when I was back there in Dengzhou killing the garrison troops in. Is he even fit to command me? Bring out the guns!"

The sight of Yin Chang scampering away like a frightened rat from the firearms last night was still fresh in the Platoon Commander's mind. They had lost half their men in the tussle with Yin Chang then, when Yin Chang had split them up with his formation. But with the city of Fanzhou right behind them tonight, they had even more confidence than they did last night. At most, they would retreat back if they had to. What was there to be

afraid of?! Either way, they had horses. If Yin Chang still dared to pursue them after they withdrew into the city with their bows at the ready, he would be courting death.

Yin Chang tugged up his trousers. The old man reached back for the hilt of his blade. He dropped the merriment, his cloudy eyes as quiet as this expanse of the night sky as he adjusted his breathing, a strategy he had thought of on his own. As long as he calmed his breathing before a battle, he would be able to stand firm on his feet.

There were incredibly gifted generals in this world; they were young and were not only ambitious but also dazzlingly brilliant. But there was also another kind of general who never had the opportunity to make a name for themselves. They always had their backs to the firmament of heaven, their eyes solely on the small piece of land beneath their feet.

Yin Chang was long past his prime.

The instant the city gates opened, Yin Chang once again felt a rush of fighting spirit coursing through his body. That was the desire that had been burning within him to this very day. He could not see the onslaught of old age assailing him; he was still as young as he had once been. The fervor that blazed anew in him let him draw his blade without the slightest decrease in his speed at all.

Win one battle!

Even if he was no famous general.



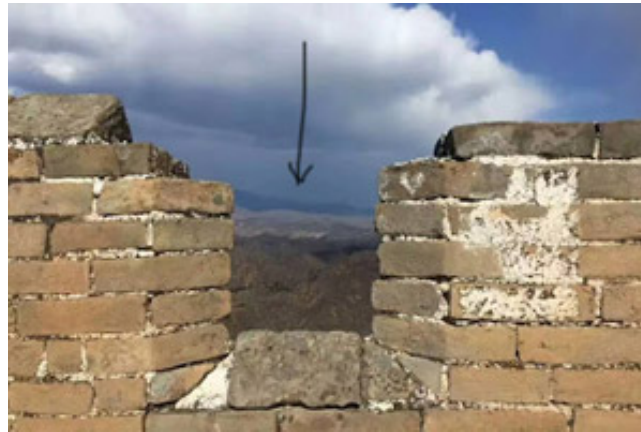
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#### Footnotes

1. 斩首 the word here used is decapitated or beheaded, although it also implied the slaying of the Xiao Fangxu in this context, leaving the Libei Armored Cavalry headless, or without a leader.



- 2.
3. 鬼头 kind of carving on the hilt of the blade. See examples [here](#) or [here](#)



- 4.
5. 垛口 *duokou*, or crenels, empty space between two merlons



- 6.
7. Specifically 悬眼 Xuanyan, a loophole opened at the base of a parapet in-between two crenels.



- 8.
9. 鬼头刀 literally ghost-headed blade. It's a kind of blade used for beheading people sentenced to death in old times.



- 10.
11. 单梢炮 Single-component catapults, or one-branch trebuchet
12. 丈 *zhang*; a measure of length, 1 *zhang* = ten Chinese feet (3.3m)
13. Specifically a *changdao*, or a two-handed, single-edged Chinese sword.



14.

15. Snowtrooper Lu Guangbai.



Thanks [Jia](#) for suggesting.

16. 地龙 *dilong*, an ancient method of warming with an indoor ground heating system, built by concreting circular flue underground where heat would flow from a fire pit outside through the channels to the entire room and raise the temperature indoors.

17. 军屯 military troops (mostly in border regions) who carry out garrison duties as well as farm crops to supply the border garrisons with grains

18. Tiger, also refers to an extraordinary man or hero. Tiger is a symbol of ferocity, agility, and courage.

19. 细刀, literally slim blade, although it may also refer to the *miaodao* (苗刀, image below)



20. 守夜 *shouye*, or 守岁 *shousui*, the tradition of staying awake until midnight on the eve of Chinese New year. It is said that if the children stayed up late, their parents would live a longer life in return.

21. 伤筋动骨一百天 literally, takes a hundred days for the bones to knit and for the tendons to heal.

22. 水(至)清则无鱼 literally, water which is too clean has no(/few) fish, i.e., one should not demand absolute purity, you cannot expect everyone to be squeaky clean.



23.

24. 如意 *ruyi*, an ancient auspicious symbol that served as a ceremonial scepter or a symbol of power, often given as gifts because of the good wishes they implied.

25. *Fengshui*, or the art of geomancy, is the traditional Chinese practice of selecting auspicious sites for buildings and tombs, believed to have a vital influence on the fortune of a family.

26. 及冠 a man's 20th birthday, i.e., coming of age at 20 for a male.

27. 家生子 Children of domestic servants or slaves. These children were also born in the household and also served as servants and slaves in the same household.

28. 名帖 (also 拜帖), a visitation card (or name card) written on paper or wood used by officials, nobles or distinguished people to notify the other party of their visit. It would usually indicate his name, position, and so on. It's like a name card in the modern world.

29. In this context, the “young master” would be Xiao Xun, since his father is now the “master” of the household, so it makes sense to call Xiao Chiye the second master (after Xiao Jiming) as calling Xiao Chiye young master would make it seem like he's Xiao Jiming's son instead.

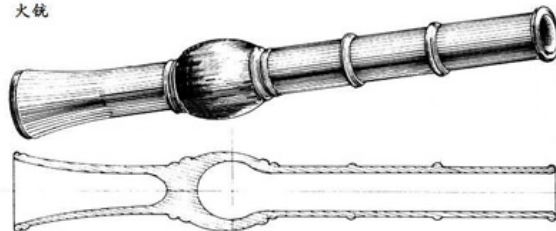
30. 清水衙门 government office with low receipts or expenditures and hence little or no chance of corruption.

31. 三姓家奴 literally, a slave with three surnames. The term originates from the Romance of the Three Kingdoms 《三国演义》 and refers specifically to Lu Bu. It's used mockingly to refer to capricious, disloyal and unrighteous people who serve traitors.

32. 一炷香 the time an incense stick takes to burn. Some sources suggest one stick takes 30 minutes or one hour, but it really depends on a variety of factors (the environment, wind, length of the stick, etc).

33. 温柔乡 land of warmth and tenderness, or a place where a man can find solace in feminine charms, such as a brothel, etc.

火铳



34.



35.

36. 铜火铳 *Huochong*, or blunderbuss (according to baidu), or sometimes known as a hand cannon, is a tube-like projection firearm used as a gun. The *Huochong* gun was an important invention as the Ming Dynasty was creating weapons to defend themselves from attackers.





37.

38. 酒囊 wine bag or pouch, a portable water bag typically made out of animals' hide.

39. 尖刀阵型, dagger, point, or spearhead formation that concentrates manpower and firepower to pierce enemy lines and create an opening for its attacking forces.

40. 尖刀队 dagger, point, or spearhead squad, a squad in the forefront of a battle that first invades enemy territory or pierces the enemy lines in a battle.

41. It was called 撞车 (battering ram) in chapter 190, although in 197 this was written as 战车 (war chariot or tank). Will double check and confirm again with the uncensored traditional chinese physical copy when it is released.

42. 扫堂腿 a leg sweep, a martial art move where one typically sweeps out a leg in a circle.

43. 兵者，诡道也, all warfare is based on deception, from Sun Tzu's The Art of War.



44.

45. 拨浪鼓 Bolang Gu , also a Chinese rattle drum or a pellet drum, is a typical child toy in China. It's shaken or rotated from left and right quickly to produce a drumming or rattling sound.



46.

47. 太师椅 *Taishi* Chair or Grand Preceptor Chair, is a classical style of a wooden armchair in ancient China.

## CHAPTER 199 : TRIUMPHANT RETURN



As Yang Qiu left the *yamen* and stood under the eaves, he saw the commoners who were seeking refuge in the wind shelter. Finding it just his luck to come across them, he spat and ground it with his foot. “Are you people dead?” He said to the men in attendance. “Huo Lingyun may be ignorant, but all of you too? The poor are like venereal diseases. It’ll be too late to cry by the time they infect the *yamen*!”

The men behind him responded with fear and trepidation and hurried over to berate and drive the commoners away.

Yang Qiu got on the carriage and closed his eyes to rest, fuming as he recalled the conversation in the *yamen*. Midway through his journey, his subordinate suddenly piped up through the curtain, “Chief, there’s a message!”

Yang Qiu opened his eyes. “Tell me.”

“Old Fang the Tenth has not returned to his residence at all,” the subordinate said. “He resorted to trickery to shake off the informer following him, then swapped out the carriage and made a beeline for the money vault!”

Yang Qiu promptly pulled the carriage curtain open and glared for a moment. Fearing that he had already lost the opportunity to get a jump on the others, he said, “Quick, gather our men!”

In less than an hour, the subordinate reported back that the Cizhou Garrison Troops had attacked the city. The Platoon Commander had charged out with firearms in hand, but he had not even reached the Garrison

Troops when the Imperial Bodyguards, who had been lying in wait for a long time, broke his head with one clean, efficient twist. As the turn of events had been so unexpected and sudden, the city gates were not shut in time, and now the banners at the top of the city wall had all been set on fire.

Yang Qiu's face turned deathly pale when he heard about the death of the Platoon Commander. Holding on to the carriage door, he looked towards the city walls, where he saw that there was indeed a raging fire against a backdrop of purplish clouds.

The 4,000 men that Yang Qiu had brought along had filled in for half of the spots at the top of the city walls. At first, in order to have a hold over Huo Lingyun, he had arranged to place the fiercely strong men under his command there too. Who could have known that they would be so easily killed by the Garrison Troops?

Yang Qiu flew into a sudden rage. "Is he out of his mind?! The heck he's defending the city for? It's not even my fucking city! Bring along your broadswords and head right over to the money vault. If you come across that Old Fang cur, hack him to pieces! Once you're done loading the money and valuables into the chests, leave immediately!"

A flurry of footsteps resonated throughout the city as the bandits' boots trampled over the slurry of snow, sending the slush splattering over the legs of their pants and smearing it with streaks across the hems of their robes. Sounds of whistles fused into one. No one could tell who was who when the several gangs bumped into one another. Without so much a word, all of them first drew their blades to cut the others down to the ground. Puddles and puddles of blood coagulated in the snow. The bandits, in hankering after the money vaults, were all frantic with anxiety.

When Yang Qiu barged into the money vault, he saw stacks upon stacks of treasure chests. He pried open the nearest chest, which was filled to the brim with dazzling gold. All at once, Yang Qiu was frozen in place, unable to move his feet an inch. He gathered them up into his bosom several times and wept with joy. "King Yi really is rich!"

Shen Zechuan had locked off the northwest of Zhongbo, and Yang Qiu was feeling quite suffocated from being boxed in. But now that he had gold, he would be able to bribe his way out of Shen Zechuan's encirclement, even if that meant he had to drop a ton of money to do so.

“Move them, quick.” Yang Qiu stared fixedly at the gold in his arms. “Move them all onto the carriages!”

Yang Qiu’s horse carriages were parked in the money vault’s courtyard, but there were too many chests, and they were all exceedingly heavy. They had only moved half of the chests when Yang Qiu’s fleets could no longer take more. However, he was unwilling to leave the rest of the chests behind, so he had his subordinates go and snatch more carriages.

Having just arrived, Old Fang the Tenth got all anxious the moment he got off his horse carriage. Waving his handkerchief, he yelled, “Block him! Don’t let him leave!”

The door to the money vault was narrow. A great number of bandits, greedy as they were for money, had hidden the gold on them when they were inside moving the chests, only to be slashed to death by Yang Qiu when he found them out. He had already lost his mind and could not tolerate anyone fighting with him over the money. Just as they were moving the chests, Old Fang the Tenth’s fleet of horse carriages entered from the back and mixed in along with the other party’s carriages, forming a jumbled mess that completely blocked off access to the courtyard door.

Leading his men, Old Fang the Tenth leaped his way across the carriages into the courtyard and hacked away at Yang Qiu’s men whenever they encountered one. Yang Qiu’s subordinates were all crowding in the spaces between the carriages, and with their hands full with the chests, they did not even have the chance to fight back. A slash of the blade, and they all toppled over to the ground, dead.

Old Fang the Tenth cursed, “Sneaky son of a bitch! Return the money!”

Wiping away the blood on his face, Yang Qiu kicked the money vault door open and charged in with blade in hand to hack away at the men. They slaughtered one another in this cramped and narrow space. Blood colored the chests a deep shade of red. The carriages at the back were still jostling against one another, knocking over the chests that had yet to be secured in place. Rocks tumbled all over the ground.

“Rocks,” someone shouted. “Why the fuck are these rocks?!”

Yang Qiu and Old Fang the Tenth stopped at the same time and saw the rocks rolling on the grounds. Yang Qiu panicked. Not bothering with killing anymore, he turned and lunged at a horse carriage and smashed a chest open, only to see that it was all rocks inside too. Only a few chests on these

dozen or so carriages contained gold; the rest were all rocks. Under the sound of chests being opened, Yang Qiu's legs went weak. He supported himself against the carriage, his eyes so bloodshot they were about to drip with blood.

Old Fang the Tenth looked all around in a fluster. "We've been had!"

A carriage at the entrance of the courtyard suddenly moved as someone stomped it through the door. Following right after, the courtyard door banged shut. Liquid poured down from the top of the walls all around. A bandit who was close by took a sniff, and the color promptly drained from his face as he exclaimed in a panic, "kerosene!"

"Smash down the door." Old Fang the Tenth clung on to the horse carriages and jostled his way to the entrance of the courtyard, where he yelled, "Quick, smash down the door!"

Huo Lingyun stepped on the snow at the top of the wall. The night was so freezing cold his hands had turned blue.

Yang Qiu heard the sound of flint being struck and bellowed, "Huo Lingyun, you son of a bitch—!"

Huo Lingyun clutched a bunch of yellowish papers—these were all notices that King Yi posted outside the *yamen*. He set those nonsensical lies on fire and, under the glow of the licking flames, said with repulsion to Yang Qiu, "Go to hell."

Trails of fire suddenly blazed forth and swept through the courtyard of the money vault like tempestuous waves. There were not only rocks in the chests but also flammable weeds. The waves of flames engulfed everyone, and Yang Qiu and Old Fang the Tenth struggled in the blaze. They rolled on the ground, cursing Huo Lingyun venomously amidst blood-curdling screams.

Huo Lingyun watched the raging fire. Like belated firecrackers, the sound of splitting and crackling flesh exhilarated him. He roared with laughter under the stench of charred flesh, his eyes equally bloodshot from having stayed up all night.

BURN!

Burn these scums to death.

Power and influence were a bunch of crock. All he ever desired was for these people to pay with their lives! From King Yi to Cuiqing, and from Yang Qiu to Old Fang the Tenth.

Not a single one of them shall get away scot-free!

Left with no means of escape, the bandits pounded on the wall with their arms and wailed in the raging fire. Kerosene got on them as they rolled about, and the inferno tore away their hair and burned them to an unrecognizable crisp. The flames made their way out of the compound, blazing all the way along the eaves of the houses and setting the whole of Fanzhou ablaze.

“Who’s setting the city on fire?” Yin Chang, who was carrying the Platoon Commander’s head in hand, was in such a state of anxiety that he stomped his foot. “The Prefectural Lord still has to pay out of pocket for the damages after it’s done burning!”

Fei Sheng wiped away the bloodstains and looked in the direction where the flames lit up the sky. “Internal strife, huh...”

The city gates had been beached, and no one came to their aid. Distracted and fatigued from shooting all those arrows, the Fanzhou soldiers defending the city did not even put up a decent attempt at resistance the moment they saw the Platoon Commander dead.

Fei Sheng returned to his senses and signaled with his eyes to the Imperial Bodyguards behind him to search the whole city and seize all the firearms.

In the gap of time when Yin Chang was not cussing at others, he had a craving for wine, and he insisted on drinking two cups after the battle was fought and won. He scratched his cheeks with his empty hand and handed the still warm head to Fei Sheng as though he was giving him a gift. “Take him. Keep him well.”

Fei Sheng dodged out of the way to avoid the blood. “Why the hell are you always carrying him around?!”

Looking as though he treasured the thing, Yin Chang said with a cheeky laugh, “Heh heh, hand it over to the Prefectural Lord on returning as evidence for meritorious service rendered.”

Fei Sheng felt a chill run down his spine the moment he thought of that scene. Shen Zechuan wore all white when he sat in the front hall. Push this bloody thing over, and he would have to die if a drop of the blood so much as splattered onto Shen Zechuan’s folding fan. He hurriedly took the head and, while Yin Chang was preoccupied drinking his wine, shoved it to a junior soldier and sent him out to bury it.



Sure enough, the Cizhou garrison troops returned in triumph. Zhou Gui set up a welcome reception by the city gates to receive them; as encouragement for these new soldiers, he had the kitchen prepare a spread of roasted meat and grilled fish to let them eat their fill. While the soldiers stopped at the gates, the commanding general had to enter to meet the Prefectural Lord.

Yin Chang did not even dare to take a sip of his wine today. He followed Fei Sheng into the residence. The door to the study was open, and Kong Ling and the rest were all waiting by the steps. Upon seeing them enter, Kong Ling immediately came forward to welcome them.

“Elder Yin,” Kong Ling smiled at Yin Chang. “A warrior’s treasured blade truly never ages. Looks like you still have it in you!”

Yin Chang was on familiar terms with him. He craned his head to look in and asked softly, “the Prefectural Lord is inside?”

“Waiting for you.” Kong Ling guided them up the steps. Aware that Yin Chang always went weak at the knees whenever he met officials, Kong Ling made a special effort to say to him, “The Prefectural Lord was the one who personally assigned you to this battle, so there’s no need for me to tell you what that sentiment means. Just answer the questions His Lordship asks of you later accordingly. Don’t worry and just relax.”

Fei Sheng answered from the side. “I’ll back Elder Yin, I won’t let him blunder before His Lordship.”

It would have been fine if they hadn’t mentioned it; the moment they did, Yin Chang’s legs turned into jelly. He placed his hands on the steps for support in a panic, scrambled to his feet with an “oh, my”, and asked after Kong Ling, “What’s His Lordship gonna ask? What if I can’t answer?!”

Kong Ling turned back and was just about to answer when Yin Chang’s body odor – the result of not bathing for two months – hit him full-on and made him so dizzy he could not continue the conversation. Earlier, he had been standing somewhere windy to receive them and so did not notice the smell, but now that they were already standing right before the hanging screen, it was too late to withdraw.

Kong Ling threw Fei Sheng a look.

Why didn’t you remind Elder Yin to take a bath?!

Fei Sheng felt suffocated with aggravation building up in his chest. He wanted to respond, *I told him to but he wouldn’t do it so what was I supposed to do*. This crafty old man even had a ton of excuses at his



disposal. What was that about winter being too cold and it was more practical to be dirty since they had to march the troops to war and the accumulation of dirt could keep them warm and prevent their feet from freezing in their sleep and all that hogwash.

The hanging screen had already been lifted, so Kong Ling could only enter. Out of habit, Yin Chang lifted his leg to stride across the threshold, only to realize that this doorway had no threshold. With Yao Wenyu in a wheelchair, Shen Zechuan had long gotten someone to tear down the thresholds inside and outside the residence. Yin Chang gently set his foot down and shuffled in.

Shen Zechuan had seen Yin Chang before, but it had been from a distance away. Previously, when the garrison troops had yet to be rebuilt, the Imperial Army was the one who fought against the bandits from Mount Luo. Later, during the period when the garrison troops were recruiting, Shen Zechuan made several consecutive trips outdoors, so both men could more or less recognize the other.

Shen Zechuan was wearing a wide-sleeved robe over his regular wear today in a shade so white he looked ethereally pure and untainted. He sat in the master's seat and watched as Yin Chang entered.

Kong Ling said, "Your Lordship, this is—"

Kong Ling had not even finished his words when Yin Chang fell to his knees on the ground. A series of "thud, thud, thud" rang out as the old man kowtowed repeatedly in Shen Zechuan's direction. *This has all gone to the dogs*, Fei Sheng thought as he kneeled to kowtow too. Once he was done, he hurried to help Yin Chang up. But how would the advisors behind them know what was going on? They had only just entered when they saw those in front of them kneeling, and thinking that the Prefectural Lord was in a rage, they followed suit and kneeled too.

The atmosphere in the hall turned weird. The Prefectural Lord – suspected of being enraged – grasped his folding fan, the words he was about to say all but cut off by their kowtows. He floundered, for it wouldn't do for him to remain seated, and it wouldn't do for him to stand up either.

Yao Wenyu was quick to react. He bent over from his wheelchair and spoke gently to Yin Chang before him, "Elder Yin headed into battle and narrowly escaped death, so it is not unusual for you to feel worked up upon seeing His Lordship. But your return in triumph today is a joyful occasion, so let us not be so somber."

From the side, Yao Wenyu's words appeared to be praising Shen Zechuan's judicious selection of a general, which inspired such gratitude in the old general that he was moved to the point of tears. At the same time, he was also telling the advisors at the back that this pair of master and servant was on good terms with each other and that all was well between them.

It was then Shen Zechuan figured out what to say. "It has been hard advancing the army. Fei Sheng, help Elder Yin up. Gentlemen, please get up as well and sit as you would."

Fei Sheng helped Yin Chang up, but how would Yin Chang dare to look at Shen Zechuan? He exercised the caution he applied in battle and did not even dare to breathe too hard.

Kong Ling was between laughter and tears. What had initially been a pretty relaxed atmosphere was destroyed by this one kneel of Yin Chang, and now everyone was finding it ill-advised to be all smiles.

Fortunately, Shen Zechuan had sway over the atmosphere in the hall. He lowered his voice and was much gentler than usual. He was in no rush as he asked Yin Chang about the food and clothing while on the move and the weather on their journey back. After a series of questions and answers, Yin Chang's answers flowed a lot more smoothly.

It was then Shen Zechuan cut to the chase.

Fei Sheng had initially planned on covering it up, but Yin Chang's body odor was just too strong. It was not that big of a deal for the old man to skip bathing for two months, but having just returned from the battlefield, they were reeking all over from head to toe with the stench of blood, a stench which was presently being amplified by the heat within the hall.

Sitting downwards of Kong Ling, Yu Xiaozai was listening to the exchange when he suddenly caught a whiff of a certain odor. Distracted, he attempted to decipher the scent, thinking that it was similar to a mix of rancid rice and stinky feet, and yet it also resembled salted fish soaking in swill. It was a smell like he had never smelled before, a one-of-a-kind odor like nothing else. What's more, this odor – sharp and intense – was a force to behold. In no time, it pervaded the entire hall and lingered at such intensity that Fei Sheng, who had an acute sense of smell, near about fainted.

Shen Zechuan's expression remained unchanged throughout.

Anyone else could cover their noses with their sleeves, but not Shen Zechuan. Yin Chang had fought the battle for him, so if he were to reveal

any hint of disdain here, he would be hurting the old man's feelings. Moreover, in consideration of the earlier defeat, the rewards accorded to Yin Chang were not all that generous, at least on the surface. If Shen Zechuan were to cover his nose, that would give those beneath him the guts to belittle Yin Chang.

Unaware of what it was like around him due to his odor, Yin Chang gesticulated wildly as he told Shen Zechuan about the firearms in Fanzhou, his excitement increasing as he rambled on.

Xiao Chiye, who had been staying over at the Beiyuan military drill grounds for the past few days, was late to arrive. He had hurried over for the specific purpose of meeting this old man when he heard of the latter's return. Having made his way under the eaves, he did away with the briefing.

Gu Jin was helping Xiao Chiye remove his coat when he took a sudden sniff and revealed a horrified expression. Seeing the change in Gu Jin's expression, Xiao Chiye asked in puzzlement, "what's wrong?"

Before Gu Jin could respond, he heard a "CRASH" from the hall, followed by Yu Xiaozai's panicked voice. "Why'd he faint?!"

Fei Sheng, having heard of Xiao Chiye's arrival, was worried that Xiao Chiye would also catch a whiff of the odor when he entered. After all, the person sitting here was Shen Zechuan; he could not afford to shoulder the responsibility should something happen to Shen Zechuan due to the stench. Yin Chang had fought a winning battle, so everyone would not blame the old man for sure. That meant that they could only settle the score with him, Old Fei the Tenth. It couldn't be helped. Who asked him to be the Attendant Officer?! Everyone around them was close to getting overwhelmed by the stench. This was truly too gross an injustice for Fei Sheng. And so, he simply went the whole hog and made the first move to collapse and play dead before Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan immediately lifted his folding fan and put on the impressive air of a commander commanding his magnificent army. With calm and composure, he said, "Hurry, help him to the side hall and call for the physician to take a look at him. Elder Yin must be tired after the journey. Chengfeng, send someone to prepare warm water for Elder Yin. Once Elder Yin has bathed and rested, we can start the banquet."

The moment Yin Chang heard the mention of a bath, he just about jumped in alarm. "Your Lordship, I don't—"

Xiao Chiye called out from outside, “Qiao Tianya.”

“Got it.” Qiao Tianya bent to enter and simply hoisted Yin Chang over his shoulder. As the old man struggled, he laughed, “Elder Yin, happy new year. Time for a bath now!”

The gentlemen in the hall were so relieved that they did not even need Shen Zechuan to say the word before they hurriedly stood up to open the windows. The rush of cool breeze across their faces felt so refreshing that everyone sucked in a deep breath all at the same time.



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## CHAPTER 200 : BANQUET



No one could have expected it to take Yin Chang nearly four hours to take a bath. All the gentlemen in the study waited until they were famished. Yu Xiaozai glanced at the snacks on the table, his stomach growling incessantly.

“Youjing.” Shen Zechuan extracted himself from Cizhou’s affairs and said, “Dunzhou will serve as the supply camp when we mobilize troops to Duanzhou in the second month. Tantai Hu doesn’t have a clue about the workings of the *yamen*, so you will still have to go over and keep an eye on things. I’ll give you the authority to undertake inspection tours. If anything crops up, you can report directly to my desk without the need to go through the relay stations.”

Yu Xiaozai was a Chief Surveillance Bureau Censor who could be considered a student of Cen Yu. In his early years, he had served as a Touring Censor<sup>1</sup> and often carried out fieldwork in local areas. As such, he was very familiar with the ins and outs of the *yamen*. They were now establishing Dunzhou anew, and the key functionaries assigned over were newcomers selected by Cizhou; using them did not feel all that reassuring. Shen Zechuan did not retain Yu Xiaozai in Dunzhou as the Investigating Circuit; instead, he gave him the authority to conduct inspection tours and report directly back to him. Although Yu Xiaozai still did not have a definite official post, he carried a lot of weight. This was equivalent to the current Surveillance Commissioner in Zhongbo, who held sway over the various prefectures and circuits’ local administration assessments.

Yu Xiaozai hurriedly retracted his gaze from the snacks and rose to bow to Shen Zechuan.

“It hasn’t been long since Dunzhou was newly established,” Xiao Chiye said to Yu Xiaozai as he sat beside Shen Zechuan. “As someone in a military post, Tantai Hu should not be interfering with the affairs of the *yamen*, but manpower is lacking in the various prefectures, so we are doing away with the taboos for now. He’s a tad obtuse in this area, so he will need you to advise him as much as you can when it comes to the major issues.”

Tantai Hu was a trusted subordinate of Xiao Chiye. Delegating him to a lower position in Dunzhou was because they needed him to fill in the vacant post of general in Zhongbo. Getting him to guard Dunzhou could actually be considered as doing him an injustice, but with this layer of connection, no one in the Dunzhou *yamen* dared to defy Tantai Hu. By saying what he had, Xiao Chiye was actually backing Yu Xiaozai. Now that Yu Xiaozai had an appointment from Shen Zechuan to conduct inspections tours and make direct reports in addition to Xiao Chiye’s words, he no longer had anyone to fear when he made his rounds in Dunzhou. It would also help his cause when he headed down to the other prefectures in the future.

Yu Xiaozai was practically radiating with delight, but it would not do for him to be standing here and wear his heart too much on his sleeve, so he held his joy in check and bowed again to both of them. “This humble subject will definitely do my best to live up to the Prefectural Lord and the Second Master’s kindness.”

Yu Xiaozai’s answer was loud and clear, but so was the response from his tummy too. Their duet was so resounding that the study was stunned into silence.

“It’s the celebratory banquet for the garrison troops tonight.” Shen Zechuan saw it was already getting dark. “So I shall not hold you gentlemen back. Let’s start the feast.”

The feast was set up in the side hall. Initially, Shen Zechuan was supposed to be in the host seat, but Xiao Chiye was back now, and Yin Chang had still yet to show up, so he simply sat for a while as a gesture of appreciation before he took his leave. Most of those present were the advisors, and they did not dare to drink and let themselves go in Shen Zechuan’s presence. With the Prefectural Lord gone for the night, they were a little more at ease.

Qiao Tianya was not around, and with no one keeping an eye on him, Yao Wenyu, unable to turn down the warm invitations of the various advisors to drink up, took a few cups too.

Seeing him in a rare moment of relaxation, Qiao Tianya did not stride across the door but let down the hanging screen at the door and accompanied him under the eaves instead.

Having found Qiao Tianya, Fei Sheng beckoned to him from afar and said across the fine snow, "Let's go. What are you standing here like a pole for? There's a table set up in the duty room too. Everyone's waiting for you."

Qiao Tianya did not move. He looked a little unrestrained as he leaned against the doorpost, "Has everything been arranged on Master's end?"

"Of course, they have to be." Fei Sheng walked over to Qiao Tianya and looked through the gap in the hanging screen. "The various gentlemen tend to break up late, so you can still make it on time when you come around later. Besides, there are guards both on the inside and outside. Nothing bad will happen."

Qiao Tianya thought for a moment and lifted the screen. Yao Wenyu looked over from the other side, as if he knew someone was here waiting. After a short pause, Qiao Tianya lowered the screen and said, "I still have a few jars of fine wine in my room. You can send someone to get them. Consider it a token of my apology to everyone."

Fei Sheng stood still at the side for a moment before he merely said, "Who cares about those few jars of yours? How boring. Master has already released us from duty today, and yet you still keep yourself here." Having drunk a little, he was much more talkative than he usually was. "Master gave me the assignment to recruit newcomers a few days back. Do you know about it?"

Qiao Tianya folded his arms and sized Fei Sheng up with his eyes. "Yeah."

Fei Sheng raised a finger to point at himself before pointing at Qiao Tianya. Holding in a burp, he said, "Let me say a word in all honesty. We'll be building a cavalry in Duanzhou in the future. Master favors you the most, since you're pretty good at fighting after all. But look at you now; how did you come to this? You follow Yao Wenyu around as though you have forgotten where your roots are. If you go on like this, you will ruin your own future, sooner or later."

Snow fell onto the hilt of Qiao Tianya's blade. He looked at the courtyard and said absent-mindedly, "This is where my future lies. You're worrying too much."

"The Grand Mentor gave you to Master." Fei Sheng lowered his voice, disappointed with him for not living up to expectations. "The day Master took you in, he also received Yang Shan Xue."

Qiao Tianya once swore to be Shen Zechuan's blade. Courage, insight, temperament, skills—he did not lack them all. Had he been willing, he could have been the kind of guard in Zhongbo like Zhao Hui and Chen Yang were. His future would be bright, with boundless prospects, and restoring his clan to its former glory would not be just a dream. But ever since he was assigned to Yao Wenyu's side, he had lost that desire. The tasks Shen Zechuan had handed over to Fei Sheng to recruit new soldiers and accompany Yin Chang's troops to Fanzhou as the Attendant Officer were all assignments Qiao Tianya did not want.

Qiao Tianya blew away the snowflakes drifting towards him and watched as the wind instantaneously swept them away into the pitch-black night, where they disappeared. He did not brush away the snow on his blade, nor did he answer Fei Sheng.



Xiao Chiye removed his armor and wore just a single piece of unlined garment as he read Fei Sheng's report, which included the details of the deployment of troops to Fanzhou. "To think King Yi could even get his hands on firearms. His capability is astounding."

"One hundred and thirty-five pieces." Shen Zechuan shed off his wide-sleeved robe. "They all come from the Chunquan Battalion, and there are even numbers from the Ministry of War engraved on them."

"He's just a mere mountain bandit without a proper army." Xiao Chiye set his arms on the chair handles and watched as Shen Zechuan undressed. "Who supplied him with such valuable stuff?"

Shen Zechuan's robe slid across the crooks of his arms and fell to the woolen rug. His regular wear had pearl clasps, which made subtle "pop" sounds as he flicked them open. That fair, smooth nape of his promptly materialized. Shen Zechuan covered it partially with his fingers, looking as though he was considering something. He was so unguarded in this slack moment it was as if he would not resist even if he were to be pinned down



onto the rug, and with his mind preoccupied with other matters, he appeared all the more seductive.

“It does not benefit Qudu in any way for the firearms to be on the loose out there. It must have been stolen.”

Shen Zechuan’s Adam’s apple would bob when he was speaking. Xiao Chiye gazed at it without so much a change in expression; he was exceedingly familiar with it. Each time Shen Zechuan dripped with perspiration, he had the habit of tilting his head up and exposing his neck. This was because Xiao Chiye was too tall. Even if Shen Zechuan was lying on the bedding, he still had to meet Xiao Chiye’s kisses in such a way.

Xiao Chiye conjured up many scenes in his mind, but his expression was so composed and collected that he betrayed nothing of what he was thinking. His thumb was subconsciously caressing his thumb ring, rotating it gently. “Did Yin Chang bring back a captive?” he asked.

“King Yi’s male lover with the surname Huo. Chengfeng said that he’s the son of Huo Qing, the former commander-in-chief of Dengzhou.” Having spoken to this point, Shen Zechuan looked at Xiao Chiye. “We can take a look at him tomorrow morning.”

“This person used firearms to scare Yin Chang into retreating,” Xiao Chiye said. “Looks like he knows how to use it.”

“Someone must have taught him. Shen Zechuan undid the last of the pearl clasp, and when he released his hand, his regular wear slid to the ground.

The beauty, finally comfortable now, kicked off the wooden clogs on his feet in passing. With his back to the dim light and narrow waist revealed, he was like the personification of gorgeousness who could not be contained by his clothes. Xiao Chiye tasted secret pleasure. This was just like foreplay between the two of them not privy to others. His desire for Lanzhou gradually crept into his chest, filling it up.

“Send a few pieces of firearms to Libei tomorrow morning. The military craftsmen can draw up a blueprint. Hairigu learned Yin Chang’s formation on the sly back at the Beiyuan military drill grounds, and I couldn’t counter his moves. When we mobilize troops to Duanzhou this time, I want Yin Chang to follow along.” Xiao Chiye tossed Fei Sheng’s report on the desk.

Shen Zechuan, who was holding up the tea to take a sip, glanced at Xiao Chiye on hearing him and asked meaningfully, “are you not taking me

along?”

“Sure,” Xiao Chiye said frivolously as he faced Shen Zechuan.

“There’s a ferocious tiger<sup>2</sup> back at home who usually keeps a tight watch on me, so I can only get up to some hanky-panky with you while the troops are on the march.”

Wickedness twinkled at the corners of Shen Zechuan’s upturned eyes.

“Your wife is so fierce. I’m scared.”

Xiao Chiye imitated Shen Zechuan’s tone the last time, “I’m fierce too.”

“I’m not afraid of you being fierce.” Shen Zechuan held up and pressed the folding fan between their lips. Like a fox from outside, he said, “But you only come over once in a blue moon.”

Xiao Chiye tilted his head slightly. “What can I do? I’m but a henpecked husband who fears my wife.”

“If it were me...” Shen Zechuan shifted away his folding fan and leaned close to Xiao Chiye’s lips, where he softly said, “I’ll stay at home all day longing for you, making love to you under the sheets, stirring up a storm with you...”

Xiao Chiye kissed Shen Zechuan, breaking up those shameless words of his. He felt his way down, but did not find Shen Zechuan’s tail. The light in the room dimmed a little, and the hanging drapes of the bed had long been let down. There was clearly no one else around, yet they both seemed to be having a clandestine affair. Both men rubbed up against the other, suppressing their gasps for breath.

“I want all of you,” Xiao Chiye whispered.

Shen Zechuan was bitten to the point of tears. The side of his face chafed against the bedding. Under Xiao Chiye’s gaze, he strained himself to look at Xiao Chiye with wet, glistening eyes and said in a fit of pique, “You... greedy... cad!”

Xiao Chiye had spent nearly two months on the battlefields, and when he returned to Cizhou, he stayed over at the Beiyuan military drill grounds. As he pinched Shen Zechuan’s chin now, he stared at him and whispered with a smile, “You’re absolutely right.”

Shen Zechuan was taken—possessed by Xiao Chiye.

After so long a time, it felt completely different this time. The change in Xiao Chiye was exhibited on full display right here. He no longer let Shen Zechuan off. The feeling of being invaded and possessed from bottom

to top gave Shen Zechuan the sensation that he had completely fallen; he was now Xiao Chiye's captive.

His heartbeats. His voice. His breaths.

Xiao Chiye wanted all of Shen Zechuan, even as he dominated him.

Shen Zechuan could not endure it anymore. Sweat and tears interweaved. He could barely catch his breath now. Xiao Chiye even had to seize away tears he had yet to shed.

Xiao Chiye once wanted the sky, the grasslands, and also the Hongyan Mountains. He domesticated eagles and tamed horses, and he galloped among the vast lands in the dreams. But in the end, he no longer wanted them all.

He wanted Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan began to cry. He raised his head, his expressive eyes glistening with waves of emotions. At the peak of his euphoria, he slurred, "A... Ye..."

Xiao Chiye thought he was afraid.

But Shen Zechuan lifted his chin slightly, his face flushed as he licked his lips wet. "Oh, how I love you so."

These words were both his madness and his solace, either of which could easily vanquish Xiao Chiye. The temptation that glistened in this pair of eyes was so much like that day in Dunzhou, when he had leaped from Fuxian Peak into Xiao Chiye's arms. The expressions in those eyes were just as equally crazed. Even without the blistering wind and raging fire, he was bad to the bone.

For this, Xiao Chiye had feigned anger. At the same time, he was extraordinarily delighted. He had in his bosom, the one and only Shen Lanzhou in the world.

Xiao Chiye bent down to kiss Shen Zechuan, as though he was shackling him. He did not want Shen Zechuan to leave him by even half an inch amidst the jolts, nor did he want Shen Zechuan to break free of his hold amidst the gasps for breath. Every thrust went in deeper and harder, never lighter, making the bedding damp, and making Shen Zechuan tremble.

They went wild with abandon in the dimness, their sweats merging together into an expanse of dampness. There was nothing left but each other.

The damp night stirred among the dappled shadows of the trees, and the bamboo blinds came to a silent rest. There was no one waiting in attendance on the veranda, so the whispered confidence in the room remained concealed within the hanging drapes. Bamboo tubes in the courtyard tilted, discharging cool water among the snowflakes and scouring over the frozen moss. Meng folded its wings and rested on the beam in the hallway. It tilted its head to listen for a moment, then tilted its head back into place and closed its eyes to sleep. Occasionally, the caws of a jackdaw rang out, but even that could not disturb the pair of lovers deep in the throes of their passion.



Yao Wenyu pillowed his head on Qiao Tianya's back. With some difficulty, he opened his eyes and looked at the overcast sky. "The stars are right within reach..."<sup>3</sup>

"Rest up," Qiao Tianya said. "There are no stars tonight."

Light snow of the night caressed his face. Yao Wenyu reached out and grabbed at the empty air. The blend of the smell of wine on him and the aroma of medicine puffed onto the side of Qiao Tianya's ear as he suddenly spoke. "What are you all red for?"

Qiao Tianya did not answer.

"What are you all hot for?"

Qiao Tianya still did not answer.

Yao Wenyu bowed his head down and buried his face into the back of Qiao Tianya's shoulder. He mumbled, "what good is of talent to me? Getting nowhere with these legs of mine, as unclear as the path ahead lies..."<sup>4</sup> With no lofty aspirations to speak of... a blessed man I am not..."

Qiao Tianya stepped across the thin snow with the soles of his boots making soft squeaking sounds.

Yao Wenyu clapped his palm together in tandem with the sound of snow and murmured, "Since time immemorial, dead are the sages and men of virtues; only the reputation of the drinkers endures..."<sup>5</sup>

Qiao Tianya felt his own nape getting wet. He knew that was not the snow melting, but even so, he said, "The snow's getting in. Block it out for me, will you?"



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### Footnotes

1. 巡察御史 Touring Censor, a duty assignment for Investigating Censors twice a year to tour and inspect governmental operations in the various regions and to provide data for consideration in the promotion and demotion of local officials.
2. A 母老虎 (Xiao Chiye used 悍虎 here) back at home usually refer to a man's wife who is a tigress or a shrew.
3. 手可摘星辰 a line from a poem "Lodging for a Night at a Mountain Temple" (夜宿山寺) by Li Bai.
4. Since this whole line seemed to us like it has multiple layers of meaning, we just going to footnote them here :V

天生我究竟何用: a modification of 天生我才必有用, or "everyone has his own heaven-endowed talent", so in this vein, the line can be read as "what good is of talent to me?" Although another way of reading this line (albeit more literally) is "why am I born?", "what is the meaning of my existence?".

行不通，道不明: first part 行不通 can be translated as "can't walk" or "getting nowhere", while the typical translation for 道不明 (as in 说不清，道不明) refer to "can't explain oneself clear", personally tho, 道 could also refer to the philosophical "Way" Yao Wenyu was talking about in an earlier chapter, especially in relation to the earlier "getting nowhere" phrase. (i.e. feeling lost about his "Way" in life).

5. A modification from the line 古来圣贤皆寂寞，唯有饮者留其名 from the poem, Qiang Jin Jiu (将进酒) by Li Bai.

## CHAPTER 201 : INTENSE DESIRE



Shen Zechuan could not get up; the inside of his thighs were all covered with teeth marks. He slept with Xiao Chiye on top of him, pinning him down, until the third quarter of the hour of si. When Fei Sheng came to call him, Shen Zechuan had still yet to wake. Xiao Chiye lowered his head to kiss him from behind, his kisses so intense that Shen Zechuan near about gave up the ghost.

“Please spare me...” Shen Zechuan strained himself to struggle before he eventually sprawled back onto the bedding. He narrowed his eyes and said to Xiao Chiye in a hoarse voice, “I... mind’s in a whirl... can’t think at all...”

Shen Zechuan was red everywhere. There were the bite marks, and then there were the pinch marks. His nape was the most piteous of all, having borne the brunt of it. Xiao Chiye’s chest pressed against him, making him so hot that he was sweating.

The most intense of all last night had been sitting in an embrace—in Xiao Chiye’s arms, with the crooks of his legs held down in place, and all he could do was to lean against Xiao Chiye’s chest.

Amidst the jolts and thrusts, Shen Zechuan forgot all about the part about it being a clandestine affair as he cried out “A-Ye” and “Ce’an” repeatedly until he came, even wetting the bedding under him later as he lay prone on the pillow. He could not remember how many rounds they had gone through, only that his tears had run out. Towards the end, he was all dazed and dizzy, but Xiao Chiye was still not done; he continued to thrust

into Shen Zechuan, making him moan softly like he was begging for mercy. The way his moans trailed off tantalized Xiao Chiye right in the heart, causing such an insatiable itch that Xiao Chiye was stirred into biting him yet again.

“Poor thing.” Xiao Chiye clung close to him and whispered, “I’ll hold you up.”



Yin Chang got up early today and waited at the foot of the veranda to seek an audience with the Prefectural Lord. Fei Sheng saw the old man looking utterly uncomfortable as he glanced left and right. Fearing that he might make a fool of himself later, he said, “You’ve already met him yesterday. Why are you still nervous?”

The icicles on the eaves had been knocked off to reveal just how distinguished the man in the room was. Yin Chang’s feet were a little numb. He tugged at his sleeves and said, “I feel uncomfortable everywhere. They rubbed me so hard with such big bars of soap when giving me a bath yesterday that my skin’s about to get all wrinkly!”

On hearing this, Fei Sheng wanted to laugh. Seven or eight young male servants were sent to attend to Yin Chang yesterday. They bathed him for a full four hours, and even changed out several big tubs of hot water. It was only in the middle of the night when everyone left the banquet that the old man made his escape, holding up the legs of his pants as he ran while evading the servants.

“Bathing is good,” Fei Sheng said. “You look spirited. I think you look just like my elder brother today.”

“Don’t fucking lie to me.” Yin Chang did not have a good night’s sleep. He murmured to Fei Sheng, “You lad, have a glib tongue.” Having said that, he looked around furtively again, “Is the Second Master in the room too?”

“Uh-huh,” Fei Sheng replied. “He rushed back just to meet you.”

“Then can I go to Libei?” Yin Chang hurriedly asked. “I’d like to meet General Lu.”

Fei Sheng was in a predicament. He did not know how to reply to him. Yin Chang’s desire to see Lu Guangbai was only to be expected. That formation of his was adapted from the Bianjun Commandery Garrison Troops, but Libei was fighting a war at present, and the areas along the Chashi River were unstable, so how could Yin Chang run around as he pleased?

As he was thinking about it, there were movements on the other side.

“Let’s see His Lordship first,” Fei Sheng said. “We’ll talk about it again after meeting him.”



A window was opened from inside to ventilate the room. The weather was not considered cold today, but Shen Zechuan was especially sensitive to the chill, so he layered up with a coat. During the journey back, Fei Sheng had checked up on Huo Lingyun’s background and reported it all in its entirety to Shen Zechuan, regardless of significance. Shen Zechuan did not have the time to read it before sleeping the night before, so he looked through it carefully now.

“The firearms seized by Fei Sheng were handed over by Huo Lingyun himself.” Shen Zechuan turned the folding fan between his fingers around and rested it on the side of his hand. “This person is interesting; I do have to meet him.”

All that separated Xiao Chiye from Shen Zechuan was a small table. With his arm propped up, Xiao Chiye looked a little playful, but the expression in his eyes was wicked. Just a glance over was an invasion. His eyes swept back and forth between the words “male lover”, “bitten to death” and “arson”. He said, “he’s a tough nut.”

If Huo Lingyun had not thrown a monkey wrench into their plans with the firearms, Yin Chang would have been able to take down Fanzhou during his first battle; he would not have given Shen Zechuan the opportunity to even tell him to bring his own head on a platter to meet him. Afterward, Yin Chang employed the use of verbal provocation to launch an attack on the city, thereby stepping onto the battlefield for real this time. But Huo Lingyun’s acts of arson diminished the battle in Fanzhou. With merits and demerits offsetting the other, Yin Chang’s reward was once again reduced by half.

Perhaps Huo Lingyun genuinely wanted to throw in his lot with Shen Zechuan, but he did not use the most optimal strategy. Instead, he fought a battle with firearms with the intent of letting Shen Zechuan know he was useful and even more valuable than the current commanding general of Cizhou. People who climbed their way to the top by trampling over others were all tough nuts to crack.

Yao Wenyu was the first to enter while they were in the middle of their conversation. Kong Ling followed behind him, pushing his wheelchair, and



finally, Yu Xiaozai stepped through. The various gentlemen bowed to Shen Zechuan, who prompted them to take a seat.

"It's so cold," Shen Zechuan said to Yao Wenyu, "You should have asked Qiao Tianya to come over and drop me a note, and I would have shifted the meeting venue to your courtyard so that you wouldn't have to make the trip."

Yao Wenyu did not sleep well the night before, and his eyes were slightly bloodshot. He had even brought his cat along today. "It's just a stone's throw away; there's no need to go to the extent of having Your Lordship put everyone to the trouble. I saw Elder Yin and Fei Sheng both waiting at the foot of the veranda. Will you let them in for an audience now?"

"Let them in," Shen Zechuan said. "I've kept Elder Yin waiting for almost an hour."

Fei Sheng led Yin Chang in to pay their obeisances to Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye. No matter how worried he was about Yin Chang, he did not dare to glance over at this moment, lest the master noticed.

Xiao Chiye looked at Yin Chang and asked, "Did Elder Yin sleep well last night?"

This was the first time Yin Chang was meeting Xiao Chiye. He had not taken a good look yesterday, but now that he had a closer look... *holy moly*, he thought to himself, *isn't this Second Master way too tall?* His legs as he sat on the couch were almost as long as two of him!

Yin Chang tensed up again. Wringing the hem of his clothes, he vaguely answered, "not, not too bad..."

"Elder Yin, take a seat too." Shen Zechuan was aware that Xiao Chiye was an imposing presence, and he did not come across as an easy one to get along with; thus, he spoke to Yin Chang gently, "We will be discussing some military affairs with the various gentlemen today. With the troops soon to be deployed to Duanzhou, Fanzhou cannot be left unattended."

"Based on the report, Huo Lingyun is inextricably tied to this battle at Fanzhou." Kong Ling was familiar with Dengzhou. "He could be considered to have come from a military family. His father was Huo Qing, the commander-in-chief of Dengzhou who repelled the bandits in the territory during the sixth year of Xiande. The feud with Yang Qiu and the rest of Dengzhou's bandits was probably formed during that time."

“I have some impression of Huo Qing.” Yu Xiaozai picked up the thread of conversation after taking his seat. “During the suppression of bandits in the sixth year of the reign of Xiande, he submitted a memorial that could be considered a report of victory to the Ministry of War. However, in the next few years, the Prefectural Prefect of Dengzhou impeached him for being a headstrong and conceited commander who resorted to arms without due consideration, which in turn caused the bandits in the territory to seek revenge on the commoners, subsequently plunging Dengzhou into extreme misery. The Ministry of War deliberated over and over again before they finally did away with the notion to promote him.”

Shen Zechuan got Fei Sheng to stand up as he addressed the gentlemen. “The local governments are a mixed bag. From the time the two factions of Pan and Hua took over control of state power, the impeachments that came from the lower levels were a mess, with the majority of them arising from personal grudges. The procedures in which the cases were handled during the reign of Xiande can’t be counted as valid, so this Huo Qing might not necessarily be a headstrong and conceited person.”

Shen Zechuan was right. Apart from the reason for his dislike for Emperor Xiande, it was true that both factions were as irreconcilable as ice and fire when they were in power. At that time, Qudu depended on side-taking to distinguish between enemy and ally, and the dividing line in the local governments was even rigid. So a conclusion on whether Huo Qing’s impeachment was legitimate could not be made based on just those few memorials.

“Huo Qing is Huo Qing. Huo Lingyun is Huo Lingyun.” Xiao Chiye had now drawn a clear distinction between father and son. “You people were the ones who detained him and escorted him back. What did you think of him during the journey?”

Yin Chang was an honest man with a one-track mind. Fei Sheng did not let the old man speak, but he could tell from Xiao Chiye’s words that the Second Master did not like this Huo Lingyun. He did not like Huo Lingyun either.

Fei Sheng served Shen Zechuan, and he had plenty of opportunities to render meritorious service in the future when they established a light cavalry, but Yin Chang might not necessarily have the chance. The old man’s hair and beard were all white now, and he only got to battle this one time after waiting several years. But then, a male consort appeared out of

nowhere and took most of the old man's credit with that bit of dirty, underhanded tricks of his.

Fei Sheng was displeased deep down, but his expression was natural as he said, "For the sake of revenge, this person could endure great hardships and steel himself to achieve his goals. He sure is something, and I respect him as a man. But when I arrived at the Fanzhou's *yamen*, I saw the furs of the mastiffs King Yi reared all glossy. Only when I asked around that I found out Huo Lingyun had fed King Yi and Cuiqing to the dogs. Since he has a feud with King Yi, why didn't he communicate with us earlier?"

By bringing up Huo Lingyun's feeding of people to the dogs at this point in time, he was tactfully telling Shen Zechuan in a roundabout way that it was hard for this person to be of great use.

Contrary to Fei Sheng's expectations, Shen Zechuan did not go along with it. Instead, he said after a moment's pause, "Since everyone is here now, call him over."

Huo Lingyun had been in the cell for two days, and the wardens who delivered his meals to him never spoke to him. Fei Sheng took special care of him and tampered with his fetters and shackles so that it was much heavier than the usual ones the others used. But he hardly moved around and merely remained in the same spot, as though he had countless never-ending thoughts on his mind.

Huo Lingyun stepped into the courtyard, and Gu Jin sensed something amiss from the sound. With Ding Tao and Li Xiong in tow, he watched from under the eaves as Huo Lingyun walked past.

"So heavy." Li Xiong pointed at Huo Lingyun's feet and said to Ding Tao, "it's the set of chains I wore!"

"Seems to me he can move freely." Ding Tao told on Huo Lingyun to Gu Jin. "Jin-ge, he's trained in martial arts!"

He was far from just "trained".

Gu Jin lifted a finger and motioned to the guards hidden in the courtyard to be on the alert. He patted Ding Tao and Li Xiong on their backs and pushed the two children to a side, while he stood by the hanging screen himself and signaled to Qiao Tianya, who was on the other end, with his eyes.

Qiao Tianya turned his head aside to stare at Huo Lingyun's back. In a deep voice, he said, "He's a rather formidable one."

Shen Zechuan did not size Huo Lingyun up. However, Huo Lingyun did not shy away from sizing up Shen Zechuan first.

The Prefectural Lord was twenty-two years of age this year. He was a beautiful one, with the upturns of the corners of his eyes just perfect; any higher, and they would give him a come-hither look. Even so, they looked like they were swimming in emotions at a quick glance. Yet, he was extraordinarily cool and detached. His gaze, when he did look over, was chilling. He was an unfathomable, bottomless pit that looked all the more dangerous the longer you laid eyes on him. Huo Lingyun did not know if it was because Shen Zechuan had been in a top dog position for a long time, but Shen Zechuan had an overpowering air to him when he did not speak. Not the kind that came assaulting head-on in the face, but the kind that gradually grew ice-cold as it crept along your limbs to your heart.

This was Shen Zechuan.

Since Shen Zechuan did not open his mouth, the gentlemen present did not dare to speak. Silence momentarily reigned in the room, making Huo Lingyun appear undaunted instead.

Xiao Chiye nudged his thumb ring. His posture remained unchanged, but his imposing aura was like a kick dealt to Huo Lingyun's face. He looked askance at Huo Lingyun with an air so oppressive that the other man almost could not lift his head.

Shen Zechuan was the precious jade Xiao Chiye held between his fangs. Any sort of prying eyes must die before they ever get within a few steps of Shen Zechuan. This was an affront to Xiao Chiye, and he was now offended, even if the other party was perhaps only looking out of curiosity.

The gentlemen in the room could hear nothing amiss, but they could sense that the Second Master was not very happy now. Very subtly, the atmosphere began to grow heavy, so much that it crushed down on their chests for no rhyme or reason, suffocating them until they could not take deep breaths.

"Your confession statements leave out the details." It was only at this moment Shen Zechuan looked at Huo Lingyun. "You reported the firearms, but you didn't explain their origins. It's most pointless to say things halfway."

As someone who had traversed both the overland and water routes,<sup>1</sup> Huo Lingyun could figure out a little something from the expression in Xiao Chiye's eyes. He retracted his gaze, and the shackles on his hands

clanged. “Naturally, there are many matters that can only be discussed when I’ve seen the Prefectural Lord,” he said with a calm expression.

“If what you say makes me unhappy,” Shen Zechuan said with cool detachment, “there can only be one outcome whether or not you get to see me.”

“There will be the Scorpions in addition to the Biansha Cavalry in Duanzhou during Cizhou’s use of military forces in the second month.” Huo Lingyun looked towards Xiao Chiye without so much a trace of fear.

“Without Xiao Fangxu, can the Libei Armored Cavalry still make it?”

The break in the thumb ring stopped between the pulps of the fingers. Xiao Chiye finally moved. Very slowly, he leaned over, and his shadow enveloped Huo Lingyun from top to bottom, forming a trail of a phantom wolf with an injured eye across the ground.

Fei Sheng, who was standing at the side, swiftly dropped to one knee on the ground and lowered his head without uttering a sound. Beside him, Yin Chang felt the pricks of fear running down his back. With his heart thumping, the old man almost slid to the ground as he kneeled after Fei Sheng.

Dead silence descended, inside and outside.

Xiao Chiye was angry.



Xiao Chiye’s reply to Huo Lingyun:



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#### Footnotes

1. The text specifically wrote 走过旱水两路, or literally, has traversed through the overland routes and waterways/water route. This is, however, an euphemism for having sexual experiences with both men and women. We left the original for the “imagery”. (° 5 °)

## CHAPTER 202 : CONNECTING THE DOTS



Huo Lingyun had seen wolves before. In the wilderness of Dengzhou, those wolves that were all skin and bones had their tails between their legs as they ran on King Yi's hunting grounds, their eyes glowing with ravenous hunger. But at this moment, the wolf he was seeing was one that hailed from Libei; not only did this wolf possess a strong physique, but it also had an aura so oppressively intimidating that he gripped his chains tight. Even the muscles on his back had tensed up with tension.

Huo Lingyun must not gasp for air, because if he opened his mouth again, Xiao Chiye would throttle him and snap his throat. Xiao Chiye completely dominated the atmosphere around him as he remained kneeling in place. It conjured the illusion of being pinned down by the back of his head.

Xiao Chiye wanted Huo Lingyun on his knees, with his head down.

Huo Lingyun broke out in a sweat as he simmered in that unending silence. He did not want to compromise, but by the time he returned to his senses, he had already averted his gaze and bowed his head.

Since that bout of heavy snowfall, the Libei Armored Cavalry had never won again. The battles they were fighting on the battlegrounds at present all proved to be aggravating. Gone were the days when the Armored Cavalry reigned over the battlefield. Huo Lingyun initially planned to crush Xiao Chiye's spirit and level the playing field for both parties during the negotiations. Yet he had run right smack into an iron plate and was now being held down to the ground by Xiao Chiye instead.

Xiao Chiye's shadow did not shift. His lowered gaze locked on to the back of Huo Lingyun's head as he repeated with cold detachment, "Can it?"

Huo Lingyun clenched his teeth as he deflated and swallowed down his indignation.

To think he had gotten afraid!

Xiao Chiye was completely poles apart from Shen Zechuan. He would not feign civility at certain moments; instead, he would dominate and dictate. He would hold down the heads of all of those who provoked him and offer them only one way out. The Imperial Army in its earlier days knew this very well from experience.

Shen Zechuan covered the teacup with the lid and tapped his fingers against it intermittently. He possessed the ability to warm up the atmosphere after a cold spell, and through this subtle action, he curiously unraveled the tension in the hall, allowing Fei Sheng, who was still kneeling, to resume breathing.

Outside the door, Gu Jin exhaled lightly and released his grip on the hilt of his blade.

It was only until Huo Lingyun's entire back was drenched in sweat that the shadow enveloping him pulled back. Xiao Chiye did not withdraw his gaze; he merely leaned back into his comfort zone, as though he had lost interest in the Huo Lingyun who had his head down.

It was at this moment Shen Zechuan opened up the lid and said in between sips of tea. "You're very well-acquainted with the situation in Duanzhou."

These two men took over from one another seamlessly, yet they both exuded a dangerous aura. Huo Lingyun's palms were all sweaty; he retracted his contempt, all the more certain that he had been right in his decision to come.

"The Scorpions came looking for King Yi before," Huo Lingyun decided to show his sincerity. "During the twelfth month last year, he instigated King Yi to ambush Chazhou and cut off your contact with Qidong. To that end, he gifted King Yi with a shipment of firearms."

In a flash, both Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye thought of the White Scorpions. These Biansha spies concealed themselves deep in Dazhou, collaborating with Amu'er from within and without to pierce through the heart of Dazhou.



The twelfth month of the previous year was the turning point when the Libei Armored Cavalry switched from offensive to defensive. Had King Yi been gutsy enough to launch a surprise attack on Chazhou at the Scorpions' instigation, Shen Zechuan would undoubtedly be held in check by this diversion and reduced his aid to Libei. Additionally, they only had to cut off the route to Chazhou, and Qi Zhuyin would have to make a detour from the eastern side of Tianfei Watchtower to head up north, where she was bound to pass through the territory of Fanzhou. With the Scorpions lying in ambush en route, the Commander-in-chief's life would be in peril.

"They're keeping a close watch on Commander-in-chief Qi." Shen Zechuan looked at Xiao Chiye, the expression in his eyes conveying all the words he left unspoken.

Hasen's encirclement of Xiao Fangxu to kill him was not only to deal a blow to Libei, but also to capitalize on the opportunity to lure out Qi Zhuyin. As expected, Amu'er knew Dazhou like the back of his hand.

"But King Yi didn't make his move. He was most willing to remain in Fanzhou like a cowering coward, and then he had his head blown off by you with a gun." Xiao Chiye's words were scathing. "So, did the Scorpions come looking for you?"

Huo Lingyun stared at both his knees. "No."

"You're lying." Shen Zechuan skimmed the tea foam and raised his eyes to say with certainty through that willowy spiral of steam, "You've had contact with the Scorpions before."

When Shen Zechuan was in the Imperial Bodyguards, he successively served as the Southern and Northern Judge, and the amount of time he had spent in the imperial prison was not exactly short. He naturally had his own means of interrogating people, just like how he had once tricked Ji Lei and Xi Hongxuan through his conversations with them. He was adept at using environments to manipulate the atmosphere.

Sometimes, one had to keep their words short without revealing more than necessary, and the other party would naturally let his thoughts run wild.

Huo Lingyun had to remain clear-headed. If he so much as gave a wrong answer again as he kneeled here, he might end up literally losing his head. He held up against the pressure from both men and exhaled deeply, as if exhorting himself to remain calm. He was already at a dead end, and the

worst that could happen was happening now. Thus, when he lifted his head once again, he regained some of his composure.

“That’s right,” Huo Lingyun said. “I’ve had contact with the Scorpions long before King Yi. My father fought a winning battle during the sixth year of Xiande, and he dispatched someone over to persuade my father to give up Fanzhou. He also promised my father a noble title, but my father turned him down.”

Shen Zechuan inclined his head slightly, concealing the lingering redness at the corners of his eyes under the slanting, backlit shadows. “You said ‘he’.”

Not “they”.

Huo Lingyun recalled the night a few years ago, when the horse carriage from Qudu brought along a valuable letter of significance. Huo Qing stood by the candlelight and opened it, where he touched the heavy promise within.

If the Bianjun Commandery was the most wretched station for troops in Qidong, then Dengzhou was the poorest prefecture of Zhongbo. These two places were similarly poor. Dengzhou’s one and only advantage was that it did not have to face the onslaught of attacks from the Biansha Cavalry all the time like the Bianjun Commandery had to. After the Zhongbo’s troops’ defeat, the rampant banditry put Huo Qing in a terrible fix, and he remained stranded in this corner, unable to get any assistance from the imperial court.

That letter was the last chance Huo Qing had to get out of his predicament, but he did not take it and ended up as dinner in the dogs’ bellies.

“Yes, ‘he’.” Huo Lingyun enunciated the word through clenched teeth. “This man is hiding right in Qudu, and he’s by no means an ordinary person if he can make such a promise. After my father refused the bribe, he was impeached by that Peng dog. Consequently, the Ministry of War refused to promote my father. They believed that cursed Peng’s one-sided lies and stopped giving Dengzhou the military funds it was due. That was when the Dengzhou bandits resurfaced. Yang Qiu went to Fanzhou and joined hands with Cuiqing to set up a brothel trade and got back into the business of selling women. He also took the opportunity to make contact with Lei Changming of Mount Luo.”

The dots were all connecting now!

Shen Zechuan remembered his puzzlement when he was checking the Yan Clan's accounts in Dunzhou. How did Biansha not leave any traces behind when they stole away such a large batch of resources from Dazhou? The reason was that they were not on the Dunzhou, Mount Luo, and Duanzhou route at all. From start to end, Lei Changming and Lei Jinzhe had merely been a smokescreen Amu'er set up in the northeast of Zhongbo.

No wonder Yan Heru was so sure about this—he had indeed never touched these goods before. However, he must have been in the know, because the merchants in his hands all had dealings with Cuiqing. Coupled with what Yu Xiaozai had said about Peng Fangmiao's impeachment of Huo Qing during the sixth year of Xiande, Shen Zechuan was even more certain of his guess.

"The goods were transported from Fanzhou." Shen Zechuan held the teacup in his hands. "They sent the goods directly to the banks of Chashi River without even passing through Dunzhou."

"He" initially wanted to use a noble title to bribe Huo Qing into being a White Scorpion and turn the Dengzhou Garrison Troops in Huo Qing's hands into delivery escorts for the goods. After Huo Qing turned him down, "he" sought out the Prefectural Prefect of Dengzhou, Peng Fangmiao, who accepted the bribe and subsequently started to impeach Huo Qing vehemently.

"Youjing." Shen Zechuan suddenly asked Yu Xiaozai. "Which year was Peng Fangmiao transferred down to Dengzhou? Before that, whose student was he?"

Yu Xiaozai racked his brain, but all he had to say was, "... I can't remember. Zhongbo was negligent in its administration after the fourth year of Xiande, and the prefectural prefects in Duanzhou, Dunzhou, Fanzhou, and Dengzhou changed frequently. All I can remember is the impeachment memorial..."

The officialdom was as vast as the sea, with innumerable key positions of varying importance just in Qudu alone; the trivial posts in the local governments were even more complex. Even without Qudu in the mix, it was impossible for Yu Xiaozai to remember all the various vice magistrates under the Thirteen Cities of Juexi, not to mention minute details such as the year the other party was transferred or the person they had received advice from.

It had to be known that in Qudu, when someone sent in a visitation card to call on a powerful household in Qudu, all it took was for the head of the clan to be willing to see said person and exchange a few words, and said person could proclaim themselves as the other person's "student" the moment they stepped out of the door; they were also sure to address the other as "teacher" whenever they met. On top of that, the Hua and Pan factions had countless of lackeys after the reign of Xiande, when both factions plunged the imperial court into turmoil.

"Ding Tao," After a moment of silence, Xiao Chiye called out. "Come in."

Ding Tao anxiously stuck his head out. Frightened by Xiao Chiye's expression, he walked in with the same side of his arm and leg moving in tandem. Everyone in the hall looked towards Ding Tao. He opened his eyes wide, wanting to look at Shen Zechuan, but not daring to.

Xiao Chiye was in no hurry. He shifted his arm slightly, then asked Ding Tao, "Do you still remember the name 'Peng Fangmiao'?"

Ding Tao shook his head blankly.

Outside, Qiao Tianya had a sudden brainwave and piped up, "Tao-zi, this person should be in the Ministry of Personnel's reference list after the fourth year of Xiande. Think again. Hua Siqian, Wei Huaigu, or even Pan Rugui."

During the fourth year of Xiande when the Biansha Cavalry slaughtered the city, the people left in Dengzhou were Tantai Hu and the others, all of whom were taken into the Imperial Army by Xiao Chiye. The original Prefectural Prefect of Dengzhou had also died during that massacre, so Peng Fangmiao could only be a court official assigned over after the fourth year of Xiande.

Other than his exemplary ability in writing, Ding Tao's memory was also rather astounding. His family's notebook was modeled after the record-taking of the Imperial Bodyguards, and Ding Tao had grown familiar with the procedure during the times he tagged along with his father. Back in Qudu, Qiao Tianya had once visited the residence of the Prince of Libei at night but was turned away by Ding Tao and Gu Jin. Ding Tao could tell the origin of the concealed weapon he had tossed out at just a glance, a feat that Qiao Tianya still remembered to this day.

Ding Tao fished out his little notebook, staying silent amidst the rustling of pages being flipped.

At this sight, Yu Xiaozai also began to remember. Without realizing it, he spoke out, “Our Chief Surveillance...”

Ding Tao’s eyes abruptly lit up. He bookmarked a page. “Chief Surveillance Bureau! That’s right, the Chief Surveillance Bureau! Young Master,” Ding Tao looked towards Shen Zechuan as though he was seeking praise. “The assassination case in Qudu! The Imperial Bodyguards and Chief Surveillance Bureau wanted to investigate Master at that time. There was someone surnamed Fu. That’s him!”

Fu Linye.

Of course Shen Zechuan remembered the assassination case. He had sensed something amiss with the Quancheng silk while he was investigating that case. At that time, the person who had shirked responsibility for searching the Prince of Libei’s residence and passed it on to him was the Right Censor-in-chief, Fu Linye.

Yu Xiaozai suddenly slapped his thigh and even stood up. He was so miffed with himself he just had to laugh at the ludicrousness of it. Chortling himself silly with Ding Tao, he said, “I remembered it now too. Your Lordship, before the assassination case, everyone thought that Fu Linye was an official of humble origins! It was precisely because of Fu Linye that Second Master suffered so much back then. So that son of a bitch had long been colluding with Wei Huaigu!”

The tussle between the noble clans and those of humble origins happened after the fourth year of Xiande. Back then, Hua Siqian led the Grand Secretariat, and he also had the help of the Empress Dowager and Pan Rugui. Hai Liangyi thus had no choice but to rely on the Chief Surveillance Bureau’s evaluations of the various officials for promotion and delegation to hinder the minions of the Hua and Pan clans from running amok in the local regions’ governments. Fu Linye, who was at that time pretending to be a gentleman of worth, had considerable influence over Hai Liangyi and the other officials of humble origins’ consideration of those on the Ministry of Personnel’s reference list.

“If Fu Linye was the one who assigned Peng Fangmiao to Dengzhou,” Shen Zechuan paused for a moment, “then Wei Huaigu and even Xi Hongxuan could be this ‘he’.”



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## CHAPTER 203 : SONGYU



Huo Lingyun obviously did not know who exactly “he” was, or he would have been able to voice out the name the moment he opened his mouth. However, regardless of whether it was Wei Huaigu or Xi Hongxuan, they were all already dead.

“During the sixth year of Xiande, only the Hua and Pan factions had the capability to make promises of noble titles to Huo Qing.” Yao Wenyu stroked the back of the cat’s neck with two fingers. “At that time, Xi Hongxuan had yet to join the imperial court, and Wei Huaigu was far from having the ability to do so. Why did Your Lordship put your guess on these two people?”

“Noble title.” Xiao Chiye stressed the two words. “Trace this promise up the hierarchy, and you don’t even need to guess to be able to list out the few who could do so. It’s as good as not covering it up.”

“Based on the speculation of Peng Fangmiao’s official career afterward, the promise of a noble title is very likely a sort of disguise. The real bribe used was something else.” Talking about the Scorpions had made half of Kong Ling’s body break out in a cold sweat. “Although Qian Jin was the Minister of Revenue before the eighth year of Xiande, it was still Wei Huaigu who held genuine control over the Ministry of Revenue starting from the first year of Xiande.”

Qian Jin was dismissed from office along with Hua Siqian during the rebellion at the Nanlin Hunting Grounds. However, the key to Dazhou's money still did not fall into Hai Liangyi's hands. Wei Huaigu stepped forward immediately right after and took over the office of the Minister of Revenue, where he continued to go around in circles with Hai Liangyi. It was not until Wei Huaigu was imprisoned during the Libei's military provisions case that the noble clans' embezzlement of state treasury during the reign of Xiande, which resulted in a deficit that eventually led to the Zhongbo troops' defeat, finally surfaced.

This was an intricate, complicated web that involved not only the officials from Qudu but even the officials of the various Dazhou local governments. Think about it. If "he" had used the same method to plant covert pawns and chess pieces in Juexi and Qidong, then how many of them now were Scorpions?

"It makes one's blood run cold," Kong Ling could not refrain from blurting out. "This is simply..."

Corroding Dazhou from within!

"Panic not." Shen Zechuan looked around at the various gentlemen. The calm tone he used flicked away the anxiety that was beginning to permeate the air. "It's all too easy to give themselves away when there are too many threads of clues. Even the most astute scheme is bound by the limitations of the mortal body. Manipulating such a game is time-consuming and labor-intensive, and having too many people involved will only prove to be counterproductive. After all, too many cooks spoil the broth."

Juexi and Qidong were both not the same as Zhongbo. Zhongbo was the result of a lax administration, while Juexi had Jiang Qingshan who, during his investigation of the deficit with Xue Xiuzhuo, did everything in his power to thwart the noble clans and the Scorpions. Meanwhile, Qidong had Qi Zhuyin, the commander-in-chief who was in charge of all the territories in Qidong. She had her own core team under her command, as well as Qi Shiyu to assist her in governmental affairs. She would never collude with the Scorpions. But Shen Zechuan was certain at this moment that the person who had tampered with the Bianjun Commandery's grains was a White Scorpion hiding in Qudu, and this Scorpion had not been trying to force Lu Guangbai into rebelling, but to drive him to his death.



Xiao Chiye, however, once again fixed his eyes on Huo Lingyun. "Since the Scorpions were the ones who gave the firearms to King Yi, then who's the one who taught you to use it?"

Firearms were not broadswords and swords. As a native of Dengzhou, Huo Lingyun would not have had the chance to come into contact with them before this, so he would have had to undergo training if he wished to use them with proficiency. Xiao Chiye had sniped and touched them before in Qudu, and thus he knew them like the back of his hand. Leaving aside the question of whether King Yi himself knew how to use it, if he had known that Huo Lingyun knew how to use it, he would not have kept Huo Lingyun by his side without so much as a precaution against the latter.

Huo Lingyun pursed his lips, his expression solemn in the silence. After a moment, he answered, "Old Fang the Tenth."

This was one of the reasons why Old Fang the Tenth had been willing to join hands with Huo Lingyun to remove King Yi from the equation. He was a fast learner when it came to using firearms, and he was able to move around by King Yi's side. What's more, he could pump him for information on the money vault, as well as keep an eye on King Yi's movements.

"After Dunzhou was reclaimed, Yang Qiu and Old Fang the Tenth started feeling uneasy," Huo Lingyun continued. "By the time Cizhou reached an agreement with Libei and Qidong, Fanzhou and Dengzhou were already facing the situation of having armed forces being sent to quell them. They were afraid that King Yi could not hold up under threat and ended up opening the gates to surrender, so they thought of making the first move to do away with him and empty out the money vault."

Huo Lingyun used the money vault as bait and burned Yang Qiu and Old Fang the Tenth to death. This sum of money was now in his hands, and he was the only one who knew where it was. This was also what gave him the confidence to dare to negotiate with Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye.

Huo Lingyun's gaze alternated between Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye. "I can use firearms, and I can teach the Libei Armored Cavalry and the Cizhou Garrison Troops." He looked at Xiao Chiye. "You want to attack Duanzhou in the second month. You can swap me over to the vanguard squad. I can lead the remaining garrison troops of Dengzhou."

Kneeling at the side for a long time, Fei Sheng's countenance promptly changed. It was only after he composed himself for a moment that he said, "It's not my place to interrupt before Master, but this matter concerns the

safety of both Duanzhou and Second Master, so I'm left with no choice but to say a few words. This man is dodgy, and it's inappropriate to put him by Second Master and Master's sides. Second Master has no lack of generals either. Besides, there's also Elder Yin following along this time."

Fei Sheng was really exercising due diligence now. His misgivings towards Huo Lingyun were not without reason. Yin Chang was clearly the one who conquered Fanzhou! If not for this Huo Lingyun's underhanded tricks, Yin Chang would not have gotten a dressing-down. This was just great now. Yin Chang took down Fanzhou, but Huo Lingyun ended up getting the lion's share of the credit, making it look like it was only because of Huo Lingyun's act of arson that they managed to take down Fanzhou.

And that was not all. Fei Sheng found Huo Lingyun to be a man who could endure and dared to be ruthless. When he made his move, he struck with efficiency and decisiveness. His vindictiveness was almost on par with Shen Zechuan. Such a man had both capability and a mind of his own. To let Huo Lingyun remain by Shen Zechuan's side was to threaten Fei Sheng, and Fei Sheng had no desire to give Huo Lingyun the opportunity to stand out and steal the show.

Fei Sheng was very clear on how things worked, and he also knew where his own opportunities lay. He dared to speak up to interrupt now because he could tell for sure that Xiao Chiye did not like Huo Lingyun.

Sure enough, Xiao Chiye did not want to answer Huo Lingyun at all. He needed the firearms, but he did not need Huo Lingyun. Duanzhou could only be his – Xiao Ce'an's – playground. He had stopped over in Cizhou for such a long time, spending every single day at the Beiyuan military drill grounds and donning heavy armor to train with Hairigu's Scorpions, all just to find a breakthrough that could change the current situation in Libei and turn the tide in its favor. If he were to change the vanguard to Huo Lingyun, then it would undoubtedly be a heavy punch to the guts of the Libei Armored Cavalry, whose morale was already low to begin with.

Shen Zechuan's waist and back started aching after sitting for a long time. The swollen teeth marks on the inside of his thighs had yet to subside. What he had told Xiao Chiye in the morning about his mind being in a whirl was not a lie. And now, his mind was in a fog all over, no thanks to the White Scorpions. They still had to start sending provisions to Dunzhou in the afternoon, and the rations needed for the battle in Duanzhou had to go

first... Then, there was also the thorny issue of whether Huo Lingyun could be put to use—or not.

“Since Young Master Huo has his mind set on it...” Yao Wenyu said to Shen Zechuan. “Your Lordship, the Imperial Bodyguards have been recruiting new recruits recently, haven’t they?”

That’s right.

Shen Zechuan understood Yao Wenyu’s intent right away.

Put Huo Lingyun in the Imperial Bodyguards, and Huo Lingyun would not be able to act as he pleased given Fei Sheng’s misgivings of him, and with Qiao Tianya at the side watching over them, Fei Sheng could not go too far trampling over Huo Lingyun either. Not only could they put him at a distance away from Shen Zechuan by doing this, but they could also put him to use instead of letting him go to waste. What’s more, leaving both Qiao Tianya and Huo Lingyun as double restraints to hold Fei Sheng in check could also serve as a warning to Fei Sheng, who was gradually becoming more and more “aloof”, reminding him not to let success go to his head.

“Fei Sheng,” Shen Zechuan said, “Pick from the remaining Dengzhou Garrison Troops. We’ll take everyone who meets your recruitment standards, including this Young Master Huo.”

Fei Sheng only had to think about it to understand the intent of this order. His heart sank, but he had to put on a show of accepting it gladly. “I shall respectfully follow Master’s arrangements. But these Dengzhou Garrison Troops are all Huo Lingyun’s old acquaintances. They may not necessarily be willing to serve in the Imperial Bodyguards.”

“That will be because you are not rewarding them enough.” Xiao Chiye raised his left hand and turned the ring on his right thumb back to its original position. There was no smile in his eyes. “Once they join the Imperial Bodyguards, they are no longer natives of Dengzhou. Their names in the previous military register of Dengzhou can be struck off.”

Xiao Chiye said just enough to make his point.

The Imperial Army the Second Master took in during his early years was even harder to deal with than the Dengzhou Garrison Troops, and his way of managing his subordinates had been none other than to be fair in meting out rewards and punishments. Xiao Chiye was reminding Fei Sheng that these remaining soldiers of Dengzhou could break away from their registered place of origin once they joined the Imperial Bodyguards and

even be exempted from field taxes in Cizhou. As long as he could do a good job carrying out the task Shen Zechuan had instructed him, what could he not achieve?

Fei Sheng understood what he meant and hurriedly acknowledged his orders.



It was already late by the time the meeting was over. Qiao Tianya pushed Yao Wenyu back to their courtyard.

The slab stone paths in the courtyard had all been cleared, with not even a speck of snow on it. They had gone out of the way to sprinkle salt too, for fear that the wheelchair might skid while going up. The newly planted plum blossoms had all withered, the fallen red dead in the embrace of its branches; encased in ice and snow, they presented a scene that appeared particularly bleak and desolate. The road today was damp, so Qiao Tianya walked slowly, keeping the wheelchair stable and steady as he pushed it along.

Yao Wenyu's cat was called "Hunu".<sup>1</sup> If it were not stretching itself and licking its paws under the eaves, it would be nestling on Yao Wenyu's knees, sleeping soundly with its belly exposed. At present, it was a little bundle of energy as it kneaded its paws on Yao Wenyu's sleeves and nuzzled itself hard against Yao Wenyu's palm.

Yao Wenyu lowered his fingers to scratch Hunu. The lanterns at the sides shone upon the sides of his face. He had gotten a little fleshy lately, and he looked a lot better as compared to the time when he had first arrived. This was the Yao Yuanzhuo of distinguished demeanor and ethereal appearance.

Qiao Tianya did not speak. His gaze shifted to Yao Wenyu's collar before he averted it to the cuff of Yao Wenyu's sleeves.

They had not exchanged a single word today.

The wheelchair entered through the door, and the attendant under the eaves headed in to deliver hot water. Yao Wenyu sat in the inner chamber and read his books, while Qiao Tianya took off his blade and stood outside to look at his own seven-stringed zither.

A long time elapsed, and the servants all withdrew from the room and closed the door gently. Usually, Qiao Tianya was the one who personally bathed Yao Wenyu without any help from the others. Yuanzhuo liked to be

clean, and he would not sleep if he did not bathe. Every time Qiao Tianya wiped his hair, he would sit quietly.

He seemed to have accepted the sorry figure he was currently cutting, but only to the extent that no one else other than Qiao Tianya was permitted to look. This was the limit of what he could bear.

Qiao Tianya stood for close to an hour before he finally heard Yao Wenyu call out in a low voice from inside. "... Qiao Songyue."

Qiao Tianya's fingers that had been strumming faintly across the zither strings came to a halt, but he did not respond, as though he had not heard him.

After a moment of silence, Yao Wenyu continued. "... time for bed."

The wind chimes beneath the eaves stirred, drawing in the loneliness in the wind as well. Yao Wenyu saw through the hanging drapes Qiao Tianya's shadow cast upon it. He seemed to have stood there for quite a long time. On hearing Yao Wenyu, he paused for a moment before lifting the drapes to enter.

The candlelight was very dim. The Yao Wenyu of this hour did not yearn for light, for this was the beginning of his frailty and helplessness every day. Hunu burrowed into the bedding and swatted playfully at the corner of the blanket, completely unaware of the awkwardness in the room.

Yao Wenyu had yet to school the expression in his eyes when Qiao Tianya bent forward with calm and composure to carry him up from the wheelchair. Their clothes touched, and Qiao Tianya placed Yao Wenyu's arm on the back of his shoulder. At the same time Yao Wenyu made contact with Qiao Tianya's back, his fingers curled slightly.

Yuanzhuo was a very reserved man; that was the effect of his upbringing as a gentleman of virtue.

Qiao Tianya untied Yao Wenyu's hair. It was at this moment the expression in his eyes was focused... so focused that Yao Wenyu could not bring himself to meet them. All he could do was to lower his own eyes to avoid Qiao Tianya's gaze. When he had been stripped down to his inner garment, Yao Wenyu muttered softly, "don't."

Qiao Tianya paused for a moment without letting go of the belt he had been pulling at.

Yao Wenyu suddenly clenched his collar with an expression similar to indignation. He repeated, "don't!"

“Don’t what?” Qiao Tianya, who had been silent this whole time, looked at him, his face a picture of calm.

Yao Wenyu’s “don’t touch me” caught in his throat. He stared at Qiao Tianya with bloodshot eyes, as though Qiao Tianya was some great scourge. His palms trembled slightly, yet the word that came out of his mouth was still, “... don’t.”

Yao Wenyu pursed his lips tightly and started to struggle. He pushed against Qiao Tianya’s chest, rejecting the latter’s touch.

The rattan chair creaked. Flashes of green and white shook in the blurred mirror as wide-sleeved robes and black hair struggled in the crooks of Qiao Tianya’s arms, like spring leaves that were all too anxious to make their escape with the wind. Qiao Tianya let him make a scene as he pleased. Just when Yao Wenyu was about to slide onto the ground, Qiao Tianya suddenly overturned the rattan chair, grabbed Yao Wenyu’s wrists, and pinned him down forcefully onto the woolen carpet.

“What do you want?” Qiao Tianya held down Yao Wenyu’s wrists with one hand and gripped Yao Wenyu’s face with the other hand to correct its direction. “Do you want me to throw you in like this, or throw you here?”

Yao Wenyu was forced to tilt his head up. His breaths quickened as he shut his eyes, biting down on his lip until it went pale. Qiao Tianya released the hand that was grasping his chin and pressed them between his lips to prevent him from biting down on them. He wedged his fingers in, only for Yao Wenyu to clamp down on them as if he was venting his anger.

“What are you afraid of?” Qiao Tianya let him bite, his expression slightly cold. “That wasn’t your fault.”

The intoxicated Yuanzhuo of last night was very different. He briskly forgot the pain of his legs and had a reaction to being touched in the bathtub. A noble young master was still human; what he had lost were his legs, not all that made him a man. He was still so young, and he still had all the same unspoken desires that he kept secret. But he did not even have the opportunity to pleasure himself, and yet he was laid bare and exposed in Qiao Tianya’s eyes every single night—even so, he never accepted such a powerless self.

“What’s wrong?” Qiao Tianya asked in a harsh voice. “Feeling aggrieved because I’m not a woman? My handjob can’t be that bad, right?”

“Stop it,” Yao Wenyu’s face betrayed his agony. All he could do was to yell dispiritedly as he lay here, “Don’t say a word more!”

The rattan chair that had rolled to one side knocked into a small clothes rack, which tilted over and smashed into Qiao Tianya's back. Qiao Tianya did not even blink. Under the flickering candlelight, Qiao Tianya did not know which part of him was in a rage either.

"How do you see yourself?" Qiao Tianya asked. "Do you think of yourself as a banished immortal?<sup>2</sup> Is it wrong to have desires? You—"

"I don't!" Yao Wenyu's eyes had gone thoroughly red. His voice trembled as he struggled to say, "I don't have that sort of... I don't need them!"

He could not sink to such lows and have his very last shred of dignity destroyed. What would he be left with then? He only had this bit of dignity left, and it was this bit of dignity that sustained him so that he could sit before the others in this weak and frail state and accept all of their pity.

As Yao Wenyu trembled, tears trickled out of his eyes. They did so against his will, but his tears were beyond his control, just like his crippled legs. He was ashamed to face this side of himself, just as he did not dare to face whatever remained of his desires.

Qiao Tianya's chest heaved. He abruptly flipped Yao Wenyu over.

With a sense of foreboding, Yao Wenyu's eyes widened in panic as Qiao Tianya pulled him into his arms from behind and undid his inner garment. Yao Wenyu struggled violently, pushing against Qiao Tianya's arms as he resisted. "I don't want to! Qiao Songyue, release me, let—"

Qiao Tianya groped for Yao Wenyu's hand, pulled it into his palm, and led it down to hold Yao Wenyu's object of shame with his hand over the latter's. It was in this way he embraced Yao Wenyu and heard Yao Wenyu crying when he was neck to neck with him.

The dim candlelight went out as they clung close to one another in this space. Yao Wenyu's face was to the woolen carpet, his cheeks wet with tears from the unbearable shame and indignation. A suppressed cry escaped his throat, a cry for the dignity he lost in Qiao Tianya's hands, and for the self he had gotten a clear look of. He panted for breath in between his sobs, his free hand clutching tightly at Qiao Tianya's sleeve as the pleasure of being defiled and broken into pieces in Qiao Tianya's masterfully sliding palm washed over him.

"Kill me..." A choke escaped from Yao Wenyu as he rasped, "Qiao Songyue... I hate you to the core..."

All the while that Qiao Tianya's palm was gliding up and down in that darkness, he was pressed up against the side of Yuanzhuo's face, listening to Yao Wenyu's sobs and ramblings, as well as Yao Wenyu's pants and rasps.

"You're not in the wrong." As Yao Wenyu shuddered, Qiao Tianya whispered into Yao Wenyu's ear, his voice raspy as he said in all seriousness, "Hate me all you want."



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#### Footnotes

1. 虎奴, literally tiger slave
2. 谪仙 literally, an immortal who has been banished from heaven to live on earth; an epithet for exceptional individuals such as the Tang poet Li Bai (who also wrote the poem, Qiang Jin Jiu). i.e., a wayward genius





## CHAPTER 204 : EMPRESS DOWAGER



Xiao Chiye deployed troops to Duanzhou in the second month, and Shen Zechuan had the grain wagons set off first. Tantai Hu, who was in Dunzhou, was all prepared and ready. To the north, Xiao Jiming dispatched Wu Ziyu to lead 5,000 Libei Armored Cavalrymen to standby at the northern side of Mount Luo. Once there was a change in situation, they would be able to combine forces with Shasan Camp to jointly attack Duanzhou.

Fine snow danced at the spurring of the breeze on this day. The outskirts of the city stretched on into the distance, where a panoramic view of the empty, boundless horizon provided a treat for the eyes. Xiao Chiye was clad from head to toe in his heavy armor, which sank into the thin snow. He looked just like a block of wall standing before Shen Zechuan.

“There are still bandits remaining on Mount Luo.” Shen Zechuan, wrapped securely in his coat, gazed at him. “You have to be careful when passing through the territory.”

Meng landed on Xiao Chiye’s shoulder. “I’ll remember it. This has to be a quick battle. I’ll be back in the third month at the very latest. If the soldiers you send to Dengzhou aren’t enough, let the Commander-in-chief know. She can transfer soldiers from Tianfei Watchtower. No problem there.”

Snow brushed past the hair on Shen Zechuan’s temples and landed on his collar. Xiao Chiye raised his hand to set his palm down on the top of Shen Zechuan’s head. A quote inexplicably came to his mind.

For my wife is still in the springtime of life;  
and tender are the words to comfort my beloved you.

Lanzhou was only twenty-two of age this year, and he would be by his side for decades to come. Xiao Chiye, however, would be fighting battles on all fronts in the days to come, regardless of life or death. Overthinking and dwelling too much on it would only serve to make him timid.

Shen Zechuan was the reason Xiao Chiye became tough. He was also the reason that Xiao Chiye mellowed. Xiao Chiye wanted to protect this man until the very end of his life, and as such, he was willing to give his very best in every single battle. But even the strong, like Xiao Fangxu, would also come to an unpredictable end. Xiao Chiye thought plenty after that incident. He loved this man, but he also worried for this man.

Perhaps other people in this world did not need him, Xiao Ce'an, that much. But Shen Zechuan did.

"I'll wait for you here." Shen Zechuan raised his palm to caress Xiao Chiye's cheek. In a soft voice, he said, "Don't fool around with others on the way. Not even a glance."

All of a sudden, Xiao Chiye hugged Shen Zechuan. In this snow, as he huffed breaths of hot air, he felt as if he owed Lanzhou too, too much; the latter clearly could not even leave him in his sleep.

"Enshconce yourself in the throne at the Hall of Distinction,"<sup>1</sup> Xiao Chiye nuzzled against Shen Zechuan's temple and whispered, "and let not the snowstorm come unto you."

Without waiting for Shen Zechuan to answer, Xiao Chiye released him. He put on his helmet, flipped atop Lang Tao Xue Jin, and turned his horse around to lead the Libei Armored Cavalry into a gallop east.

Seeing that Shen Zechuan did not move, Fei Sheng held up the umbrella to shield the Prefectural Lord from the falling snow. Shen Zechuan stood in the snow, clutching his blue handkerchief until it was silent all around.



Qudu experienced consecutive days of clear skies, and one could occasionally catch a glimpse of the birds flying in diagonal formations between the double-eaved roofs of the imperial palace. The heir apparent was a fast learner. Although she still did not possess the authority to make decisions, she was allowed to listen in on the discussions on state affairs in

Mingli Hall. She rarely spoke up, yet in that pair of eyes of hers, Cen Yu saw her dedication to government affairs.

Other than reading and practicing calligraphy in the past six months, Li Jianting had no other hobbies. She rose early each day and did not even slack off on the days when she fell ill. The Chief Surveillance Bureau, which used to lecture Li Jianheng in the past, gradually could not find any shortcomings in Li Jianting they could admonish her for. In the eyes of these fastidious censors, this heir apparent was one who was the most like a proper crown prince since the Crown Prince of the reign of Yongyi. Even Kong Qiu, who was initially quite critical of her, no longer took to talking about her lightly.

No one knew how Xue Xiuzhuo had done it, but he had completely destroyed “Ling Ting”, and now, only Li Jianting existed in this world.

The Empress Dowager had been plagued by headaches lately. Initially, incense had been lit in the hall, but she had Matron Liuxiang snuff it out as the scent made her feel unwell. The amount of gray hair along her temples had increased; old age was eroding this person of power who had a hand in the storms and turmoil of Qudu for as long as thirty years. In the face of Li Jianting’s youthful appearance, she felt all the more willing in spirit but lacking in strength.

“Yesterday, Han Cheng presented a memorial to the throne. He’s still requesting for troops to be deployed to Cizhou.” The Marquis of Helian sat below and groused to the Empress Dowager. “Conflicts are now abound between people on our own side. Why is he still thinking about Zhongbo!”

The Empress Dowager let Matron Liuxiang massage her shoulders as she leaned back on the couch. She looked over Han Cheng’s memorial, then said, “Shen Zechuan has taken down Fanzhou, and now he even intends to use military forces in Duanzhou. After spring, he will become the tiger of Zhongbo. He harbors a deep-seated hatred towards Han Cheng for the murder of his teacher. It is only natural for Han Cheng to be afraid.”

The Marquis of Helian did not want to bother with Han Cheng’s personal feud at all. What he was currently worried about was of another nature. After the ninth month last year, the practical doers faction led by Xue Xiuzhuo collaborated with the Chief Surveillance Bureau to investigate the crop fields of the eight cities in preparation for the resurveying of the crop fields. This had always been the case for the past years, but those had been merely done for show. The officials going on inspection tours simply

went through the motions and visited the eight cities as a mere formality to get things over and done with, then submitted a figure that everyone had agreed on beforehand to the Grand Secretariat to muddle their way through the process.

But it seemed that Xue Xiuzhuo was serious about it this time.

“I told all of you in the past to tell the rural manors you have in your names to restrain themselves. But did anyone listen? How many people froze to death in winter last year? Other than the three cities of Dicheng, Jincheng, and Quancheng that provide disaster relief to save the people, everyone else would rather be cowering cowards.” The Empress Dowager tossed the memorial onto the small table. The eastern pearls by her ears swayed along with her voice. “Why did Pan Lin have to antagonize Xue Xiuzhuo? Now Xue Xiuzhuo is going to work with Cen Yu and the rest to investigate the accounts. Was this not an opportunity Pan Lin himself served up to him?!”

The Marquis of Helian married Commandery Princess Zhao Yue to Pan Lin’s younger brother, so their Fei clan and Pan clan were now both in the same boat and would sink or swim together. He had initially thought the marriage would be an insurance against future troubles given that three members of the Pan clan – Pan Xiangjie, Pan Lin, and Pan Yi – were all significant officials of the imperial court, but who would have expected this Pan Lin to be such a pain in the ass?!

The Marquis of Helian did not dare to take the blame for Pan Lin, but he could not let Pan Lin continue with his ways either. Pan Lin was currently stuck in the opening that was the Minister of Revenue. The job he did was significant and crucial, yet he did not receive a promotion in name. Everyone was wrought with anxiety, fearing that Pan Lin would keep on getting defeated in this tussle between both sides and ended up handing the Ministry of Revenue on a silver platter to the officials from humble origins.

“Chengzhi is impatient by nature. I have no idea how he offended Xue Xiuzhuo.” The Marquis was restlessly burning with so much anxiety he was like an ant on a hot pan as he pleaded. “But Pang Xiangjie and Pan Yi are both loyal to Your Majesty. You have also watched our Zhaoyue grow up into a lady. She and the Third Missy are—”

“The gall of you!” The Empress Dowager cut him off and even righted herself to berate him. “How dare you push political disputes of the court

onto my little baby?! Back then, when I wanted Zhaoyue to marry a lad of the Han clan, you refused and insisted on coveting that bit of petty advantage the Pan clan could offer you. Now that things have gone south, you have to shoulder the responsibility for it yourself!”

The Empress Dowager rarely flew into a rage like this. The palace maids and eunuchs both inside and outside the hall hurriedly fell to their knees and bent low over the ground, holding their breaths. How would the Marquis still dare to sit? He fell to his knees in a fluster, shuffled forward on his knees, and slapped himself several times as he pleaded, “Your Majesty, please be appeased!”

“The Third Missy has already been married away to Qidong,” the Empress Dowager declared solemnly. “She is the first lady of Qi Shiyu. With a proper rank now, every word she says and every action she makes comes under close scrutiny. The encroachment of the commoner’s fields by the rural manors under you people has nothing to do with her, so don’t bring this up again. You’re already at such an advanced age. Do you still need me to teach you to watch your words?”

“You, you’re right...” The Marquis of Helian was not a man with guts to begin with. The only lawful descendants of the Fei clan in this generation were the younger Marquis Fei Shi and the Commandery Princess Zhaoyue. Fei Shi spent his days fooling around, and even now, he still did not hold a proper official position. Because of this, the Marquis of Helian hesitated over the Commandery Princess Zhaoyue’s marriage for a long time over every little thing. Who would have known that trouble would still come knocking on his door?

The Empress Dowager rose to her feet. With Matron Liuxiang supporting her, she made her way over to the Marquis of Helian’s side. The Marquis was up in years, and for what it was worth, he was still a noble; it was a disgrace for him to keep kneeling like this. The Empress Dowager calmed down some and said, “Get up. This is so unbecoming of someone your stature.”

The Marquis of Helian scrambled to his feet and stood helplessly by the Empress Dowager’s side, not daring to stand too close.

The Empress Dowager raised her head back slightly to look along the palace eaves at the bright and clear sky. After thinking for a moment, she said, “Fei Shi has also come of age. If his inclinations do not lie in scholarly studies, then he can join the military. There are so many vacancies in the

Eight Great Training Divisions; let him learn from them. He doesn't need to carve out a distinguished career, as long as he can temper himself and settle down. Once he has put in the hours and has the record of service to prove it, he will naturally be promoted to the Ministry of War."

The Empress Dowager had pointed out the Marquis' sore spot. He only had Fei Shi, this one son, and he had kept him sheltered back at home ever since the latter was young. After Fei Shi entered society, he was adept at all things related to the drinking of wine and the soliciting of courtesans, except for learning. What's more, he was an obstinate one who was close friends with Pan Lin. To date, he was not even willing to show Xue Xiuzhuo due respect. He spent his days wallowing in vice on Donglong street, typically listening only to what the courtesans had to say.

The Marquis of Helian's eyes momentarily grew moist. He lifted his sleeve to wipe his tears. "Your Majesty is the compassionate mother of all in the world; your graciousness knows no bounds. This humble subject originally wanted him to join the Eight Great Training Divisions as well, but with that temperament of his... alas!"

The Empress Dowager was fed up with the Marquis of Helian. She knew what he meant. The Eight Great Training Divisions were no longer a glamorous, lucrative post that managed Qudu's patrols. Given its proximity to Zhongbo, they might even be deployed to fight wars in the future. The Marquis of Helian was reluctant to send his son in to give his life for the cause for fear that Fei Shi might meet with a mishap on the battlefield, so he was hoping the Empress Dowager could get Fei Shi into the Six Ministries instead.

But Qudu was now no longer the playground of the noble clans. Domestic strife and foreign invasion were imminent. Shen Zechuan was not eliminated from the equation, and in just a short six months, he had become the overlord of Zhongbo, working in collusion with Libei. If not for the pressing threat of the Biansha Cavalry, he would have already fought his way to Qudu by now. Qi Zhuyin, on her end, had also written a letter to Qudu saying that she was going to use military force against the Qingshu Tribe in the fourth month. Meanwhile, Xue Xiuzhuo was pressing in on them every step of the way. Although he professed it to be a private feud with Pan Lin, his impeachment memorials were all legitimate. The eight cities did indeed encroach on the people's fields, and it would be a tough battle once investigations started after spring.

The situation was already at such a stage, and the Marquis of Helian and a few others were still only thinking of themselves and those small tracts of fields their rural manors have for fear that they would be confiscated.

The Empress Dowager recalled the times during the reign of Xiande. From Hua Siqian to Wei Huaigu, which of them was not a capable minister or general? And now, the Marquis of Helian was a bungling oaf who was good for nothing, Pan Xiangjie was a fence-sitter who swayed where the wind blows, and Han Cheng was a rapacious one with wild ambitions. Dealing with the Grand Secretariat exhausted the Empress Dowager, both physically and mentally.

“Xue Xiuzhuo’s investigation of the eight cities’ fields is meant to pave the way for the Heir Apparent to ascend to the throne.” The expression in the Empress Dowager’s eyes was deep. “It’s still not time for the Heir Apparent to step into the limelight. Go back and make it clear to Pan Xiangjie that he should open up the granaries in Dancheng and Chuancheng to distribute the grains as aid relief while the snow has yet to melt. Clean up the accounts in his hands as well, and return all those unnecessary fields to the people. Xue Xiuzhuo does not have the power to abuse as yet. If he wants to investigate, then let him investigate.”

Alarmed, the Marquis of Helian exclaimed, “if those accounts were to fall into this hands, it’d be hard to exculpate ourselves!”

The Empress Dowager looked at the Marquis of Helian and said, “Pan Lin has served in the Ministry of Revenue for so long, and the appraisals of him have been good. He also has capable men working under him. Xue Xiuzhuo wants to assist the Chief Surveillance Bureau, but even so, he can’t sidestep the Ministry of Revenue. The previous year’s field records are all in the Ministry of Revenue, which also manages the auditing of the account books. Pan Lin can avoid arousing suspicions; just get him to appoint someone he can trust over. Get through this, and Xue Xiuzhuo won’t have any way to force the issue.”

The Marquis of Helian pondered it over for a brief period. “Pan Lin has a man named Liang Cuishan under him. He was originally promoted by the Emperor Tianchen during the public ditch incident, and he has also been guided by Pan Lin before. This person’s appraisal last year was outstanding, and he also has a good reputation with the officials of humble origins. His



home is in Qudu, and he doesn't have much of a history, which makes it most convenient for us to hold him in our grasp."

"As long as the Pan clan can survive this," the Empress Dowager said, "they will be able to come out of it for the better."

Since there were problems with the fields in the eight cities, then just how clean could the Xue clan's Quancheng be? Xue Xiuzhuo's audacity in touching the eight cities' fields account was tantamount to laying a hand on a slice of the noble clans' pie. This matter concerned the future interests of the noble clans, and no doubt heads would have to roll if the field taxes were to be investigated. The Empress Dowager wanted Pan Lin to use Liang Cuishan to choke off the opening in Dancheng. As long as the investigation could not move forward and the bookkeeping was messed up, they could make things difficult for Xue Xiuzhuo on the imperial court and turn the tables around to investigate his Xue clan's Quancheng first.

Under the sunset glow of the setting sun, the Empress Dowager took off the prayer beads on her wrists and tossed them on the couch. Incense smoke from the prayer hall behind her rose in spirals, accentuating the Empress Dowager's dignified and poised appearance that almost belied her old age had it not been for her gray hair.



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#### Footnotes

1. 明堂 or *mingtang*, a ceremonial hall in a palace where the emperor issued governmental instructions, declared punishments and rewards, and carried out large ceremonies. Other names used include Hall of Light/Brightness/ Brilliance.



## CHAPTER 205 : DUANZHOU



It was not until the second month that Qi Zhuyin received a reply to the memorial she sent to Qudu. She read it over while she was at the residence in the Cangjun Commandery, then said to Qi Shiyu, who was lying on the bed, “I said to fight the Qingshu Tribe, but the Ministry of War dismissed the notion. The Empress Dowager told me to wait as she’s concerned about the military expenses, but Zhongbo is already at war now. I’ll miss the golden opportunity if I wait any longer.”

Qi Shiyu was getting much better these days, although he stuttered a little while lying on the bed, and he had to clutch a handkerchief in his hands when he spoke. “H-hurry.”

Qi Zhuyin distorted his meaning and set the letter down. “That’s right. I’m in a hurry. How could I not? When it all comes down to it, the defeat of Libei’s troops will not benefit Qidong in any way.”

Only then did Qi Shiyun complete his earlier words, “What’s the h-hurry?!”

While leaning back in her chair, Qi Zhuyin heard her father’s concubine in the courtyard wailing and making a commotion. She had ridden for half the night on her horse last night before arriving, and here she was now, sitting and relying on strong tea to keep her spirits up. Furthermore, she still had to ride back later. Vexed on hearing the cries, she said to Qi Shiyu, “Can you tell her to shut up?”

The concubine in the courtyard had given Qi Shiyu a son before, and now she was the picture of a tear-stained beauty as she leaned against her maidservant and sobbed out loud in the direction of the room, “Old Master... Can’t you even let me see the Old Master? Commander-in-chief, how very heartless of you!”

Qi Wei stood still under the eaves as he watched that particular concubine cry until her eyes were all red and swollen and she was almost sliding to the ground. He clicked his tongue lightly and shuffled his feet around to face the wall. Listening to her was giving him a headache.

Qi Shiyu could tell which concubine this was. Before he had a stroke, he was a tender one towards the fairer sex. He clenched the handkerchief tightly, his chest heaving violently as he shouted with all the might he could muster, “I-I’m telling you to sh-shut up!” He then paused to catch his breath for a moment and covered the corner of his mouth with the handkerchief as he addressed Qi Zhuyin, “Li-Libei, has no...”

“That was so many years ago.” Qi Zhuyin took over the conversation for him. “You’re already at such an age, and you still want to sulk about His Old Lordship? The commanding generals of Libei’s battle camps are quite the interesting batch. They are no longer the same as they were a decade or so ago.”

“Then, then Xiao Jiming, and, Xiao Chiye...” It was a strain on Qi Shiyu to speak, and even he had to frown on hearing himself. He tried his best to speak more coherently. “Can they beat A-Amu’er? By deploying troops now to clean up their mess, the Empress Dowager will view you with suspicion. Once the battle is over, watch how Qudu takes you to t-task!”

Several decades back, Qi Shiyu was the prince charming of many Dazhou ladies. He came from a distinguished background, and he was handsome. Of the Four Great Generals during the reign of Yongyi, he was the earliest to make his name in Qidong. Even Feng Yisheng was a high-ranking military officer under his command. At first, he had hopes of being conferred the title of a prince, but who would expect Xiao Fangxu to rise to prominence in Luoxia Pass all of a sudden? The Libei Armored Cavalry elbowed out the Qidong Garrison Troops’ military glory, trampling over Qi Shiyu for life.

There was no enmity between them, although they loved to pit against each other and had even fought before in Qudu. Qi Shiyu made little of Xiao Fangxu’s humble origins, and Xiao Fangxu once called Qi Shiyu names for being just a pretty face that was all looks and no substance. Feng Yisheng was the oldest among them when he was still around, and it was all because he went to a lot of effort – with Lu Pingyan following his lead – that Qidong and Libei could stay brothers for so many years.

Qi Shiyu rose to the challenge to prove his worth, but never could he have expected himself to be without a son and heir of lawful birth. At first, he had the idea of having Qi Zhuyin marry Xiao Jiming, but he felt rather awkward deep down and eventually did not broach the topic.

“Take me to what task?” Qi Zhuyin removed her blade. “If Libei is gone, so is Zhongbo, and if Zhongbo is gone, Dancheng will be a goner too. Who is the Empress Dowager going to take to task? Herself? For all their shortcomings, Xiao Jiming and Xiao Chiye are both His Old Lordship’s sons. With that bit of capability Han Cheng has, does he have the ability to stop the Biansha Cavalry when the time is nigh? Everyone might just as well let the state perish.”

Qi Shiyu was rendered so speechless by her that he wheezed for breath.

Qi Zhuyin poured a cup of tea while she was at it and continued, “You should rest for a while.”

“No!” Qi Shiyu’s obstinate nature took center stage as he childishly tossed the handkerchief at Qi Zhuyin. “You foolish woman! Bar, bargain with the Empress Dowager. At least have a noble title to your name before you g-go to war!”

Qi Zhuyin fell silent for a moment. She knew Qi Shiyu’s heart was aching for her. She had served as the commander-in-chief of the military forces of Qidong’s Five Commanderies for quite some years, but she still had no noble rank. If she were to get injured or disabled in the future, all Qudu needed was a transfer order on paper, and they would be able to remove her.

“At the very least, you’d have a reputation in life, and...” Qi Shiyu’s voice started trembling, “status in death!”

Otherwise, a hundred years on, she, Qi Zhuyin, would just be “a woman of the Qi clan”. No matter how illustrious her military achievements had been, she could never leave her rightful name and title behind.

Qi Zhuyin held the teacup with her fingers and studied the patterns on it. “A soldier only knows to die on the battlefield for his country; what need is there to concern himself with the return of his body home after?<sup>1</sup> If I were to really die in battle, etch my name on a memorial tablet<sup>2</sup> at home—it’s all the same.” She raised her head and smiled at Qi Shiyu. “Our Qidong is under the control of others, and we have to discuss every single matter with

Qudu. As long as the Empress Dowager is willing to give us military provisions, I can do away with a title. It is what it is.”

Whether it was because of his old age or not, no one knew, but Qi Shiyu suddenly started shedding tears. He would not even let Qi Zhuyin wipe it away for him as he hung his head down and choked with sobs. “If only you were a boy...”

Qi Zhuyin folded the handkerchief and set it down beside the bed. When Qi Shiyu was a little better, she continued, “Brothers who have died before in battles are aplenty, but can each and every single one of them leave their name behind in history? General Feng was not conferred a title either, was he? I’m telling you this so that you know how things stand. We are really going to war this year. Before the turn of the year, I heard that Chen Zhen was in ill health. It’s also because of his powerlessness that the Ministry of War did not agree to my deployment of troops this time. Once he retires, we will have no one else in Qudu. I’m worried that it’ll be even harder to ask for military salaries and provisions. We should save on the various expenses in the residences as much as we can. Stop getting swayed by all those pillow talks. Those concubines of yours have the manors they want and the shops they ask for. Even if I die, they and those sons of yours won’t starve to death.”

Qi Shiyu said, miffed, “All, all the manors I gave you...”

“Were used to make up for the shortfall.” Qi Zhuyin thought for a moment before comforting him. “There’s a small plot of land left though. My mother used to plant flowers and herbs there, and I couldn’t bear to sell it off. I can still make a living with it in the future.”

The concubine outside went silent. It was an overcast afternoon, with thick clouds covering the sky, and it was even dimmer inside the room with the drapes let down. Qi Shiyu looked at his daughter from the couch, her skinny shoulders set against the weak light from the window, and his late wife’s hairpin in her hair.

Qi Zhuyin resembled her mother, and she looked charming when she smiled, especially when her imposing aura did not dominate her facial features—the Commander-in-chief was not as full of heroic spirit as the rumors made her out to be.

Qi Zhuyin waited until Qi Shiyu fell asleep before she left. She changed her shoes under the eaves, then stepped into the snow with her deerskin boots to ask Qi Wei, “Where is she?”

“Madam invited her away.” Qi Wei answered as he followed behind her.

Qi Zhuyin had yet to see Hua Xiangyi upon her return, and she hesitated for a moment. As she passed by Hua Xiangyi’s courtyard, she heard sweet, delicate voices like the pleasant trillings of orioles and sparrows from within. From where she was on the other side of the moon gate, she saw Hua Xiangyi in between that plum blossom branch.

Hua Xiangyi was bundled up in a fox fur robe today. Going by the quality of the material, she had most likely brought it along from Qudu. It was pure, unadulterated white. Fluffy fur lining the sides of her cheeks accentuated her clear-as-autumn-waters eyes, bringing out the vividness in them and making them appear even more distinct. She looked just like someone’s pampered daughter. The fingertips on the plum blossom branch were fair and dainty, never having been tarnished with a single speck of dust before in this life.

Qi Zhuyin inexplicably inclined her head and watched for a long time.

“The in-house accountant has prepared the account books and is waiting for you in the office. Our residence’s expenditure last year...” After saying a bunch, Qi Wei looked up to see that Qi Zhuyin had not moved, so he followed her gaze over.

Qi Zhuyin raised Zhujia and blocked Qi Wei’s view with its sheath.

On the other end, Hua Xiangyi picked up the plum blossom branch with her fingers. A petal-like flower embellishment lay between her brows.<sup>3</sup> She laughed as her maidservant whispered in her ear, then turned sideways where she was hidden from view.

Without turning her head, Qi Zhuyin said to Qi Wei, “Let’s go.”

Qi Wei, having not seen a thing, repeated, “Let’s go?”

Qi Zhuyin lifted her foot and left. Qi Wei, not making head or tail of what was happening and not daring to ask either, followed after her. Qi Zhuyin headed straight to the office to reconcile the account books with the accountant. She did not have the time to sit and settle down, so she simply stood and flipped through a couple pages.

“Has there been a change of steward?” Qi Zhuyin suddenly asked.

The accountant hunched over and answered in a small voice, “To answer the Commander-in-chief, no.”

“That’s strange.” Qi Zhuyin turned a few more pages. “The balancing of accounts has always been a mess in the previous years, with records that

couldn't be more vague than the last. So why are last year's accounts so clear?"

These accounts were more than just clear. Even this year's advances had been separated out in a separate book, with the expenses of the various branches of the family all listed out clearly. Her father's concubines' cosmetic spending had also been halved at Qi Zhuyin's request, while the manors Qi Shiyu could not explain were also listed on it. This was simply done more beautifully than the Ministry of Revenue's accounts.

"The accounts in our residence were originally diverse and complicated, and with the various concubines unable to give a detailed account of their spendings, the various gentlemen were all at a loss where to start." The accountant took the teacup and held it out with both hands to Qi Zhuyin. "The Commander-in-chief wanted the residence to be more frugal, but we couldn't get a clear count of the rural manors in our name, and the monthly tributes were a mess when combined with the logistical expenses."

Qi Zhuyin raised her eyes to look at the accountant.

"This time, it was Madam who did the accounts." Afraid of incurring Qi Zhuyin's displeasure, the accountant hurriedly added, "Madam manages domestic affairs, so she has to look through all the accounts of the various concubines. She specifically sent someone to tell us that these accounts were too messy, and we had to redo them for the sake of your upcoming military salaries and provisions expenses. We rushed to redo them a few times, but we couldn't stand up to the commotion the various concubines kicked up. Many of them had manors hidden, and they refused to tell the truth..."

This was true.

Her father's concubines were all afraid that Qi Shiyu would kick the bucket, and so they kept a tight hold on the manors and shops in their hands. They even kept fishing for more from the residence, and none of them spoke the truth when it was time to settle the accounts. Qi Zhuyin did not live at home in the back courtyard, and her trusted subordinates like Qi Wei were all men that did not belong to the immediate family, so it was inappropriate for them to intervene. That was why these accounts had always remained a mess. She got a headache every time she thought of it.

So it seems that this Hua the Third is a rather capable one.

Qi Zhuyin took the account book and said, "And the concubines listened to her just like that?"



“At first, they pulled a long face and gave her a hard time.” The accountant said. “They are all mothers to the young masters, and they counted on the Old Master’s affections to refuse to hand over the accounts. They even wanted to head over to the Old Master’s courtyard to kick up a ruckus. Didn’t the Commander-in-chief put Miss Hongying at Madam’s disposal? So she had Miss Hongying send the concubines who cried until they fainted back to her courtyard and called for a physician to take a look at them. The physician couldn’t tell what was wrong, so she had them all buried in the courtyard.”

It did not immediately sink in for Qi Zhuyin. After being stupefied for a moment, she parroted, “buried in the courtyard?”

“Buried in the courtyard!” The accountant said. “This was just great. The concubines cried themselves a river and said they were going to complain to the Commander-in-chief.”

“Huh,” Qi Zhuyin said, “Complain to me?”

“So she gave them horses and opened up the gates to let them go.”

These concubines typically had to be waited upon even when they were getting dressed, so who would know how to ride a horse? Qi Shiyu did not fancy women of such ilk! It was such a cold day to boot, and yet Hua Xiangyi would bury anyone who dared to go wailing at Qi Shiyu’s courtyard like she was planting radishes. In no time, the concubines passed out from the freezing cold.

The matrons by Hua Xiangyi’s side were all old hands the Empress Dowager had carefully selected. If the concubines dared to make a scene, then they would dare to switch tactics to teach those concubines a hard lesson. The concubines kneeled in the walkway and waited in attendance, but they could not even get a glimpse of Hua Xiangyi’s face. When the concubines returned in tears to their own courtyards, their sons took over.

“Oh, it’s the young masters,” Hua Xiangyi sat behind the screen and said in a gentle tone. “I heard that you have yet to repay the debt of several hundred taels of silver you owe someone outside several days back, and they have already come hounding us at the residence. How would that do? As the lady of the house, I feel sorry for you brothers, so I asked the matrons to make the repayment first. Don’t be afraid. The memorandums of debt with handprints and signatures are with me for safekeeping in case the creditors claim not to have received the payment and go looking for the Old Master later... Young masters, are you leaving already?”

“And that was how it went.” The accountant was done mimicking Hua Xiangyi for Qi Zhuyin’s benefit. “Madam has the young masters’ debts in her hands. She only has to report to us, and the young masters’ shops will all be transferred under her name as collateral. Who would still dare to make a commotion now?”

Qi Zhuyin closed the account book and stood for a moment before opening it again. “That’s quite the temper she has there.”

This account had indeed been tidied up beautifully. Qi Zhuyin could not help but wonder if she would still need to fear those wily old foxes from the Ministry of Revenue if the military accounts out there could be this well done. But Hua Xiangyi was, after all, the apple of the Empress Dowager’s eye. So, after thinking about it, she dropped the idea.



The snow gradually abated in the second month, and the number of sunny days in Cizhou saw an increase. Once Shen Zechuan had free time, he brought Yao Wenyu to the outskirts of the city for a stroll.

It was cloudless for miles around today, with the bright, clear sky in a shade of azure blue. The snow in the forest had already begun to melt, and thawing stream water tinkled as they ran. There were already signs of wildlife to be seen. Ding Tao had to let Feng Ta Shuang Yi out to pasture, so he brought Li Xiong along to play at the edge of the forest.

“You don’t look too well these few days.” Shen Zechuan wiped his hands with snow and cast a glance at Yao Wenyu. “Are you not sleeping well at night?”

Yao Wenyu’s pale side profile was reflected upon the frosty leaves. He smiled at Shen Zechuan. “It’s cold, and my legs are hurting, that’s all...” He paused. “It has been half a month since the Second Master arrived in Dunzhou. Has Your Lordship received any news yet?”

“Tantai Hu discovered that there were still leftover bandits wandering on Mount Luo, so Ce’an was delayed for a few days there. It was reported the night before that the Mount Luo bandits have already been cleared out, and the Libei Armored Cavalry have occupied Mount Luo.” Shen Zechuan had changed into a jade-colored narrow-sleeved robe with a long, velvet outer garment today that made him look even younger. He was wearing the dogskin arm guard on his right arm, and as he raised his arm, he whistled. Meng came spiraling down from the forest and landed on his right arm.

Meng was too heavy, so Shen Zechuan could only let it perch for a while. He fed this messenger which had been traveling to and fro on both ends some white meat before letting it go off to play.

“There’s no need to worry over Mount Luo.” Yao Wenyu watched as Meng flew away. “The difficulty lies in Duanzhou.”

The entire Duanzhou battle line was directly facing the Chashi River, and it had been completely infiltrated by the Biansha Cavalry these few years. No one knew exactly how many Scorpions lurked within. Xiao Chiye only brought 5,000 Imperial Army soldiers along. The rest were all from the Libei Armored Cavalry. He was unwilling to completely give up the Libei Armored Cavalry, so no doubt he would have to find a way to deal with the Scorpions in the battle of Duanzhou.

Shen Zechuan’s heart was hanging on tenterhooks over Duanzhou.

“Now that the connection between the relay stations is running smoothly again, we will be able to send reinforcements immediately even if there is a change in the situation.” Seeing Shen Zechuan’s grave expression, Yao Wenyu said soothingly, “Besides, Second Master is a man blessed by Heaven.”

“Lu Guangbai said that Amu’er is planting grains on the opposite bank of the Chashi River.” Shen Zechuan pushed aside the withered branch beside his ear. “My concern is that he has long been wary of Zhongbo, and his placement of the crop fields near Gedale is meant to situate them in a better position to fight a protracted war with Duanzhou.”

Libei could not afford any delays now. If they could not take down Duanzhou, then the Shasan Camp would be in a rather perilous situation. Furthermore, Zhongbo was unable to completely shut their gates. Amu’er had set his sights so far and wide that Shen Zechuan even felt that nothing from south to north could miss his eyes.

Think back to last year’s battles. Amu’er first used Huhelu to hold down Guo Weili and give Hasen time to head up north. The Scorpions’ infiltration of Zhongbo to smuggle supplies back then was to prepare for the time they stormed and seized Libei’s battle camps. Now that he had used Hasen to take Xiao Fangxu out and reduce the pressure on the northern battlefields, he would have more confidence to face up against Qi Zhuyin. He relied on the Scorpions to hold Libei in check, then depended on the cavalry to engage Qi Zhuyin in a deadlock. Zhongbo was the weak and

vulnerable belly. As long as he could free out another leg, he would be able to stomp down the battle line that had only just been stabilized.

The battle in Duanzhou would be a tough one.

Yao Wenyu was just about to say a word when Fei Sheng spurred his horse over. He dismounted to pay his obeisances to Shen Zechuan. “Master, Yan Heru is here.”

Shen Zechuan knew that Qudu was just done investigating Hezhou’s transportation of grains by water to the capital, so presumably, Yan Heru was here to whine about it. Besides, they still had yet to come to an agreement regarding the new Port of Liuzhou in Juexi. Thus, he turned around and said, “Let’s head back.”



Yan Heru was indeed here to whine and grouse. He arrived too late, and Zhou Gui and the rest sat with him and briefly discussed some Liuzhou matters with him. He only got down to business when Shen Zechuan returned and told him all about the issue with the shipments of grains by water in Hezhou.

“The official from the Ministry of Revenue who was initially in charge of the transportation of grain shipments in Hezhou is called Liang Cuishan. He also led the collection of taxes on salt in Juexi. Last year, he put the thirteen cities in order with Jiang Qingshan. The reason our business has been difficult is all thanks to these two people.” Yan Heru disliked how hard the chair was and shifted in his seat before he said, all bright and chipper, “Oh man, Your Lordship, I’m telling you, I really got worried there! This person is not an easy one to deal with, and he isn’t one to accept bribes either. But guess what happened? Before I could think of a plan, he was transferred away. They said it was to investigate the crop fields of Dancheng with the Court of Judicial Review. The imperial court has really done me a great favor~”

Shen Zechuan found this name to be a familiar one. He repeated, “Liang Cuishan?”

“Liang Cuishan, courtesy name Chongshen.” Yan Heru sprawled face down on the table and winked at Shen Zechuan. “Do you know him? You should’ve said so sooner! Then I don’t have to worry about him anymore.”

Naturally, Shen Zechuan knew him. After all, Shen Zechuan was the one who had Xiao Chiye recommend Liang Cuishan for office. He

promptly asked, “they had him transferred to Dancheng to investigate the fields?”

“That’s right. Pan Lin is currently fighting it out with Xue Xiuzhuo. Xue Xiuzhuo is truly a real man to be stirring up the hornet’s nest.” Yan Heru said enigmatically. “Your Lordship, guess how many fields have the eight cities seized over the years? If Xue Xiuzhuo were to really get to the bottom of the accounts, even the Empress Dowager would be taken to task for it, let alone the Pan clan. At present, the noble clans all want him dead.”

The noble clans’ appropriation of the commoners’ fields had led to an increase in the numbers of displaced refugees. Those who had flocked to Zhongbo last year were all commoners who had been forced to leave. Qi Huilian relied on the implementation of the census registers<sup>4</sup> to curb the problem, but it proved to be ineffective in the eight cities, and now, Xue Xiuzhuo was using Yao Wenyu’s matter as an opportunity to deal the first blow to the Pan clan of Dancheng.

Even Yao Wenyu had to concede that Xue Xiuzhuo had guts.

“Liang Cuishan was promoted by Pan Lin.” Shen Zechuan understood it in a flash. “The noble clans want to rely on Liang Cuishan’s use of his Ministry of Revenue authority to obstruct Xue Xiuzhuo from investigating the lands and drag things out until the beginning of spring.”

“What a fine show of battle between those in power. Let them kill their fill in the bloodbath.” Yan Heru clapped his hands lightly and said to Shen Zechuan with a smile. “Best if they fight until Zhongbo is stable, and Your Lordship will be able to free a hand to teach them a lesson!”

“Then I fear you’d be disappointed.” With his folding fan, Shen Zechuan pushed away Yan Heru’s fingers that had made their way before him. “This Liang Cuishan...”

A commotion suddenly broke out under the eaves. Shen Zechuan stopped talking, and the gentlemen in the room all looked over. Zhou Gui rose slightly and inquired, “What’s all the din about? A discussion is currently underway in the hall!”

Fei Sheng lifted the hanging screen with a hand. His gaze moved past the others to land on Shen Zechuan, his face pale as he called out, “Master...”

Wind escaped from the dark vault of heaven, blowing over the corner of the hanging screen with such force that the various gentlemen all raised their sleeves to shield their faces. Shen Zechuan stood up. The expression in

Fei Sheng's eyes gave him a sense of foreboding. He even took a few steps forward as he stared at Fei Sheng under the flickering candlelight.

"Incoming message of utmost urgency," Fei Sheng said in a solemn voice, "Second Master—"



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#### Footnotes

1. 只解沙场为国死，何须马革裹尸还 a line from the poem 《出塞》 by Xu Xilin (徐锡麟). The return of the body here specifically refers to wrapping the corpse in horsehide to be sent back to the camps or hometown for burial (a typical practice for the fallen in battles).



- 2.
3. a spirit or memorial or ancestral tablet, with the name, birthday, etc., of the dead inscribed and placed in shrines at home or in temples, etc.



- 4.
5. 花钿 known as *huadian*, these are flower embellishments affixed or painted onto the forehead for cosmetic purposes. Flowers are common patterns, although there may be others.
6. 黃冊 *Huangce* or yellow registers/yellow book served during the Ming Dynasty to provide basic data for taxation and recruitment based on the household's classification according to their occupation. It was mainly divided into three categories: civilian, military, and craftsman

## CHAPTER 206 : RIVER OF ICE



Xiao Chiye's communications with Duanzhou were completely cut off three days after he left Zhongbo. They vanished in the snow after Achi's return in resounding victory. Tantai Hu's scouts could no longer find any traces of him. This squad of vanguards seemed to have disappeared into thin air.

The Biansha Cavalry had set up a perimeter to the west of the Chashi River, and this squad of vanguards had walked into the encirclement trap, where they were hemmed in by Achi at the Chashi River. Tantai Hu had no way of searching the battlefields, but even as he waited anxiously, he had to deliver the news truthfully to Dajing and Cizhou.

If something untoward had happened to Xiao Chiye, then Wu Ziyu would have to immediately notify Guo Weili of the Shasan Camp. They had to head down south to block off access from the opening that was Mount Luo. Otherwise, the consequences would be unimaginable.

Shen Zechuan did not take the horse carriage, but rode on Feng Ta Shuang Yi instead. When he arrived at Mount Luo, it was already late at night. Wu Ziyu trotted out to receive him and saw no expression on the Prefectural Lord's frozen blue face.

"Your Lordship." Not daring to engage in idle chatter, Wu Ziyu cut to the chase and followed Shen Zechuan into the campground. "The encirclement is located in the southeast of Duanzhou. It's mainly to stop Tantai Hu, who is still in the west, from proceeding further, and to deprive



us of the chance to snoop around. For this reason, Second Master must still be in the southeast.”

Shen Zechuan stood at the entrance of the camp, his shoulders covered in snow. “Who are the Attendant Officers tagging along?”

“Gu Jin, Yin Chang, and Hairigu,” Wu Ziyu answered. “Second Master only had Tantai Hu stay put.”

“Master,” Fei Sheng spoke up behind him. “Why not let the Imperial Bodyguards hurry over to Tantai Hu’s camp? We can serve as scouts. By tomorrow night...”

Shen Zechuan had already turned around. He got on his horse once more and said to Wu Ziyu, “Write a letter to Yu Xiaozai and Kong Ling. Tell them to seal off all the Zhongbo’s bridle paths heading west right now and have all the merchants traveling to the mutual trade market take a detour from Cizhou.”

Yan Heru had just gotten off the carriage. His backside had not even gotten comfortable when he heard Shen Zechuan’s words. He still wanted to do business with Fanzhou and Dengzhou, especially now that these two places were suffering from a shortage of grains and clothing! Thus, he hurriedly ran a few steps after the horse and lifted his head to say, “Your Lordship, come on, let’s discuss this. Can the grains from Hezhou to the two prefectures still be allowed access? If so, why not...”

“Sure.” Shen Zechuan’s eyes were thin and icy. He bent down and patted Yan Heru’s cheek with the horsewhip. “But only grains. If your company of merchants dares to smuggle anything else other than grains to the east of Zhongbo before I give my approval, I will hang your head up at the city gate tower of Hezhou.”

The remaining bandits in the two prefectures of Fanzhou and Dengzhou had yet to be completely eradicated. So who knows if Yan Heru would play tricks again? Shen Zechuan was too preoccupied now to watch Yan Heru, but he had ways to make Yan Heru behave himself and stay put.

Yan Heru did not dare to move. He meekly swallowed his saliva, not even daring to blink his eyes. It was only after Shen Zechuan turned his horse around that Yan Heru realized his legs were trembling.



The saker falcon soared through the dancing snow and wandered around the banks of the Chashi River. The sky at the hour of you was dark and dreary, and the snow looked more like crushed grains of rice the closer

they got to the ground. It felt uncomfortable to have them sticking to one's temples. The Gobi desert stretched on endlessly into the horizon. Bayin, from where he sat on horseback with a book under his arm, looked out into the distance before him.

"There will be a snowstorm tonight." Bayin muttered in the Biansha tongue.

The world was presently a picture of frozen landscape. Bayin could not bear the cold even when he was all bundled up in fur. Yet, Achi was squatting on the Chashi River washing his face with water from the hole cut in the ice. He rubbed his fingers clean, staining the water bloody red.

"I'll send you across the river tonight." Achi's right arm had a scorpion tattooed on it. His face, which was as dark as Bayin's, appeared a little good-natured.

Bayin was the brains by Hasen's side. He initially worked under Huhelu, but was now transferred over to Achi's side to observe the Duanzhou battle. He was the eyes Hasen put here.

Seven days ago, Xiao Chiye arrived at Duanzhou. Their siege on the city was unsuccessful. The Biansha Cavalry had already learned to use the weapons from within the city of Duanzhou itself. With the advantage they had from their occupation of the city, they left Xiao Chiye out in the cold outside the city gates to wear him down. Three days ago, Xiao Chiye launched a surprise attack, and Achi left the city to give chase. He chased them down near the Chashi River, where he annihilated the left flank squad of the Libei Armored Cavalry.

Bayin turned his head back and said to Achi, "Perhaps I should stay for a few more days."

"Hasen needs you." Achi stood up and lifted the Libei head in his arms as he said to the Scorpions on the bank of the river, "The Libei Armored Cavalry is already at the end of their tether. This pack of wolves is helpless against us. Last night is the proof. They can't withstand a single blow just like they couldn't before the new year."

Achi threw away the head in his hand.

"The Armored Cavalry is no longer our medal of honor—they are not worthy."

The Scorpions, who were mingling among the cavalry, followed Achi's lead and boo-ed as they threw away the heads at the side of their horses.

They were collecting the helmets of the Libei Armored Cavalry, using them as nighttime chamber pots in the wilderness.

Achi turned to Bayin. "We are elites of the Scorpions. It's not a good idea for the Hero to put us in Zhongbo. If I kill Xiao Chiye, you have to tell Hasen to transfer me back to the northern battlefields. That is where I should be."

This unit was the elites Amu'er left in Duanzhou. Achi was the leader of the Black Scorpions, having taken Hairigu's place. After Jida's death, he became the undisputed despot of Duanzhou. He wanted to obtain lands, and so he had to think of ways to render meritorious military service. For this reason, he was already displeased with Amu'er's arrangement to leave him in Duanzhou.

"You are all the natural enemy of the wolf pack." Bayin placated Achi. "The Hero naturally has his own considerations for his arrangements."

"His arrangement is to make me clear out the position for Hasen." The expression in Achi's eyes was gloomy. "Hasen stole the credit from the Scorpions."

Bayin did not have the numbers and strength to back him up, so he could not start a dispute with Achi here. He swallowed his frustration and watched as Achi got up his horse and stepped onto the frozen ice surface of the Chashi River with the Scorpions.

The Chashi River would freeze over in winter, and the layer of ice was strong and solid enough to bear the weight of the Biansha Cavalry. They liked to pass through the territory during winter in the past, as this would allow them to cross the Chashi River without having to take a long detour. The "slender waist" of the Chashi River was close to Gedale. If they moved fast, they would be able to arrive in one night.

The snow started to intensify. Worried that his book would get wet, Bayin kept it back in his leather bag. He wore a leather hat and a fur collar that covered his nose and mouth tightly, but even so, it was still so freezing cold that his exposed ears turned red.

"Spring had better come soon." Achi's horse trotted beside Bayin. "Many people in Gedale have died of starvation this winter. They gave all the grains they grew to the northern battlefields."

"This battle is a must for Biansha's transformation into a lion.<sup>1</sup> We have too few fields." Bayin said in a muffled voice. "There is no extra land in the desert to grow food. It's only by attacking our way west that we can

survive. Zhongbo is a good place... you actually don't have to hate it that much."

"If my unit puts down their iron hammers, they will once again be reduced to being slaves of the various tribes." The iron hammer at the side of Achi's horse was stained with blood all over. He shook his head. "We will not till the land."

As the Scorpions' leader, Achi had once negotiated with Amu'er. The Scorpions wanted lands and names. It would be best if they could be merged into the Twelve Tribes and not serve as slaves. But Amu'er rejected him. He required the Scorpions to completely crush the Libei Armored Cavalry in this battle, and it was only when Libei fell would he consider Achi's suggestion.

Bayin was merely part of Hasen's retinue and could not question the Hero, Amu'er, but he understood Amu'er's intent. Amu'er was unwilling to give the Scorpions names because he wanted to hold them captive in his hands. Only then would these homeless bastards truly put in their best efforts.

The troops walked on the ice for four hours, and the snowstorm obscured the directions in the night. Achi came next to the route markers the Biansha Cavalry left behind and did not immediately stop. He wanted to escort Bayin to the opposite bank as soon as possible, then head back to annihilate the remaining Libei Armored Cavalry and clean up the Duanzhou battlefield.

Xiao Chiye was a nobody, but he was a wolf pup through and through. It was to the regret of Biansha that Hasen did not bring back Xiao Fangxu's head. Achi had his eyes locked on Xiao Chiye. He wanted to use Xiao Chiye's head to negotiate with Amu'er again. They attacked Libei relentlessly and without reservations, for they were already fed up with the stalemate in the northern battlefields.

Bayin lifted his fur collar and drank a couple mouthfuls of water. The wind and snow blew so hard that he could not open his eyes. As he attempted to cover himself, he shouted at Achi. "Let's stop for now and rest here. The snow is too heavy!"

The saker falcon was unable to continue flying and had already landed on its master's shoulder. The wind blew the snow on the ice into slopes, which gave off creaking sounds with every step taken. Achi dismounted to

scout the path ahead. He swept off ice that had formed on the route markers, only to discover footprints before him.

Given how intense the snow was, there could only be two reasons why there could still be tracks left behind. The first was that they were too heavy and had compacted the ice underneath; the second was that the other party had left not too long ago and was very likely standing right next to them across the curtain of snow.

“The wolf is here,” Achi estimated the depth of the footprint with his fingers, then lifted his head to shout, “the armored cavalry has been here!”

Bayin waded through the thick snow, huffing and puffing as he kneeled and lay in front of the footprints. “But they were heading west. That’s the way back to Zhongbo.”

These footprints were all facing the direction that they had come from.

“Three days ago, you took out the left flank of the Libei Armored Cavalry.” Bayin looked towards Achi. “But their vanguards aren’t dead yet. It is very likely that Xiao Chiye led them to escape their way onto the frozen Chashi river. They’re looking for the way back.”

“It could also be a cover-up.” Achi prodded at the snow. “They could have walked backward so that they would be able to hide ahead of me and set up an ambush.”

Bayin shook his head lightly, frowning as he watched the snow. “It doesn’t benefit them to head east. That’s where our territory lies.”

Achi swiftly swept aside the snow along the footprints and saw that these footprints were all heading westward. He knew how Xiao Chiye had taken Huhelu out of the picture. In his heart, this person was adept at bluffs and ambushes; the more obvious the footprints were, the more he was certain that Xiao Chiye was right in front of them.

“We’ll take a detour.” Achi got to his feet. “Even if Xiao Chiye stays on the ice, he can’t go without water to drink. They will definitely leave traces behind. We’ll go after them by following their tracks.”

Bayin thought it was not the opportune time tonight to cross swords with the Libei Armored Cavalry. He chased after Achi. “If we can’t stop here to rest, we should still continue to head east. Achi, Dazhou has a saying, ‘do not pursue a beaten enemy too far’.<sup>2</sup> Don’t get led astray by them. Let’s return to Gedale first before making our plans.”

Achi shoved Bayin aside, exposing the scorpion on his right arm. His eyes were filled with murderous intent as he said, “the wolves are right here in this heavy snow. If we let them go, it will not bode well for us. You have absolutely no idea how to fight a war at all. By letting Xiao Chiye remain on the Chashi river, our unit could end up getting ambushed by him tomorrow morning!”

As Bayin watched Achi mount his horse, he reached the end of his forbearance and could not help but shout out, “I once advised Huhelu, but he didn’t listen to me. In the end, he didn’t even leave a corpse behind!”

“Was this how you advised Hasen?” Achi turned his horse around and spat with contempt, “So that was why he lost the King of Wolf’s head; it was all to preserve his own life.”

Having said that, Achi cracked his horsewhip and headed southeast.

“Achi!” Bayin chased a few steps after him, then spat hard and cursed under his breath. “Bastard, you won’t be able to tell the directions once you veer away from the route markers!”

Achi galloped among the snow without turning back. If he could not find his way around, then neither could Xiao Chiye. But he was more familiar with the Chashi river than Xiao Chiye was.

The wolf was close by.

And Achi was going to catch him.



#### Footnotes

1. 雄狮 literally lion, also a metaphor for a strong or powerful tribe/nation/figure, etc.
2. 穷寇莫追 One should not press a defeated enemy so hard (lest they turn and make a last-ditch counterattack in desperation.) i.e., Don’t force people into a corner, as they may fight back desperately like cornered rats.



## CHAPTER 207 : PLAYED FOR THE FOOL



Gu Jin lay prostrate on the ice for an hour. Hail that came with the snowstorm rained down his armor, making clunking sounds. He remained motionless. If not for his eagle eyes still blinking, Yin Chang would have thought that he had frozen to death.

Yin Chang huddled in the snow and took small sips of his wine. It did not take long for the wine in the wine bag to run out. He shook the empty bag and drained the last few drops into his mouth. Flying flakes of snow pelted his cheeks. The old man's hair and beard were all white; only his nose remained red.

The wind wailed and howled in the night, making such a terrible racket that the tips of the Imperial Army's ears went numb. The rations in their bellies were almost gone, and even though limbs would naturally stiffen after such a long time of sprawling, very few of them moved.

Yin Chang turned his head back to cast a glance at the Imperial Army and marveled to himself.

The Imperial Army did not even blink when they faced up against the Scorpions a few days ago. Without Xiao Chiye's order, they would never act arbitrarily on their own. Who could still associate these men with the ruffian soldiers who did manual labor in Qudu? If the Cizhou Garrison Troops could be rallied to the same degree as the Imperial Army had been, then Yin Chang would even dare to fight Gedale, let alone Duanzhou.



A pity these were not his soldiers.

Yin Chang pouted regretfully and put the wine bag back on his waist.

Snow had accumulated on Gu Jin's back. He was not wearing a helmet, and the snow fell onto his nape, where it melted and trickled down along his neck. It was amid the violent gale that he detected those slight movements. Fragments of ice swirled and rustled across the snow. Gu Jin's hand, which had been pressing down on the snow, suddenly clenched into a fist. His eyes bore through the flying sand-like snow before locking onto a certain spot in the darkness.

"Here they come!"

Yin Chang prostrated his body and lightened his breathing as the sounds of horses' hooves approached. The old man's palms were sweating as he counted in silence, fearing that he might start shaking his legs out of overexcitement.

The kickup of snow turned the snowy fog in the sky into thick clouds; the ponies' hooves were almost about to trample over their faces. Yin Chang let loose a bellow. In the twinkling of an eye, he had already sprung up.

But the other party's ponies came to a stop!

Yin Chang had not even drawn his blade when a Scorpion's hammer came swinging over inches from his face. Yin Chang did not have the same arm strength Li Xiong possessed, so naturally, he did not dare block the blow. All he could do was roll into the snow and cut a sorry figure as he dodged it.

"Motherfucker, that's some fine arm strength there!" Yin Chang cursed as he steadied himself.

The Imperial Bodyguards behind him leaped out of the snowfield. At first, they had wanted to imitate Yin Chang and spring up in one suave move, but on seeing the old man bested, they all gave up the idea and opted to draw their blades without all the fanfare.

Once the Scorpions' hammers came up against the Imperial Army, they knew they had fallen for the trap. This was not the Libei Armored Cavalry at all, but a bunch of imposters in helmets!

"Helmets off!" Gu Jin clambered up the pony that was speeding past him and held onto the saddle as it brought him up. With both legs scraping across the snow, he slammed the hilt of his blade hard into the side of the

Scorpion and turned over to forcibly seize the pony. Once again, he commanded sternly, "Helmets off!"

Helmets clattered noisily into the snow, and the Imperial Army leaped into the unit of cavalry. They were like mice who did not care how these Biansha Cavalrymen ran as long as they could startle the ponies. The snow under the hooves fell away as a hoop of rope net rose from its hiding place, bringing down a number of cavalymen in the process.

Snow and sand came assailing them in the face. Achi's soldiers took several mouthfuls of ice and snow in the mouth as they tumbled.

The Imperial Army's blades were short. Once they came in close before the Scorpions, the iron hammers would prove tough to fight with. Regardless of whether the Scorpions extended or retracted it, the Imperial Army's short blades would out-speed them, giving them no time at all to parry the blows.

Gu Jin rapidly observed the battlefield, but he did not catch any sight of Achi. His heart promptly sank. But before he could voice a warning, a branch of cavalymen came dashing out from his left at a speed so fast Gu Jin could not even dodge.

The Imperial Army seemed to be bitten down by a vicious beast that had materialized from across the sky, breaking them up in front and at the back. This unit of cavalymen did not use iron hammers, but they directly knocked Gu Jin straight off the pony with their swift and sudden advance. At the same time Gu Jin landed on the ground, it neighed, and a hot burst of fresh blood sprayed all over Gu Jin's head.

"Cunning!" Achi rebuked Gu Jin in the Dazhou tongue. He brandished his own scimitar, flinging the remaining droplets of blood onto Gu Jin. "But that's all there is to it."

The scimitars Achi's elite scorpions used were larger than those used by the common Biansha Cavalrymen. When held in hand, they looked like thick, silver hooks. Get caught in them, and one would meet their end, whether they were humans or beasts.

Achi had smelled a rat while he was following the trail. There were simply too many clues left for him along the way; it was like they were exposing the enemy's presence and location to him. Very quickly, Achi's windblown brain calmed down. He used his advance guards unit to probe the way ahead, and sure enough, he had baited the Imperial Army out of hiding!

Gu Jin inclined his head to wipe away the blood on his face and spat lightly, “Is that so?”

Yin Chang, who was on the other side, gave up resisting. Surrounded by the cavalry, he spread his arms open, his half-crouching body looking like he was going to lift something as he said at the top of his voice, “Time to get up—!”.

The layer of ice under the cavalry’s hooves shook violently. They thought the Imperial Army had smashed open a hole here and instantly reined their horses in and retreated in fright. However, as soon as they retreated, they saw Yin Chang lower himself in a roll along with the Imperial Army. They sprang their way out between the hooves, then dragged up their blades and took to their heels.

We’ve been had!

Achi’s fury blazed, and he cursed in mixture of Dazhou and Biansha expletives. But he did not immediately give chase; he was still keeping his wits about him at this point, thinking that there must be a trap somewhere. It was only when Yin Chang and the Imperial Army fled further and further away that it finally hit Achi.

They’re really fucking fleeing for real!

“Split up and give chase.” Achi cracked his horsewhip. “Hack off their heads!”

The cavalry was split into two flanks, with Achi in the center, presenting a claw shape that overlooked the squad, one that seemed to clutch the Imperial Army within. The two flanks advanced first and went around the left and right to come before the Imperial Army. As long as they could join up with the other, they would be able to form an encirclement ring. When the time comes, Achi would lead the center unit to barge their way into the Imperial Army from behind, and then it would be a slaughterhouse with the scimitars set loose within.

Seven years ago, Amu’er used this type of battle formation to ram the Duanzhou Garrison Troops into the Chashi Sinkhole. Achi, thus inspired, was extremely fond of this formation. It was also with this formation that he shredded the left flank of the Libei Armored Cavalry into pieces near Duanzhou a few days ago.

Both flanks, moving hard and fast, had already overtaken the Imperial Army to circle to the front. They turned their horses, and their units looped

around like a long snake to the center, intending to block the Imperial Army's way out and to hem them in.

But a familiar figure was standing in the center.

The battle steeds did not neigh in the darkness of the night, although cloudy puffs of hot air spouted from their iron muzzles, and their armors looked particularly ferocious in the pitch-black surroundings. The Armored Cavalry towering motionlessly on horsebacks loomed large amid the raging snow and wind, cutting off the sounds of slaughter with their silence.

The vanguards on both flanks, having crossed swords with the Armored Cavalry before, were not afraid, so no one shouted the command to stop. The ponies kicked up snowy haze as they came attacking from both sides in a pincer attack, while the Scorpions who served as the vanguards of both flanks simultaneously swapped over to their scimitars.

They wanted to throw the Armored Cavalry off their horses with one swing of their hammer at the very moment of impact, relying on their horses' hooves and arm strength to smash the Armored Cavalry's helmets in like they had done so countless times before.

Xiao Chiye sat on the back of Lang Tao Xue Jin, which was presently digging into the ground with its hooves. Xiao Chiye was clad in heavy armor, and with steel obscuring his face, no one knew the expression he was presently wearing. He was like a stabilizing force amid the chorus of shouts all over, steadying the morale of the soldiers before and behind him.

Gu Jin exhaled deeply the very instant he saw Xiao Chiye. He braked to a stop almost at the same time that Yin Chang did, then turned around together with the latter amid the waves of snow to assume a fighting stance while facing Achi's pursuing soldiers.

The wind stirred up by the Biansha Cavalry swept through the whole field. Their scimitars and hammers had been driving away the men of Dazhou. From Libei to Zhongbo, no one could survive the assault of their hooves.

Xiao Chiye expelled a breath of hot air between his thin lips.

The Scorpions on both flanks swung up their hammers. At the moment of collision, the smell of gunpowder assailed their noses. Flashes exploded in the snowstorm, and the Scorpions, who were caught totally off-guard, were blown off their horses by the firearms, while their horses collided into one another in panic upon hearing the thunderous blast.

The muzzles of the guns started smoking. Xiao Chiye had only brought along thirty firearms. They were of little use when facing the main forces of Biansha head-on, but it was the key to blowing away the heads of the two cavalry flanks at this moment. That oppressive power promptly blindsided the cavalymen of both flanks to the extent that the Scorpions at the rear could not even catch what was happening.

Xiao Chiye made the first move, and the Libei Armored Cavalry behind him followed suit to bare their brand new fangs. These heavy armors were like vicious wolves that had been let out of their cages, so ravenous their eyes glowed with insatiable hunger. As they split into their respective columns, they leveled out their long blades in unison.

Although Achi's center unit was obstructed by the Imperial Army, he had already seen the Imperial Army's blades. It was already too late for the two flanks of the scorpions to pick up their hammers again. The battle steeds raised their hooves and trampled over the tumbling bodies, splashing sprays of erupting blood onto their armors.

The scorpions at the back of these two flanks surged forth to outflank them. Xiao Chiye followed up by shrinking the Libei Armored Cavalry into a "war chariot" battle formation that swiftly and aggressively went ramming into them. Their structure of strung-up blades on all four sides prevented the hammers from inching any closer. As the Armored Cavalry started lunging, they resembled a "battering ram" charging into the battlefield. Xiao Chiye was at the pointed end of this formation. They were an unstoppable force when they came together as a cohesive whole.

Reining in the battle steed beneath him, Achi snarled furiously from a distance away, "swing your hammers!"

As long as they had hammers, the Libei Armored Cavalry would be tofu all the same.

The hammer of a Scorpion swung from the side towards the head of the Armored Cavalry at the fringe of the formation. It was too late to avoid the attack, but a resonating and heavy "thud" rang out as Hairigu used an iron hammer to deflect the hammer from atop the Libei Armored Cavalry horse he was on.

"Traitorous betrayer," Achi gnashed his teeth in rage. "Hairigu, you've become a slave to Libei!"

With swift, dexterous moves, Hairigu heaved up the hammer to knock over the other party and landed on the ground at the same time the other

man did. While the other person was still cussing, Hairigu lifted his hammer and slammed it down with precision onto the man's skull without so much as a second glance.

Achi's center unit was caught in a dilemma moving forward. The left and right flanks he had sent ahead had respectively gotten their "heads" hacked off and were now nothing more than headless chickens. And with military commands hindered and obstructed by the Imperial Army, he could no longer freely mobilize the two flanks into returning.

Bayin had only just rushed into the vicinity. He was aware of Achi's importance to Duanzhou. The remaining scorpions in Zhongbo all heeded Achi's deployment orders, and for this reason, he could not abandon Achi to escape on his own.

Bayin panted in the snow as he scanned the battlefield and chased after Achi on horseback. "Achi! Turn the horses around and head back. The Libei Armored Cavalry won't be able to catch up to us!"

As long as they followed the route markers and retreated west, then by daybreak at the latest, they would be able to make it back to the southeast of Duanzhou where they had stationed a large number of troops. By then, the only path that awaited Xiao Chiye would still be death.

Achi tugged at the reins of his horse hard and cracked his whip loud and clear. He did not refute Bayin and led the remaining scorpions out of the entanglement with the Imperial Army.

He was clear about his priorities. If he lost to Xiao Chiye here, then Amu'er would mete out the harshest punishment on him and skin him for the rash deployment of troops. His defeat was a small matter, but if this carelessness escalated into the loss of Duanzhou, then even if he could live to escape back to Gedale, Amu'er would not spare his life.

This battle did not count.

Achi whipped his horse hard to spur it on.

This was merely just him being made a fool of!



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## CHAPTER 208 : RETURN OF A NIGHTMARE



Achi fled towards their original path in a hurry. Along the way, the Scorpions let loose their own saker falcons. Lang Tao Xue Jin pressed forward and did all it could to catch up amid the clanging sounds of the heavy armors. The collective sound of the Libei Armored Cavalry's hooves in hot pursuit was so intense that it unnerved the Scorpions, who feared the ice beneath their feet would crack. What's more when that sound was catching up just right behind their horses!

Achi clenched his teeth and looked back in the wind in humiliation. All he could see was that one heavy armor.

Xiao Chiye!

Bayin suddenly pulled in the reins on the head of his horse as he bumped into Achi from the side and barked sternly, "Retreat, retreat, retreat! Achi, stop looking at him!"

The snowstorm that resembled flying willow catkins transformed Heaven and Earth into a sacred, untainted realm. The Biansha Cavalry charged madly in the wind for a little less than an hour before they managed to throw off the Libei Armored Cavalry. Even so, they did not dare to stop. On returning to their original path, Bayin suddenly piped up, "Pull out the route markers. Don't leave them behind for Xiao Chiye!"

They charged with all they could along their original path, heeding Bayin's instructions not to leave behind route markers for the Libei



Armored Cavalry.

“Deploy troops to counterattack tomorrow morning.” Bayin was covered tightly in his fur collar, and his eyelashes had been dyed white by the wind. He could barely even open them. “Xiao Chiye will not be able to escape out of the Chashi River once he loses all sense of direction.”

Achi was livid. His rage blazed so intensely that his chest felt uncomfortable. He had been played for a fool by Xiao Chiye even before they came face to face with one another. No matter what, he could not take this lying down.

“Listen, Achi.” Bayin chased after the lightning-swift Achi and pulled down his collar to shout, “Don’t fall for his goading, you hear me? He did it on purpose.”

“He wiped out both of my flanks!” Unable to contain himself anymore, Achi screamed back at Bayin. “He’s flaunting his military might to me. That son of a bitch!”

Three days ago, Achi took down Xiao Chiye’s left flank troops, and today, Xiao Chiye stood there and blew out Achi’s left and right flanks. The vanguards of both flanks were all elites. Achi’s heart was dripping blood. He felt this to be a warning from Xiao Chiye, and the threat was now rubbing it into his face.

“I’m going to kill him!” Achi lost control and growled. “I will kill—”

With one fist, Bayin punched Achi off his horse. Having lost its master, the horse slowed down and stopped ahead. Achi rolled in the snow, his chest heaving violently.

“The Hero knows all. If you still want to merge the Scorpions into the Twelve Tribes, then finish Xiao Chiye off tomorrow morning.” Bayin said in a deep voice. “Losing your mind will reduce you to being a jackal, and a jackal can’t bite a wolf to death. You’d best clear your head up!”

Achi lay on the snowfield and grabbed a handful of snow to wipe his face with. He climbed to his feet and caught up to his horse without so much as another word.

The atmosphere surrounding the cavalry was glum and heavy. With Achi and Bayin no longer speaking, those at the back did not dare to open their mouths either. They ran in the snowstorm for another two hours, and their battle steeds were all exhausted to the point they were panting. Fortunately, the route markers indicated they had reached the end.

“The saker falcon will notify the reinforcements to hurry this way.” Achi slowed his horse and stepped onto the bank. “We can wait here.”

Bayin was feeling uneasy deep down. Due to his introversion, he took particular notice of his environments. The boundless expanse of snow obstructed the world from view and prevented him from getting a clear look at the situation a few steps away, but he could keenly sense that this was not the southeastern part of Duanzhou from where they came.

“We went the wrong way.” Bayin muttered and squinted his eyes to keep out the gale. Amid the fog of snow that was being blown away, he indistinctly caught a glimpse of what lay ahead. “This place is...”

A horse at the back that had yet to step ashore suddenly lost its footing, and its hind hooves slid into a hole in the ice. The Scorpion on horseback yanked at the reins in the blinding snowstorm, intending to drive the horse back on ice, but in its panic, it broke its hind knees against the edge of the ice and neighed as its entire body overturned into the water!

The unit was promptly thrown into disarray. The horses all started panicking, and the Scorpions berated them to no avail. Fearing that they would slide in too, they could only lash out with their whips hard. Achi heard the sound of heavy armors among the noise. He initially thought it was a misperception, but not long later, the pitch-black Armored Cavalry materialized for real in the snow.

No matter how dumb Achi was, he could also realize what was happening by now. He retreated and shouted, “Get on your horses and move fast!”

This particular route marker was genuine enough, but Xiao Chiye had long shifted it away from its original location. The footprints were indeed a diversionary cover-up; Xiao Chiye’s real intention had been to herd them towards this place.

Seeing Bayin still in his original spot, Achi bumped into him hard and cursed, “Get on your horse! Snap out of your fucking daze!”

Bayin turned his eyes to look at Achi. As if sensing it too, Achi looked ahead, and the color drained from his face in horror.

The pitch darkness ahead was none other than the Chashi Sinkhole.

Achi wiped the sweat at his temple and looked out as far as he could, only to see that both flanks of the Libei Armored Cavalry had already surrounded them from both sides and were now ahead of them. He turned his head back and saw Xiao Chiye.

Seven years ago, the Biansha Cavalry buried 40,000 Duanzhou Garrison Troops alive here. Seven years later, on the same snowstorm night, Xiao Chiye used the same battle formation to push them before the Chashi Sinkhole. Achi did not know Xiao Chiye, but in this instant, he strangely understood Xiao Chiye's intent.

Bayin's Adam's apple bobbed. He squeezed his cowhide-bound book and muttered Hasen's words, "... returning the favor, tit for tat."

Xiao Chiye was the wolf that was the toughest to deal with. Bayin knew Xiao Chiye would even bite Hasen to death in order to retrieve Xiao Fangxu. Once an opponent like this committed his scars to mind, he would retaliate and tear away at his foes with his fangs on his own terms.

"Reinforcements will be here in a while." Achi unexpectedly calmed down at this juncture. He stared at Xiao Chiye. "Hang in there until then, and this place will still be our slaughterhouse."

Achi had never seen Xiao Chiye's real appearance before today, but through that helmet, he seemed to sense Xiao Chiye's scoffing. Achi did not believe in the Biansha gods; he believed in his own tattoo. As a Scorpion surviving in difficult circumstances between the gaps, he would not concede defeat until the very moment his head took leave of his body.

However, Xiao Chiye similarly believed in his tattoo. That was his father, and also his Libei. The scar Hasen left behind burned all the time. He had suppressed it for far too long, so long he could even hear Langli Blade howling in its sheath.

The violent gale under the snowy dome rode roughshod over the snowflakes, tearing them into pieces of willow catkins flying in the wind. At the moment when the swarm of white blinded his eyes, Achi saw the Armored Cavalry charge. Their armors were like dusty blades, charging head-on towards the Biansha cavalry with the momentum of a tempestuous storm that brushed away all the dust on them to reveal sharp blades that glinted coldly in all its glory.

The moment the iron hammer came swinging, Xiao Chiye parried it with Langli Blade. His horse did not stop as he led the Armored Cavalry to crash head-on into the Biansha Cavalry amid the screeching sound of friction as blade scraped against blade. Meanwhile, the armor-clad Lang Tao Xue Jin, clad in heavy armor, threw its head back and knocked askew a pony that was blocking the way.

The Biansha Cavalry was like a canteen that had been crushed until it burst. They resisted Xiao Chiye's onslaught of heavy blows for just a mere few blinks of an eye before they were repeatedly rammed back in a retreat by the "war chariot" battle formation. The sinkhole stretched across them a short distance away; if they retreated again, they would no doubt plunge into it.

Achi lifted the iron hammer that weighed a hundred *jin*.<sup>1</sup> In this short period as they crossed swords, he had come to recognize Xiao Chiye as the most vital part of the Libei Armored Cavalry. He knocked over an Armored Cavalryman before him with a swing of his hammer and heard the other man's head slam into the snow with a "thud". Hooves stepped over the body, and in a split second, he was already swinging his hammer right in Xiao Chiye's face.

But he struck at empty air!

Achi thought Xiao Chiye would follow up his victory with an attack, but Xiao Chiye did not. He retreated back in front of the Libei Armored Cavalry, and this "war chariot" instantly underwent a transformation.

Bayin crowded at the back with his book in his arms and got a clear look as the Libei Armored Cavalry transformed.

Was that the Libei Armored Cavalry?

That was a heavy-duty war chariot!

Xiao Chiye was unwilling to give up on Xiao Fangxu's heavy armors; he did not want to prove his old man wrong. It was through Lu Guangbai, Qi Zhuyin, and Yin Chang that he acquired a whole new Libei Armored Cavalry.

Xiao Chiye cast away the former long blades of the Libei Armored Cavalry on the basis of them being "heavy" and equipped the Libei Armored Cavalry under his command with new blades. These were the real long blades, with a length so long that there was no way for the iron hammers to get close. He had observed Lu Guangbai's infantrymen at the battlegrounds. The "war chariot" battle formation was able to conceal their weakness of not being fast enough. Xiao Chiye directly cut off their need to give chase; he wanted the Biansha Cavalry to come lunging into them themselves.

That offensive and defensive battle Qi Zhuyin fought in the war zone was skillful in its swap between light and heavy cavalry. Xiao Chiye consolidated the Imperial Army and the Libei Armored Cavalry together.

As long as they appeared on the same battlefield, they would have erratic and unpredictable ways of fighting. Hasen did not reign supreme when it came to field warfare.

The last was also the most crucial point—Yin Chang’s “dagger” squad.

Yin Chang modified Lu Guangbai’s “war chariot” battle formation and split the soldiers into “daggers” to advance onwards. Hairigu secretly learned this move on the sly, allowing Xiao Chiye to find a new opportunity back at the Beiyuan Hunting Grounds to turn things around. Xiao Chiye then incorporated the “dagger” into his own “war chariot” formation, thereby giving rise to the current Libei Armored Cavalry of tremendous might and formidability.

Very quickly, Achi came to understand that the iron hammers were now useless, as they could not avoid the long blades to get close to the Libei Armored Cavalry. But when he swapped out the iron hammers, the Libei Armored Cavalry would attack in columns. It was just like several bayonets suddenly flicking out of a box to stab at the Scorpions until they could not even fend for themselves.

Those bright, shiny edges of the blades extended and retracted at will.

This was equivalent to a heavy-duty war chariot, one that discarded the wooden structure of the common siege weapons, was completely forged with iron and steel, and came with improved mobility. As long as Xiao Chiye was willing to give the go-ahead, the Libei Armored Cavalry could even dismantle on the spot and switch over to field squads to lay ambushes.

Even though it was still in its infancy and was even a little raw around its edge, it was undoubtedly a Libei Armored Cavalry that completely belonged to Xiao Chiye.

Achi saw defeat looming right before his eyes, but then he heard a falcon’s cries among the snow. His saker falcon retracted its wings and circled its way down the heavens, bringing with it the reinforcement troops he had been waiting a long time for.

“Why are there so many soldiers?” Yin Chang was about to sit on the ground to pour away the watery blood in his boots when he saw the cavalry swarming out from the southwest like ants. He hurriedly clambered to his feet and stomped his feet into his boots. “We’re done for. This is almost fucking three times our military strength!”

The Scorpions’ morale was instantly boosted. Sounds of killing crashed over them like the roaring waves as both parties engaged in a battle of life

and death before the Chashi Sinkhole. Gleaming blood splattered through the snow. The Libei Armored Cavalry and Imperial Army went all out. The only chance they had to break out of the encirclement was now. If they missed the opportunity tonight, they were as good as dead!

Gu Jin lifted Hairigu by his back collar and kicked him into the crowd of people. Seeing Yin Chang limping a little, he leveled his blade to strike away the Biansha Cavalry and shouted to the old man. “Elder Yin, are you injured?!”

Yin Chang wrinkled his red nose, rotated his ankle a few times self-consciously, and answered, “My, my foot is itching from all that soaking.”

Hairigu nimbly dodged the scimitars from where he was in the crowd. Every now and then, he even had to flash his little golden token to the Imperial Army, who had gone berserk from the killing. “We’re on the same side!”

On the other end, Achi, who was far more adept at wielding the scimitar than the hammer, was already battling it out with Xiao Chiye. The trampling and stomping in the tussle between both parties’ troops caused the ground to shake. No one knew whose horse flipped over first, but following that, the edges of the sinkhole collapsed entirely, sending everyone tumbling into it in one jumbled mess.

The Imperial Army ingested several mouthfuls of mud and popped their heads out from among the dense mass of enemies to shout to each other. “Fuck! Did Second Master get jostled down there too?!”

As Lang Tao Xue Jin rolled and sank into the bottom of the pit, Achi pounced from a rock. Unable to get to his feet in time, Xiao Chiye lifted his foot to kick Achi in the chest, causing Achi to stagger back a few steps from the impact. Meanwhile, Xiao Chiye had already straightened up. The hammer came swinging almost in his face, and as Xiao Chiye dodged the blow, he used his arm guard to block the attack.

“THUD!”

Feng Ta Shuang Yi knocked over the old and dilapidated wooden fence as Shen Zechuan galloped across the snowstorm with his overcoat flapping in the wind. Frosty snow flew between his facial features, his side profile reflecting a somber, forbidding harshness.

Fei Sheng, not daring to be complacent and careless on the battlefield, followed closely behind Shen Zechuan’s horse with the Imperial Bodyguards.

Tantai Hu, not daring to let Shen Zechuan take the lead either, led his troops to chase after the Prefectural Lord with such haste that he was almost standing on his saddle. He shouted at Shen Zechuan across the gale, “Your Lordship! It’s right in the northeast—the Chashi Sinkhole!”

Sprays of flying snow erupted under his horse’s hooves. Shen Zechuan had gripped the reins until it was soaked. He had not made a single stop on the journey here, and Feng Ta Shuang Yi was already exhausted.

Chashi Sinkhole!

All that Shen Zechuan passed by on his way was a white, boundless expanse of wilderness. But the moment he entered the vicinity of Chashi Sinkhole, that nightmare came surging to the surface like a tidal wave, and the familiar stench of blood choked his nose and throat. Shen Zechuan gasped for air, unable to see Xiao Chiye in the bloodshed.

Shen Zechuan shouted in a grim voice. “Xiao Ce’an—!”

Fei Sheng surveyed the surroundings and saw Yin Chang, who in turn saw the Prefectural Lord all dressed in white from afar—a rather conspicuous sight here. He jumped up and down, waving his blade as he shouted. “The sinkhole, in the sinkhole, Second Master is in the sinkhole!”

In that instant, Shen Zechuan’s face turned a shade of ghastly white. With icy-cold limbs, he rolled off the horse; even his hands that were holding onto Yang Shan Xue were trembling. Blood seeped through his white robe, wetting it as he stepped over the corpses. All he could see was the sinkhole that appeared in his nightmares millions of times.

Shen Zechuan could not bother with anyone else. He stumbled along the sinkhole and slid down. Heavy snow filled all over the sky. He trembled as he shouted, “Xiao Ce’an...”

Nightmare and reality overlapped. Shen Zechuan had seen his own body strewn among the corpses here before, but he had never imagined that Xiao Chiye would be among those lying here.

Fei Sheng had never seen the Prefectural Lord in such a state. He hurried over to help him up, but Shen Zechuan refused. He dug up the body before Lang Tao Xue Jin among the bloodied mountain of corpses, raking so hard with his hands that they both turned slick with blood. The ‘corpse’ suddenly raised a hand, and grabbed hold of Shen Zechuan’s wrist with speed and accuracy.

“Lanzhou,” Xiao Chiye felt suffocated under the helmet. “Lan...”

Shen Zechuan had already pushed off Xiao Chiye's helmet. In that whirling snow, he got a clear look at Xiao Chiye's face, and with no regard for the bloodstains, he hugged Xiao Chiye's head tightly in his embrace.

Xiao Chiye backhandedly stroked Shen Zechuan's back. He wanted to say something, but in the sougning of the wind, he heard Shen Zechuan call out over and over in a small voice.

"Xiao Chiye..."

Xiao Chiye's heart ached with such ferocity that it broke into pieces.



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#### Footnotes

1. 斤 *jin* or catty, 1 *jin* equal to 0.5 kg



## CHAPTER 209 : EMBRACE



Chashi Sinkhole was Shen Zechuan's darkest hour.

When he first entered Zhao Zui temple, the insides of the temple were old and dilapidated, with broken windows that could not keep out the chilly wind. Ji Gang kept the only spot that was sheltered from the wind for him to sleep, and he would rest his head on his arms, not daring to tell his *shifu* that he could not fall asleep.

Back then, Shen Zechuan could still remember Ji Mu's face. There were shadows of Hua Pingting in his big brother, a handsome man with delicate features. The number of matchmakers coming to play go-between while he was still at home was enough to break their threshold from all those coming and going.

"I've been thinking about my promotion," Ji Mu was squatting in the courtyard, picking up dumplings to eat. "Let's move to the eastern side once I'm promoted."

Shen Zechuan imitated him and stuffed himself with dumplings until his cheeks were bulging. He nodded and slurred his words with his mouth full, "I'll watch sister-in-law for you."

Ji Mu had a childhood playmate, a maiden who originally lived next door to them and later moved away to the east. This maiden's father played up to those in power and was always thinking of marrying his daughter off to someone in the *yamen*. In order to prove himself, Ji Mu enlisted in the

military and worked hard all day attending to official duties, hoping to wed the maiden before she was married away.

Ji Gang did not earn much. Their family was not well-off. With two sons to raise, Hua Pingting even saved her own dowry as funds for her sons' future weddings. Seeing as Ji Mu was already of age, she and Ji Gang contemplated engaging a matchmaker.

Winter in Duanzhou was a scene of desolation. The Chashi River lay to the east. When they were a little younger, they would go onto the ice in winter to pull sleds. Shen Zechuan was a smart one, and he always coaxed the little rascals who tagged along to be the horses while he himself played the old master sitting on the sled as he directed them to run all over the place.

Ji Mu told Ji Gang at that time, "My younger brother will definitely go far in the future."

Hua Pingting treated Shen Zechuan as her own son, and so Ji Mu treated Shen Zechuan as his own kin younger brother. When Xiao Chiye and Xiao Jiming were in Libei riding horses and drawing bows, Ji Mu was still taking Shen Zechuan running around all over the mountains and plains. Shen Zechuan was very sloppy in his training of the Ji Clan boxing style before he was fifteen years old, but Ji Mu always covered for him and would not let Hua Pingting admonish him.

In the third year of the reign of Xiande, Ji Mu was promoted to Squad Commander. The entire family was delighted, and Hua Pingting started making arrangements by counting the family's savings over and over again as she and Ji Gang prepared to hire a matchmaker to propose marriage to the maiden in the east.

At that time, Ji Mu had to be on duty. Shen Zechuan took the food Hua Pingting packed for him and went to the garrison troops camp to deliver the meal to his elder brother. That night was the last time Shen Zechuan saw Hua Pingting. His *shiniang* stood at the entrance of the courtyard, where she fastened his lined jacket for him and put on his fur collar. She covered him up securely and gave him the instructions to "*leave and return early.*"

Ji Mu secretly gave Shen Zechuan wine to drink, and Shen Zechuan drank it by dipping his chopsticks in it, looking very much like a green radish wrapped in a lined jacket sitting among a row of tough and muscular soldiers. When the snow fell, these rugged men said that the timely snow

was an auspicious omen for a good harvest; Duanzhou was going to have a bumper harvest next year.

Ji Mu rapped his chopsticks on the porcelain bowl and sang the tune “*A Song for Peaceful and Tranquil Times*”.<sup>1</sup> At that time, he was only twenty years old and was about to marry and bring home a pretty wife. Both brothers got along harmoniously with one another, and their parents at home were free from illnesses and worries. He was right in the prime of his life.

Every time Shen Zechuan thought back to that night, tears would stream down his cheeks. He lost the courage to reminisce and walk down memory lane when he was in Zhao Zui Temple; he no longer dreamed of those times again. Over the course of seven years in which he was plagued by nightmares, Ji Mu turned into a grotesque skeleton. Shen Zechuan forgot what his elder brother looked like; he could not even remember their last conversation.

Why didn’t he pull Ji Mu up?

Shen Zechuan crawled his way out, then fell back in again. In the first few years, he would still lie within and cry inconsolably. And so, “Shen Zechuan” was left behind here. He stood up and saw the snow burying himself.

Military boots trod upon the snow, making slight noises.

Shen Zechuan apathetically turned his head back and saw a travel-worn Ji Mu in the snow. Ji Mu was clean this night, without a trace of injury on him. He held on to the hilt of his blade and approached Shen Zechuan.

Ji Mu had not changed at all even after seven years. His cheeks were slightly red from the freezing cold, and he huffed breaths of hot air as he walked. All that hostility during the struggle in the sea of blood vanished without a trace. Shen Zechuan looked at him and remembered the “*Song for Peaceful and Tranquil Times*” he sang before his departure.

Shen Zechuan, who was already as tall as Ji Mu, called out wearily, “Ge.”

Ji Mu stood still before Shen Zechuan. As the snowstorm tousled the messy hair on his temples, he asked, “Why aren’t you going home?”

“The snow is too heavy. I forgot the way,” Shen Zechuan answered.

Ji Mu laughed as he looked at Shen Zechuan. “Silly lad. Mother’s looking for you.”

Shen Zechuan looked back and saw Hua Pingting on the other end. *Shiniang* was carrying a lantern in the heavy snow, the hem of her skirt swaying in the wind. As he watched her, the tears started to gush from his eyes.

He remembered everything. That was why he wanted to forget it all.

Ji Mu held his blade steady and passed through Shen Zechuan to walk towards Hua Pingting.

Shen Zechuan suddenly could not contain himself and shouted, “Ge!”

With a teary voice, Shen Zechuan disconsolately attempted to grab Ji Mu. But Ji Mu did not turn back. Shen Zechuan chased after him. Every step he took, the blood under his feet rose an inch. He hastily started running, but he could not break free of his shackles. Eventually, he fell into the pool of blood, where he was bogged down by corpses. He shouted himself hoarse after Ji Mu, “Come back!”

Ji Mu was already about to vanish in the snow.

Shen Zechuan failed to grasp hold of anything as the blood swallowed him up in the inundated sinkhole. The terror of drowning swept over him. He could not breathe. All he could do was struggle and look on helplessly as that faint light died out.

“Shen Lanzhou—!”

Xiao Chiye scooped up Shen Zechuan. Those sturdy shoulders of his could stand up against the assault of the storm. He brought with him the light of the blazing sun, and he used the strong wind to sweep this dark, gloomy world clean, dispelling the snowstorm. He was scorching hot, so scalding that there was no room for anything else around Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan abruptly returned to his senses. He was soaked all over through and through. Xiao Chiye cupped his cheeks, touched the tip of his nose to his in the darkness, and kissed him soothingly. Still gasping for breath, Shen Zechuan wrapped his arms around Xiao Chiye’s neck, his eyes turning damp as they clung to each other in a snuggle.

Xiao Chiye leaned in closer to coax him, “Lanzhou, come back. Come back to me.”

With his heart still palpitating, Shen Zechuan nodded. He bumped his forehead against Xiao Chiye’s and gazed at Xiao Chiye with panicky eyes. Xiao Chiye wiped the corner of his eyes with his thumbs and caressed his cheeks.

“Everything is alright now.” Xiao Chiye dropped him a kiss each time he spoke. “Give me a hug.”

The military tent was newly erected. The fire in the charcoal brazier did not burn strong enough and went out in the middle of the night. Both of them slept on a simple plank bed, padded with a thin mattress underneath, and with an overcoat blanketing them. Fearing that Lanzhou would fall sick, Xiao Chiye grabbed his icy hands, stuffed them into his clothes, and pressed them against his own chest.

Shen Zechuan’s breathing calmed as he grasped at Xiao Chiye’s clothes until they wrinkled. Not once had Xiao Chiye’s arms ever let go of him, and it was in this position he covered them with the overcoat and whispered to him underneath.

“Are you cold?” Xiao Chiye asked.

Shen Zechuan buried his face in the crook of Xiao Chiye’s neck and answered in a quiet voice, “cold.”

Xiao Chiye embraced Shen Zechuan tightly and pressed down in the center of the top of his head with his chin. With eyes half-closed, he said, “Stick a little closer, and you won’t be cold anymore.”

Both of them clung to each other for warmth, like a pair of mutually dependent cubs relying on each other for survival. Shen Zechuan reached out to feel his way to Xiao Chiye’s back, his touch so icy-cold that Xiao Chiye inhaled sharply. Touching that wolf set Shen Zechuan’s mind at ease. His touch was careful and delicate, as though he was stroking a wolf’s fur.

The stroking of the prominent muscles on Xiao Chiye’s back tickled him, but there was nowhere for him to hide, so he could only tilt his head back slightly and endure the waves of tingling sensation washing over the small of his back. Eventually, he could no longer bear it and lifted a hand to grab hold of Shen Zechuan’s wrist before turning over to pin Lanzhou down beneath him. His breathing was slightly heavy as he pressed up against him without moving.

Shen Zechuan sulked in a huff. “Didn’t you want to hug?”

“Is that what you call a hug?” Xiao Chiye leaned in closer to press down on him, then repeated his question in a whisper. “Is that what you call a hug?”

Shen Zechuan was of the opinion that this voice was one that escaped from his throat. He looked at Xiao Chiye, seeming to be choked with silent indignation.

Xiao Chiye released Shen Zechuan's wrist and slid his hand down along the latter's waist, his touch turning Shen Zechuan's face a shade of red. That was ticklish. Initially, he could endure it, but Xiao Chiye pressed against him with his chest, stirring him up so much that his expressive eyes gradually glazed over with water again. In between short, urgent breaths, he tilted his head up and smiled.

Xiao Chiye loved Lanzhou's smile to the moon and back—when those half-shut eyes rippled with tidal surges of emotions, with his Xiao Ce'an's silhouette drowning in them.

Shen Zechuan smiled until his neck turned damp and his clothes clung to his back, soaked with sweat. He felt tired as he calmed his breathing to welcome Xiao Chiye's kiss. It was warm under the overcoat, so stifling that Shen Zechuan forgot all about the snowstorm.

Xiao Chiye knew Lanzhou did not sleep well, but tonight, he was here. And he was burning with the ambition to make sure that he was all Lanzhou ever dreamed of from now on.



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## Footnotes

1. 清平调 *Qing Ping Diao*, or A Song/Tune for Peaceful and Tranquil Times by the famous poet, Li Bai.

## CHAPTER 210 : QINGSHU TRIBE



The snowstorm was still raging the next day at the hour of mao, and the charcoal braziers in the military tents had all gone cold. Various generals gathered around a map on the table in the tent and waited for Xiao Chiye to speak.

The battle over at the Chashi Sinkhole was not considered a tough fight, but it was rather perilous. Xiao Chiye took advantage of the snowstorm and led Achi away on ice from the southeast to the Chashi Sinkhole, where the deployment of Biansha troops was relatively weak. Achi's reinforcement troops came so quickly because there was still a relay station in Duanzhou, but as he had shifted his focus to the southeast and was helpless against Xiao Chiye's Libei Armored Cavalry, he gave Tantai Hu, who always had his eyes on the movements in Duanzhou, the opportunity to provide diagonal support.

Xiao Chiye had already removed his armor last night. After the military medic withdrew from the tent, he moved his shoulders and arms a little and looked around at them. "We are not here this time to fight a showdown battle with them but to wrest Duanzhou from them. Now that Achi is dead and a large number of their troops are still stationed in the northeast, the number of troops in Duanzhou is less than 10,000. It's an excellent opportunity."

Fei Sheng brought the medicine to Shen Zechuan and stole a few glances at the latter, noting the Prefectural Lord to be in passable spirits.

“Quite a number of cavalymen escaped yesterday.” Yin Chang pressed a finger down to the southeast of Duanzhou. “The troops here will suspect we are going to attack Duanzhou once they receive the news. They will definitely move to intercept us first.”

The old man feared no one during military discussions. He even casually tied his messy beard together. It was just that he did not dare to drink in Shen Zechuan’s and Xiao Chiye’s presence and could only rely on strong tea to satisfy his cravings.

Xiao Chiye did not reply immediately; instead, he left the opportunity to Tantai Hu.

In these two years, Tantai Hu had gradually come to gain some insights and opinions of his own. He pondered over the Second Master’s meaning and raised a hand to point at Duanzhou’s location. “We are now at the Chashi Sinkhole, which is some distance away from Duanzhou. If the troops in the southeast come here to intercept us, then the military strength in the city of Duanzhou will remain unchanged.” He looked at Xiao Chiye with some apprehension and continued when he saw Xiao Chiye’s neutral expression. “Get Wu Ziyu, who is stationed in Mount Luo, to make a detour to the west gate of Duanzhou when that happens, and we will be able to launch a surprise attack directly.”

Xiao Chiye nodded as an indication that Tantai Hu was right.

With a slightly heavy expression, Gu Jin looked at the Chashi River and said, “We can lure all the troops to the Chashi Sinkhole by being bait, but Master, the Chashi River lies right behind us. The moment Amu’er seizes the opportunity to mobilize troops for a sneak attack, or if Hasen is deployed over from the south, then we will end up being attacked from the front and rear. By then, Wu Ziyu would have already gone around to the west of Duanzhou. We will be left without reinforcements.”

“By saying that, you’re breaking the hearts of those in the war zone.” Xiao Chiye watched Shen Zechuan drink his medicine in between speaking. When he was done, he continued, “Is the Shasan Camp not reinforcement?”

Gu Jin paused for a moment, then shook his head. “I can’t trust Guo Weili.”

Xiao Chiye did not continue the thread of conversation. He raised his hand and patted Gu Jin lightly on his back. “My eldest brother has a clear view of the situation from where he is in Dajing. We must obtain Duanzhou



at all costs. There's still Lu Guangbai and *shifu* on the battlegrounds. The Three Great Camps will certainly do their best to stall Hasen. As for Amu'er..." Xiao Chiye smiled derisively. "The tribe he can deploy at such urgent notice is the Qingshu tribe."

Qi Zhuyin wanted to send troops to attack the Qingshu tribe. The Empress Dowager and the Ministry of War did not consent, but did that mean there was absolutely nothing she could do about it?

"Qidong's military provisions are being supplied by the Yan clan, and the carriages are already heading for the Cejun Commandery three days ago." All Shen Zechuan could taste in his mouth was bitterness.

"Commander-in-chief Qi should have already eaten her fill by now."

As long as they could let Qi Zhuyin eat her fill, she would dare to play games with Qudu. She did not venture into the capital the last few years to contend with those wily old foxes because she did not want to go looking for trouble. But now that the scimitars were almost right before her eyes, all those concerns went flying out of the windows.

"The speed of the cavalry's advancement in the snow is not as fast as it usually is. We still have time here to prepare," Xiao Chiye said. "The current campground is rather rudimentary. Have the Dunzhou Garrison Troops dig horizontal trenches in the vast expanse of open ground. Take turns to carry out night patrol duty, and send the falcons out for reconnaissance too. The Imperial Army and Libei Armored Cavalry have been fighting hard for several days, so rest up whenever possible. We have to conserve our strength and stall the enemies long enough for Wu Ziyu."

With the heavy snow obstructing the roads, it would be too late to deliver the message on horseback to Mount Luo. The good thing was that the Libei Armored Cavalry all brought along their own falcons, which could deliver the message by flying northwest for a few hours.

Everyone responded in the affirmative. When they started to discuss among themselves, Xiao Chiye reached under the clothes on his chest and groped around for a moment. Shen Zechuan set down the medicine bowl and grasped the folding fan in his sleeves when something suddenly sprang onto him between his sleeves. He fixed his eyes on it—it was a piece of candy wrapped in oil paper.

Xiao Chiye looked at the map with a straight face, looking as if he was not the one who had done it.



Wu Ziyu slept in Mount Luo until he was awakened by the deputy general at midnight. He opened the letter the falcon delivered, read it by the candlelight in the tent, and was instantly wide awake. Not even daring to sleep anymore, he rose to put on his armor. "Where's that Yan Heru?"

He had only just said that when Yan Heru popped his head out from the side of the hanging screen and answered, "Here!"

Wu Ziyu clutched the letter and said gruffly, "Is everyone dead? How can you let him enter as he wishes?"

"Aye, come on now, don't be mad." Yan Heru made his way in with his hands around his little golden abacus. "His Lordship told me to wait here, so I did. What can I do, man? Master Wu, aren't you being a tad too cautious?"

"Marching troops to war is different from merchants transporting goods. If something goes awry, we will literally lose our heads." Wu Ziyu had dealt with the Mount Luo bandits before when he was preparing military provisions for the Libei Armored Cavalry last year, so he was not flustered to encounter those like Yan Heru. He put away the letter first before saying, "I'm going to mobilize troops soon. The Mount Luo bandits have only just been eradicated, so it doesn't reassure me to leave you here. Let's do this. Go and pack up quickly. You'll be leaving with me."

Yan Heru had conducted deals with the Biansha people before. There would be no one to watch him if they were to leave him in Mount Luo, and Wu Ziyu found it inappropriate. He had to keep an eye on him.

Yan Heru was so frightened that his face turned a shade whiter. Hugging his abacus to his chest, he followed behind Wu Ziyu and said, "Blades and swords have no eyes, Master Wu. Why are you taking me with you? My family's businesses all depend on me, so I can't have anything happen to me. You know about Qidong's military provisions? I'm the one delivering them now. I'll just stay behind. Or how about you assign someone to send me back to Cizhou? Dunzhou is fine too!"

"Don't tell me we aren't capable of protecting you given how many soldiers we have." Wu Ziyu bared his frightfully white teeth at Yan Heru. "I'll send you back after the battle. You won't go wrong going with the Prefectural Lord. I assure you it will not hold up your affairs."

Then, without waiting for Yan Heru's reply, he yelled for the guard outside to stuff Yan Heru into the horse carriage and secured him to take him away with the troops.

Wu Ziyu exhaled deeply at the entrance of the tent. It was dark. He took out the crumpled letter earlier to read through it again. The candlelight from the tent fell upon his back. He stared blankly at the word “surprise attack” for a long time.

Launching a surprise attack on Duanzhou concerned Xiao Chiye’s safety. This battle had to be fought not only quickly but also steadily. Two men who were inextricably linked to the war situation were now both at the Chashi Sinkhole, and Wu Ziyu could not afford to take responsibility for the loss of either one of them; he had to shoulder the load of this weight.

But I’m just an escort in the convoy squad.

Deep creases formed between Wu Ziyu’s brows as he frowned. He gazed out through the long night and recalled the first time he met Xiao Chiye.

“Aren’t you the Libei Armored Cavalry?”

Under the blazing sun, Xiao Chiye partially looked back with eyes deep and quiet.

To this day, Wu Ziyu still did not dare to answer Xiao Chiye. He seemed to have tacitly agreed that all he could do was to escort the supply wagons, but at the same time, he was loath to accept it. In his early years, he had been sent to Bianbo Camp as a punishment by Xiao Jiming for drinking on the job. He watched as Zhao Hui became the Commanding General of the Three Great Training Divisions of Liuyang, and now he was watching as Chen Yang and Gu Jin were successively entrusted with heavy responsibilities. Meanwhile, Xiao Chiye held him back in Bianbo Camp, never putting him at the forefront.

Wu Ziyu spat and stuffed the letter back into his bosom. He took two steps in the snow before suddenly leaping up and swinging his clenched fists around in the air a few times.

Since Xiao Chiye dared to give him the opportunity, then he would dare to stake his life and all that he held dear to fight a battle for Second Master!



The snow gradually lightened at the hour of you the next day.

Xiao Chiye put on his heavy armor in the military tent. His armor had taken some damage from the assaults of the iron hammers the day before. The left and right arms were the most severely battered, especially the left arm which had repeatedly taken the brunt of Achi’s iron hammers; it was even somewhat dented.

“Wu Ziyu has already arrived at the western side of Duanzhou. Last through this night, and we will be able to make a simultaneous attack from the front and back with him tomorrow morning.” Xiao Chiye appeared visibly taller when he was in armor, so much so that he was almost blocking off all the light before Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan sat on the plank bed. In the eyes of the others, his presence here had a far deeper purpose. Xiao Jiming’s current daringness to pull out all the stops and let the Three Great Camps in the war zone assist Zhongbo in the battle of Duanzhou was not just because Xiao Chiye was here, but also because Shen Zechuan was here; this was the sincerity Libei saw.

“Fei Sheng, in leading the Imperial Bodyguards to follow after Hairigu, can make up for the temporary lack of scouts.” Shen Zechuan looked on as Xiao Chiye put on his arm guard. “If you don’t come back tomorrow, then the remaining troops will be put at the forefront of the battle.”

The troops that Xiao Chiye left behind were meant to serve as a protective barrier for Shen Zechuan. If something unexpected were to happen, these people would escort Shen Zechuan up north. When the time came, Shasan Camp would naturally come to receive him.

Xiao Chiye’s hand that had been securing the arm guard paused slightly. He looked at Shen Zechuan, understanding what Shen Zechuan meant. Shen Zechuan motioned for Xiao Chiye to squat down. It was inconvenient for Xiao Chiye to squat in his armor, so he simply withdrew a leg and knelt on one knee on a spot near Lanzhou.

Snow outside the tent fell like light willow catkins. Intermittent sounds of Fei Sheng lecturing Yin Chang about his drinking drifted through the air. Meanwhile, the Libei Armored Cavalry in their heavy armor stepped in the snow and moved in concert with one another. It was noisy all around. Inside the tent, tea that had been set above the charcoal brazier with firewood burning in it started to boil.

The expression in Xiao Chiye’s eyes was penetrating. Of late, the dazzling brilliance of his talent was becoming harder and harder to conceal. “Wait for me here.”

“As a matter of fact, I would like to go.” Shen Zechuan’s overcoat slipped off his shoulders. Imitating Xiao Chiye’s past action, he pinched Xiao Chiye’s chin and cocked his head slightly. “But I don’t have that

capability. All I can do is to remain here as the wife who shares hardships with his husband.”

Xiao Chiye, who had been letting Shen Zechuan pinch as he wished, burst out laughing on hearing him.

Shen Zechuan listened as Gu Jin stopped outside the tent. He took the helmet over and put it on for Xiao Chiye. In that brief exchange of glances, he and Xiao Chiye exchanged a kiss across the steel.

“After tonight,” Xiao Chiye’s icy iron fingers caressed Shen Zechuan’s cheeks, his voice low and deep as he said, “my Lanzhou will be the overlord of Zhongbo.”



Xiao Chiye tested his new blade on Achi, but it was far from enough. He was so ravenous he could devour the north and south battlefields. Every battle was a trial; he wanted to hone his blade even faster here.

The Biansha’s massive troops in the southeast numbered 25,000, of which 5,000 were the Scorpions. The remaining cavalymen lacked horses, so many of them could only stand in temporarily as infantrymen. They lost their commanding general, and they were unable to obtain updates from the opposite bank of the Chashi River. Obstructing Xiao Chiye was a measure they were forced to take in order to ensure the safety of Duanzhou.

What Xiao Chiye wanted was for them to be forced into doing so. Once these 25,000 men moved, the western side of Duanzhou would be completely vacated, and Wu Ziyu could immediately begin his attack on the city. The advantage in having Shen Zechuan seal off Zhongbo would then become apparent—Duanzhou would not get any form of assistance, and since their grains had already been supplied to Achi’s 20,000 soldiers, the 8,000 troops remaining behind to keep guard on Duanzhou would all have to meet the enemy’s attack on empty stomachs.

When the battle in Zhongbo started, it was in the dead of night over at the Bianjun Commandery.

News of Achi’s defeat had yet to make it to the Qingshu tribe, whose night patrol squad was presently roaming around the Bianjun Commandery. The commanding general of the Qingshu tribe was called Sumeng, who used to be Hasen’s deputy general and could also partake in the discussion of official affairs when he was under Amu’er command. But because his tribe was not powerful enough, he lost the opportunity to follow Hasen up north. He had also crossed swords with Lu Guangbai here before.

The Bianjun Commandery was devoid of snow tonight. From afar, Suotian Pass looked like a sleeping beauty lying in slumber upon the city. There were bits of floating snow in the air, while no trace of the moon could be seen when one raised their head.

Sumeng felt the Bianjun Commandery to be too silent tonight. It made him feel ill at ease, so he increased the number of people on night patrol, keeping all eyes on the eastern front of the Bianjun Commandery in case of a surprise attack from the garrison troops.

During the latter half of the night, the night patrol squad set up a bonfire in the wilderness, where they filled their stomachs with melted snow as they roasted the dried meat jerky they carried with them.

“The Scorpions in the north have been winning battles.” A cavalryman of the Qingshu tribe said in the Biansha tongue as he broke off the dried meat jerky. “They’re about to merge into the Twelve tribes and become a tribe near the north. By then, will we still be able to get our hands on provisions?”

Sumeng drank the melted snow, shaking his head as he said, “The Hero will never allow the Scorpions to become a tribe of their own. They are the slaves of the Liaoying tribe.”

The mothers of the Scorpions were all natives of Dazhou, and with the emergence of traitors like Hairigu, it would be difficult to convince the masses even if they were victorious in battles. Moreover, the person who all the tribes in the desert answered to was Hasen.

“If they can give us Gedale,” the cavalryman smiled at Sumeng, “then we won’t have to worry about starving in the future anymore.”

Sumeng gulped down the melted snow and did not answer immediately. He had sounded Amu’er out before, but did not receive a response. The Qingshu tribe was not a powerful tribe, and the Liaoying tribe of today was no longer the minor tribe it had been in the past. In addition, the Huiyan tribe had thrown in their lot with Libei, leaving their Qingshu tribe behind here to choke on sand with the Bianjun Garrison Troops. But who would have expected the Bianjun Commandery Garrison Troops themselves to take off in the end? After being stationed here day in and day out, Sumeng could not see a future. He pinned all his hopes on his son, but as it happened, his son came to a premature end at the beginning of spring this year.

“There is purpose in waiting.” These were the only words of comfort Sumeng could offer. “At least we won’t face reprisals from Libei if we stay here.”

The cavalrymen burst into laughter.

Halfway through the bonfire, a cavalryman saw several stray dogs behind him. He brandished a withered branch at them and shoo-ed at them to drive them away. But these stray dogs were so starving they were drooling and panting warm air as they circled the cavalry.

“Chase them away,” Sumeng ordered.

So the cavalryman stood up, grabbed his scimitar, and started to stomp his feet as well. The stray dogs cowered back for a moment, and the cavalryman, with his bulging belly, turned back to suggest to Sumeng. “We can hunt them. Dogskins can—”

Before the cavalryman could finish his words, the stray dogs pounced. It was as though they had gone mad as they tore at the cavalryman with their fangs and dragged him with such force that he fell over to the ground. The dogs latched onto his arm that had been holding onto the scimitar. The leather could not withstand the sharp fangs of the stray dogs, and the pain cut so deep that it sent him screaming.

Sumeng promptly stood up, and the cavalrymen on night patrol caught up to the cavalryman in distress and kicked out at the stray dogs as they dragged him back. Sumeng noticed that the eyes of these dogs were oddly red with rage, so to be on the safe side, he told the cavalrymen, “Shoot them to death with the bows. Something’s wrong with these dogs.”

A few faint cries of a Chinese francolin reverberated through the night. As if sensing danger, the stray dogs turned tail and fled as the cavalrymen got on their horses and drew their bows. The dogs ran westward in a panic, and the cavalrymen followed in hot pursuit.

A stray dog took an arrow to the leg and limped as it continued to flee onward. The cavalryman behind it drew his scimitar and leaned down with the intention to end the stray dog with one slash in between the sprinting of his horse. They galloped wildly, splashing froths of snow in the air. An explosive “whoosh” rang out, and a long arrow came hurtling from the west. The cavalryman instantly fell off his horse. His legs, however, were still hanging from the saddle, and he ended up getting dragged by the horse across the demarcation line.

Oh, shit!

Sumeng swore to himself, feeling a sense of foreboding. Amu'er had long instructed them not to engage Qidong in battle at this moment. As long as they did not attack, Qi Zhuyin could not step to the fore. He immediately reined in his horse and shouted, "Fall back!"

But the torches ahead lit up all of a sudden, illuminating the surroundings brightly.

"Qi Zhuyin!" From where he was on horseback, Sumeng decried in the Dazhou tongue, "Women are devious—"

Qi Zhuyin stood in front of the combat-ready garrison troops in full battle array. As she crushed the snow beneath her foot, she leisurely said, "Light up the beacon tower. Inform Qudu that the Qingshu tribe has breached the boundary line and invaded our territory."

The Qidong Garrison Troops abruptly lined up their shields, and the cold steel of their blades glinted and flashed.



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## CHAPTER 211 : HEAVY FROST



Warning: Animal Abuse :V

A boundless expanse of thick clouds swarmed forth and swallowed up the sunlight. Falcons from Libei soared across the vast horizon. Meng was the first to swoop down. Under the cries of the falcons, it spread its wings, dispersing the thin fog as it looked down upon the stretch of pure white snow. The saker falcons came from the south like a volley of sharp arrows shooting straight towards the falcons. Letting out a long, loud cry, Meng spun and brushed past the military banner beneath. The sound of war drums instantly reverberated through the sinkhole.

Cavalrymen surged towards them with the momentum of a tidal wave incoming from the south.

The Armored Cavalry remained still. Once the scimitars of the Biansha Cavalrymen could be clearly seen, Yin Chang drew his old blade with a loud clang and roared at the sky, “Unveil the trenches—!”

The Imperial Army, who had been lying prostrate in the snowfield, promptly released their grip on the ropes at both ends, exposing the newly dug trenches. Meanwhile, the Biansha Cavalry, renowned for their speed, was charging long-distance towards them when they crossed the trenches. Unable to stop in time, the horses fell into the trenches, and cracking sounds instantly rang out as their front knees broke on impact.

The vanguards of the Biansha Cavalry tumbled into the trenches, throwing the array at the head into disorder. The Imperial Army instantly drew their blades and pounced like wolves to engage this batch of

vanguards in the trenches. Without losing speed, the Biansha Cavalry at the back spurred their horses into leaping over the trenches to continue with their charge forward.

Even as Yin Chang hacked down the Biansha Cavalry, he still had to dodge the hooves leaping over his head, or he might just get his head kicked into a bloody pulp in a moment of inattention. He bent over and shouted over to the other end, “Laohu, what’s wrong with you? You dug this way too narrow!”

Tantai Hu’s palms were slick with sweat. He heard Yin Chang’s shouts as he fixed his eyes on the Biansha Cavalry galloping over, but he did not dare to divert his attention to answer. Gripping his own twin blades, he silently recited Tantai Long’s name to himself.

A Biansha cavalryman’s scimitar was already swinging towards him when the ponies were right about to reach him. Tantai Hu rolled forward, and Xiao Chiye, who was behind him, stuck out Langli Blade in a flash, making use of the cavalryman’s momentum to stab through him. Blood splattered. Leading the garrison troops, Tantai Hu crouched and slashed his blade across to cut off the ponies’ legs.

The ponies screamed and threw back their heads as they toppled over to the ground, like wild geese that had lost their wings. The cavalrymen fell off the ponies and rolled. Tantai Hu wiped the blood from his face, lifted both blades, and roared, “Revenge avenged!”

After getting thwarted again and again, the Biansha Cavalry decreased the momentum of their charge, no longer willing to advance rashly. But the distance between them had already shrunk. They wanted to retreat, but Xiao Chiye was now advancing.

Xiao Chiye tapped gently on the abdomen of his horse with the back of his blade, and Lang Tao Xue Jin charged forth. The sound of the Libei Armored Cavalry’s hooves was as resounding as muffled thunder as they pushed forth urgently with the snowstorm moving in tandem. They rammed into the Biansha Cavalry, breaking the latter’s battle array into tatters. The “war chariot” formation left the Biansha Cavalry with no time to catch their breaths. As long as they were slammed over to the ground by the heavy armors, the iron horseshoes of the Libei Armored Cavalry would trample over flesh and blood as they steamrolled over the Biansha cavalrymen’s bodies.

A saker falcon swept past overhead, with the wind trailing in its path as it attempted to flee east. Meng swooped through the snow and grabbed hold of the saker falcon with its talons. As it passed by Libei's wolf banner, it ripped off one of the saker falcon's wings before flinging the saker falcon away.

The Biansha Cavalry retreated like the receding tide, and one of its young generals galloped on horseback and yelled a series of swift commands. He withdrew the regular cavalry, then chided the Scorpions in the Biansha tongue for them to advance. The scimitars were instantly drawn back as the cavalymen retreated with their eyes on the Libei Armored Cavalry.

Xiao Chiye slowly returned to the battle formation, and the protruding columns on all sides followed suit and merged back swiftly. The Scorpions took the place of the vanguards. The iron hammers they swung no longer faced up to one Armored Cavalry, but a group of Armored Cavalries.

Xiao Chiye led the charge. As he sped forth, he suddenly kept away Langli Blade. Following his action, the Armored Cavalry behind him unleashed those new blades of terrifying length. Xiao Chiye bent over slightly as they stabbed hard into the ranks of the Scorpions like a flash of cold glint in the night.

Xiao Chiye flipped the longer hilt with both hands and took away a Scorpion's head as his horse passed by. To reduce its weight, the sharp steel of the long blade was thinned down, and it took just the blink of an eye for throats to be slit. A spray of blood instantly splattered towards his heavy armor along its iron arm before spilling onto the ground.

The iron hammers could not keep up with the speed of the long blades, and they were not long enough to swing and hit the Armored Cavalrymen themselves either. All they could do was watch helplessly as the Libei Armored Cavalry killed their way into their formation and cut down their own ranks into two halves.

Lang Tao Xue Jin broke through the Biansha Cavalry's encirclement and snorted as it turned around on its hooves. Xiao Chiye held his long blade at a slanting angle and shook off the viscous blood on its blade.

Scorpions on both sides gasped for air as they watched all of their center unit tumble off their horses. Everywhere Xiao Chiye passed, streams of flowing blood formed. His long blade practically sliced off the heads of everyone who stood in his way.

A Scorpion pulled at his reins as he murmured in the Biansha tongue, “*Chidaqi...*”

The Libei Armored Cavalry spurred on their horses once more, and the Scorpions, no longer willing to continue fighting, turned their horses around at the sound of that muffled thunder. When the young general of the Biansha Cavalry at the back saw the Scorpions retreating, he hurriedly brandished his blade to berate them, but to no avail. Fear had already been sown in the hearts of the Scorpions. Following the loss of their leader, they had been reduced to mere sacrifices on this battlefield.

Lang Tao Xue Jin galloped out of the pack, while the Libei Armored Cavalry followed close behind on its trail.

The Biansha Cavalry on the south side of the sinkhole were too powerless to resist, as their scimitars were unable to pierce the heavy armors. Those who lost their ponies scrambled over themselves to run like mad in the snow, their urgent breaths of white air resembling a wave of floodwater breaching its dam. Surfaces of snow quaked as the Libei Armored Cavalry made its passage through. A Biansha Cavalryman who was falling behind the rest fell to the ground, and his scimitar went flying from his hand. Before he could even reach out a hand to draw out his piked dagger, he was swallowed up whole under the hooves of the Armored Cavalry.

Xiao Chiye charged out from the fringe of the battle formation and chased after the Biansha Cavalry like Xiao Fangxu had done so thirty years ago, showing no mercy under the iron hooves of his horse. The Libei Armored Cavalry ran on a rampage as they assaulted and massacred their way forward. Heavy armors gravely traversed the battlefield, turning into heavy blades in the midst of emerging from their sheaths in Tantai Hu’s eyes.

As the Scorpion galloped on his horse, he shouted sharply, “*Chidaqi!*” Vicious wolf!

Seven years ago, Xiao Jiming led the troops down south, earning himself the name “River of Ice Armored Cavalry”, and tonight, Xiao Chiye chased after the Biansha Cavalry for twenty *li*, the echoes reverberating through the lands he stepped on.

“Damn...” Yin Chang’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he wiped the blood off his face and recited silently to himself,

The passage of heavy frost through the lands  
leaves not a blade of grass in its wake.



Shen Zechuan was boiling tea in his tent. The Prefectural Lord, inept as he was in the art of tea, simply stuffed the tea leaves into the teapot, filled it with water, and set it on the fire to boil. His folding fan was resting on his knee, and there was a stack of piled-up documents on the desk at his side, yet his eyes were fixed on that tea as he watched it gradually start to boil and bubble over.

Hairigu squatted at the entrance of the tent and peeked through the gap. "It's not drinkable if you boil it like this, or is it?" he asked Fei Sheng.

Fei Sheng did not have a favorable impression of this Scorpion, so he looked ahead with his arms folded and listened to the urgent beats of the war drums. "It's not like you are going to be drinking it, so what are you worrying about?"

Shen Zechuan stared blankly for a long time, and by the time he returned to his senses, the tea had almost evaporated. He lifted the teapot off, added more water, and continued to boil it. The sound of boiling water could cover up some of the drumming from the war drums, which was putting him in a dazed trance. He had not done any work today either.

Seeing as it was late, Fei Sheng lifted the flap to enter. He said softly to Shen Zechuan, "Master, how about taking a quick nap? As soon as there's news from the battlefield, I'll call you."

Shen Zechuan lowered his eyes and did not answer him.

Fei Sheng understood that the Prefectural Lord was reluctant to do so, so he dared not persuade him further and retreated to the entrance of the tent to wait in attendance. The tea in the military tent boiled for the entire night. When it was almost dawn, Shen Zechuan heard the war drums stop.

Shen Zechuan rose and pushed aside the flap. Fei Sheng hurriedly draped a cloak over him and accompanied Shen Zechuan out of the tent. They made their way outside, where Shen Zechuan waited again for a moment in the snowy fog bathed in the first glimmer of dawn. It was extremely frigid in the morning, so frigid that the tip of one's nose would turn red from the freezing cold if one stood for too long out there. The north wind pounced on their faces like sharp knives. After a little less than an hour, Shen Zechuan suddenly heard the rising sound of hooves, followed by

rows after rows of emerging silhouettes overlapping one another. Meng was the first to return to camp.

Fei Sheng heaved a sigh of relief as if he had been relieved of a heavy load. He immediately congratulated Shen Zechuan, “Master, it’s a success!”

Meng circled in the air, wanting to land on Shen Zechuan’s arm. Shen Zechuan was not wearing his arm guard today. Just as he lifted his arm, a whistle sounded from the other end.

Xiao Chiye broke through the boundless expanse of heavy fog and spurred his horse on without stopping. The moment he rushed into the campgrounds, he swept up Shen Zechuan. Lang Tao Xue Jin slowed and turned its hooves around to gallop away into the fog again with both men on its back. Meng, which had pounced on empty air, landed on the military banner and wiped its talons clean as it watched them run further away into the distance with a sidelong glance.

Yin Chang, with arms cradling his war trophy, wanted to say something, but Fei Sheng held him back and did not give him the chance to open his mouth. The rest of them wore a wide array of expressions. Tantai Hu spat on his palms and rubbed them together to warm them up a little. “... Let’s enter the tent first. Military affairs can be reported a little later. There’s no hurry to do so right now.”

With that, he repeated it once more, only to make what he had been trying to cover up all the more conspicuous.

“No hurry to do so now.”

“Whatcha’ mean? No hurry?” Yin Chang craned his neck to look around him and said in bafflement, “We have to head back to the city at the hour of mao. His Lordship’s very much in a hurry!”



## CHAPTER 212 : DREDGE (UP THE PAST)



Lang Tao Xue Jin galloped away from the campgrounds, but did not go far. It came to a stop on a snowy slope at the northern end of the Chashi Sinkhole. The humid fog and snow made Shen Zechuan appear to be situated amidst the vast expanse of misty, rolling waves on the lake's surface. All his eyes could see where they roamed was white.

Xiao Chiye rolled off his horse and removed his helmet. There was sweat along his temples as he panted slightly, yet his eyes were full of spirits. "Can you see Duanzhou?"

As Shen Zechuan held onto Lang Tao Xue Jin's reins, he handed the blue handkerchief in his sleeve over to Xiao Chiye. He could only catch a glimpse of the abandoned relay station's watchtower in the far distance amidst the visible clouds of his breath, but he understood Xiao Chiye's jubilation. "Looking at Duanzhou now is just like looking into what's already in my bag."

Xiao Chiye lifted his chin slightly, and beads of sweat trickled down. He smiled. Shen Zechuan gazed at him, realizing that he still retained the unyielding and untamable attitude he possessed during their time in Qudu; this was the spirit that Shen Zechuan desired to have in his possession.

Shen Zechuan leaned over, breathing onto Xiao Chiye's cheeks. The tip of his nose pressed right up against Xiao Chiye and edged up along the latter's temple as he licked the latter's sweat like he desired. Those beads of astringent, salty sweat dissolved in Shen Zechuan's mouth. As his Adam's

apple bobbed slightly, he said, "This will be your, Xiao Ce'an's, riding track from now on."

Xiao Chiye raised a hand over Shen Zechuan's nape, covering it, and the iron fingers of the armor he had yet to remove were icy and hard as they lay over the soft, fair neck, leaving behind a touch that resembled the cold steel of a blade.

"I don't want a riding track." The straight bridge of Xiao Chiye's nose nuzzled along the spot on Shen Zechuan that had been bobbing earlier. He watched fixedly as Shen Zechuan narrowed his expressive eyes. His words had an edge of danger to it as he said, "I want Shen Lanzhou."

Shen Zechuan breathed out a puff of hot air at Xiao Chiye. Xiao Chiye thought Shen Zechuan wanted to kiss him. He did not expect Lanzhou to grab the chance to pull back the blue handkerchief in his hand. Shen Zechuan then straightened up and wrapped the overcoat tightly around himself. The Prefectural Lord, who was sensitive to the cold, revealed only his eyes and the reddened tips of his ears as he said in a muffled voice, "Shen Lanzhou's freezing to death."

Xiao Chiye, his arms empty, had still yet to realize what just happened.

Shen Zechuan watched Xiao Chiye's expression undergo several changes. Xiao Chiye looked as though he was going to make a grab for him, so Shen Zechuan immediately shook the reins to urge Lang Tao Xue Jin into returning back to camp. Xiao Chiye cradled his helmet in his arms. There was still a lingering warmth from where he had been licked on his temple. He touched it, gradually getting riled up as though he were a maiden of a decent family who had been disrespected by a frivolous philanderer.

"Shen Lanzhou..." Xiao Chiye watched as Shen Zechuan fled. With a stride of his long legs, he slid down the snowy slope and yelled, "Heartless cad!"



Achi, who had been confident of success, had been defeated at the Chashi Sinkhole, and the Biansha people, who had been winning battles in the north for half a year, never expected Achi to lose to Xiao Chiye. The remaining soldiers in Duanzhou were no match for Wu Ziyu's surprise attack. Consequently, the six prefectures of Zhongbo all fell under Shen Zechuan's command. Qudu received news of it only seven days later. At the



same time, the military report of Qi Zhuyin's mobilization of troops into battle with the Qingshu tribe also made its way into the palace.

The Empress Dowager sat in Mingli Hall behind the hanging curtain and flung the memorial onto the seat across the luminous pearls. The eastern pearls swayed beside her ears as she held back her rage and barked at the ministers in the hall, "Did the Ministry of War reject Qidong's request to deploy its troops or not? Chen Zhen, you handle military affairs, and you can't even make yourself clear?!"

The Minister of War, Chen Zhen, immediately knelt on the ground, knowing that the Empress Dowager was venting her anger. Qi Zhuyin now had a strong and well-trained military, and Qudu was unwilling to act rashly and offend them, so they could only take it out on the easy games like him. He listened expressionlessly until she was done speaking before saying, "In the first month of the year, Commander-in-chief Qi presented a memorial to the imperial court, hoping to deploy troops to fight the Qingshu tribe. We rejected her request on the grounds that we were lacking in military provisions. The Grand Secretariat kept a copy of the correspondences for archival records. The Senior Grand Secretary and the various other ministers are all aware of it."

The Empress Dowager understood that this was in no way authorized by the Ministry of War, but she was still fuming. After a moment's pause, she continued, "So why did she go ahead with it this time?"

"Seven days ago, the Bianjun Commandery's night patrol encountered a surprise attack by the Qingshu tribe." Chen Zhen lifted his head slightly at this point. "Commander-in-chief Qi was thus forced to mobilize troops."

"Amu'er is at war with Libei in the north. Why would the Qingshu tribe provoke Qidong for no rhyme or reason?" Han Cheng had been at the receiving end of Qi Zhuyin's frostiness when he escorted Hua Xiangyi to her new home. Sitting in the hall now, he suddenly bared a smile and said, "Then again, it's really such a coincidence that Commander-in-chief Qi happened to be in the Bianjun Commandery just when the Qingshu tribe launched their surprise attack. This battle was such a swift and abrupt one that the report of victory and request were both presented together. Even if she was at fault, she had already succeeded."

Kong Qiu, who had fallen ill after the new year, sat in the hall with his complexion all ashen as he covered his mouth and coughed. "We cannot listen to only one side of the story. If the Qingshu tribe had genuinely

crossed the line, then Commander-in-chief Qi's mobilization of troops was an act of emergency. For the past years, the situation at the frontiers has been unstable. When Lu Guangbai was still stationed at the Bianjun Commandery, the Qingshu tribe often invaded as well. The details of the matter still need to be presented by Commander-in-chief Qi. What is of utmost urgency now is how long this war will continue? We are right about to enter the plowing season in spring, and the thirteen cities of Juexi are still waiting for the arrangements to be made. The supply of military provisions is of major concern."

Pan Xiangjie timidly folded his arms up his sleeves. Xue Xiuzhuo wanted to investigate their Pan clan of Dancheng, and this matter had been stuck at an impasse for a long time. Given that the fields were still in dispute, he did not dare to butt in now for fear that the Grand Secretariat would apportion the shortfall of military provision to them.

The Empress Dowager did not consent to send their troops to war because Qidong's deployment of troops at this moment was akin to supporting Libei, and also because Xue Xiuzhuo had been too impatient in chasing the accounts. The Eight Great clans were presently in a situation where one slight move could lead to major consequences for all of them. Fields were their roots, and the young masters of the eight cities all depended on these fields to survive. If an investigation were to be launched, then the noble clans would suffer debilitating effects just by having to return the fields to the common folks and make up for the arrears in taxes. Not to mention that there was also the risk of dismissal and prosecution as well as imprisonment. Qi Zhuyin's battle with the Qingshu tribe meant that the expenses for the Qidong's Five Commanderies' military salaries and provisions would have to go through the accounts of the Ministry of Revenue. Once the state treasury ran out of money, all the past events during the reign of Yongyi were going to get dredged up again. The Empress Dowager was acting in place of the crown prince, and there was still the Heir Apparent beside her eyeing the throne, so she dared not act rashly without careful consideration.

Whether Amu'er was a rapacious aggressor or not, the noble clans did not know, but they knew it was inadvisable to keep delaying given the current situation. Zhongbo had already grown to be a thorn in their sides, and getting themselves stuck in a stalemate with the Heir Apparent and the Grand Secretariat would not do the noble clans any good.

“Since it was the Qingshu tribe that invaded, Qi Zhuyin can just repel them; there is no need to mobilize troops again to penetrate deeper into the enemy’s territory.” The Empress Dowager’s fury had subsided. She deliberated it over and said, “I know that it’s bitterly cold and impoverished at the frontiers. No doubt the battle with the Biansha people must be fought, but not now. Just as the Grand Secretary has said, the spring plow season is right around the corner. We should place the commoners as our priority. Not all of Juexi’s territories last year had bumper harvests either, and the granaries in Qudu have still yet to be filled to the brim, so where would the imperial court have the spare grains to give Qidong to fight wars? This matter has to be conveyed properly to Qi Zhuyin. As someone who assists in the government affairs of the Five Commanderies, she should have long known about this.”

Silence descended upon Mingli Hall for a moment. The hanging screens at the entrance were all securely tucked in to keep the wind out. Because of Qi Zhuyin’s mobilization of troops, the atmosphere in the hall was grave and heavy.

In truth, Kong Qiu and Cen Yu approved of Qi Zhuyin’s wish to wage a battle against the Qingshu tribe. But they were presently duking it out with the noble clans. Pan Lin was the one who had the Ministry of Revenue in his grasp, but he presently had his hands too full with Xue Xiuzhuo incriminating him to jointly discuss the matter of Qidong’s military salaries and provisions. Moreover, it was precisely because the Pan clan was the first to bear the brunt that Pan Xiangjie did not dare to let his son get too involved with the Grand Secretariat at this juncture.

Pan Xiangjie was used to playing fence-sitter. It was all thanks to this ability to sway where the wind blows that he could survive until now. He did not want to offend Xue Xiuzhuo, and he did not want to offend the Empress Dowager either. As long as there was no victor in the tussle for power in Qudu, he was unwilling to let the Pan clan follow another’s lead easily. In the past, he threw in his lot with Hua Siqian and Wei Huaigu, but these two men both used him as a scapegoat. Now wary and guarded, he trusted none of these three parties.

Cen Yu sighed lightly. He rarely spoke up in Mingli Hall now. Yu Xiaozai left the capital with the letter he wrote to Shen Zechuan, but Shen Zechuan never replied, and he understood what Shen Zechuan meant by that. Everyone had drinks in his house a year ago, and he still remembered

the distinguished figures Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye had cut then. He found it a pity the way things had turned out.

Cen Yu shifted his gaze to Li Jianting, who was sitting upright at the side staring at the tea before her, as if she had not heard the discussion in the hall. After the court session was dismissed, Cen Yu and Kong Qiu walked along the long path that had been cleared of snow.

The palace eaves on both sides hung low, turning the paths oppressively dim. The eunuch in front was holding a lantern. As Cen Yu walked, his sleeves flapped in the wind. The wind blew his short, newly grown beard all over, and he lifted a hand to stroke it.

“Why didn’t you say a word today with something this big happening?” Kong Qiu asked.

Cen Yu lifted his eyes. “Her Majesty’s mind is already made up. The result will be the same, whether or not I speak up.”

It was already dark by the time both men walked out of the palace gate. Cen Yu did not get into the horse carriage. Instead, he carried the lantern himself and stepped on the snow as he walked on the level path with Kong Qiu.

“Xunyi, you seem to have a lot on your mind today.” Kong Qiu scrutinized him. “What are you thinking about?”

“Thinking about today last year,” Cen Yu answered, “when Vice Commander Shen and Marquis Xiao were both still in Qudu...”

If Emperor Tianchen had not been assassinated, perhaps Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye would still be in Qudu today. Cen Yu had always been one to cherish talents. He once thought of having Shen Zechuan join the imperial court as an official, but alas, things did not go the way he wished—the weight of Shen Zechuan’s crime was too heavy.

Kong Qiu let out a long sigh and thought of Hai Liangyi again.

“If Emperor Tianchen possessed even a fraction of a crown prince’s disposition, would you and I be reduced to such a state? I’ve been feeling more and more out of my depth lately. There are simply too many situations that are beyond my ability to salvage. They do not consent to the current war Commander-in-chief Qi is waging with the Qingshu tribe for fear that the military provisions would drag the eight cities’ fields into it. But I can tell that the war in Libei is at a tense and critical juncture. Even the Prince of Libei, Xiao Fangxu, met his end in battle. The strength and the capabilities of the Biansha can no longer be underestimated.” Cen Yu could

see it all clearly, but it was pointless. He could not solve the conflict in Qudu just with his eloquence alone. It was simply a tall order to get the noble clans to relinquish their existing interests.

Both of them had not gone far when they saw a man standing under a bamboo umbrella ahead of them, waiting. Cen Yu and Kong Qiu traded looks and looked at Xue Xiuzhuo.

Xue Xiuzhuo's official robe was brand new, and he was not wearing a lined jacket. He stood in that spot all by his lonesome self, like a floating leaf among the torrential currents even as the wind sent his sleeves fluttering. He kept away his umbrella and bowed in greetings to Cen Yu and Kong Qiu.

"Why are you standing here? Is something the matter?" Kong Qiu asked.

Xue Xiuzhuo straightened up as floating snow sporadically danced past. "This humble official has been waiting here for both gentlemen to discuss the issue of Dancheng's fields and taxes in detail."

Cen Yu frowned slightly and said, "Affairs of the imperial court should be settled on the imperial court itself. There is no reason to discuss them in private. This case, in particular, should avoid having aspersions cast on it. If others were to see this, rumors and slanders would inevitably start making their rounds. You should go back first. We'll discuss it in the Grand Secretariat's office tomorrow morning after the morning court session."

"If not for the urgency of the matter, this humble official would naturally not dare to bother both of you." Xue Xiuzhuo's expression remained unchanged. "At the beginning of the month, Her Majesty drew up a decree to have a key official from the Ministry of Revenue tag along to investigate the case, and Pan Lin appointed Liang Cuishan, who is in charge of salt taxes in Hezhou and Juexi."

Kong Qiu and Cen Yu both knew who Liang Cuishan was. Xiao Chiye had vouched for him and recommended him for an official position during the collapse of the public ditches. He was a Ministry of Revenue official who had been personally appointed by Emperor Tianchen to investigate Wei Huaigu in the case of the military provisions. He was very talented in the administration of financial affairs and taxes. Last year, he sorted out the old accounts of the thirteen cities with Jiang Qingshan in Juexi, and for a period of time, he even managed the transportation of grains by water from Hezhou to the capital.

Yan Heru told Shen Zechuan that it was tough to do business via the waterways. The Yan clan's goods heading for Juexi were all subjected to rigorous checks, and Liang Cuishan was the reason for this. This man was smooth and diplomatic in his work, but he was not a slippery character. In his position, the amount of tax money passing through his hand every day numbered tens of thousands of silver. Yan Heru wanted to pull strings and make backdoor deals with him, but his attempts were all rebuffed.

“Liang Cuishan has already returned to the capital and will enter the palace tomorrow morning to seek an audience.” Xue Xiuzhou held his umbrella in his arms. “But he had a narrow escape this trip and must meet both gentlemen tonight.”



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## CHAPTER 213: TURN OF EVENTS



Liang Cuishan was not wearing his official robe; instead, he had on a sheepskin-lined jacket over his upper garment with overlapping collars and a pair of green cloth shoes. He was the total antithesis of “His Excellency Chongshen” as town rumors went, with a short beard, squarish face, and a tanned complexion from being on the go outside all day. His hands also did not seem to be the kind that held brushes, but hoes. Cen Yu almost took him for an errand-runner when he stood under the relay station’s lantern to meet Kong Qiu and Cen Yu.

“Why does Chongshen look like this?” Cen Yu asked in astonishment.

Liang Cuishan led them upstairs and waited for them to take their seats before he answered. “It’s a long story. This humble subordinate is truly indebted to both of Your Excellencies for your willingness to come—I can die a hundred deaths without regrets now!” With that, he gave Xue Xiuzhuo a long bow. “Your Excellency saved me from calamity today. This humble subordinate shall never forget this kindness for as long as I live!”

Xue Xiuzhuo wiped his hands with the hot handkerchief in the room and took a seat at the side. He merely said, “It’s a matter of urgency. You should discuss it in detail with both His Excellencies first.”

“What is it?” Kong Qiu sized up Liang Cuishan. “Going by the dates, you should arrive in Qudu only the day after tomorrow.”

“The superiors are rushing me, so this humble subordinate dare not delay on the road. To tell Your Excellency the truth, it is also to pull the wool over the eyes of others that I dressed up like this.” As Liang Cuishan spoke, he fished out an account book from under the clothes on his bosom and set it down lightly by Cen Yu’s hand. “Your Excellency supervises the Ministry of Revenue’s audits of accounts all year round, and you would have seen this kind of account book before. Please take a look.”

Cen Yu flipped the account book open and looked through it for a long time before hesitatingly asking, “isn’t this the account book the City of Chuancheng submitted to the Ministry of Revenue at the beginning of the year?”

“That’s right. It’s the account book of the Marquis Helian from the City of Chuancheng. Along with the accounts from the rest of the seven cities, it was handed over to the Ministry of Revenue at the beginning of spring to be reviewed. The aim was to straighten out the details of their taxes and expenditures with the assistance of the Chief Surveillance Bureau. There was no issue with it at that time.” Liang Cuishan fished out another account book from his bosom. “This account book, on the other hand, has been tidied up by this humble subordinate these few days.”

Cen Yu’s countenance changed the instant he read the beginning of the book. “How did you sort out this account?” he asked Liang Cuishan.

With a solemn expression, Liang Cuishan organized his thoughts and said, “Her Majesty drew up an imperial edict last month, and Vice Minister Pan wanted this humble subordinate to assist the Court of Judicial Review in investigating the City of Dancheng’s accounts. But this humble subordinate was in the City of Yongcheng in Juexi at that time reviewing the thirteen cities’ sales taxes with His Excellency Jiang.”

Within a few days, Liang Cuishan received a visitation card from the Tax Circuit Intendant of Juexi at the relay station. Liang Cuishan never received visitors when he was attending to official duties, but this Tax Circuit Intendant took the opportunity to leave Liang Cuishan a “small gift”. Liang Cuishan opened it to find gold inside.

“Juexi is connected to the city of Dicheng and the prefecture of Hezhou through the waterways, and the Tax Circuit Intendant is in charge of the administration of all affairs relating to grains and the transportation of grain by water in between. It’s a lucrative job, but this humble subordinate was based in the Provincial Administration Commission of Juexi, which has the Provincial Administration Commissioner, Jiang Qingshan, overseeing matters, so I dare not act rashly and inadvertently alert the perpetrator.”

The position of Tax Circuit Intendant shared some similarities with Liang Cuishan’s position, except that it did not hold as much authority of office as Liang Cuishan had from concurrently holding the position in two places. Even so, the Tax Circuit Intendant wielded considerable influence when it came to a place like Juexi. Liang Cuishan did not dare to act



without due consideration and end up tipping the perpetrator off, as he suspected at that time that this person had come to offer bribes at Jiang Qingshan's behest.

Liang Cuishan was a very cautious man. It had not been easy for him to finally see better days after all the hard times he had to go through, so he was extremely careful when navigating the official circles. He wanted to be a capable minister, but at the same time, he also wanted to keep himself alive. Juexi was Jiang Qingshan's territory. If he had immediately submitted a memorial to impeach this Tax Circuit Intendant, then his memorial might not even have made it out of Juexi before being detained. In addition, Jiang Qingshan's opening up of the granaries to distribute relief grains in the fourth year of Xiande and his taking full responsibility for the matter had sent shock waves through the imperial court and the common people. He was well-loved and held in high esteem in all thirteen cities of Juexi. Liang Cuishan had no chance of winning against him just based on this point alone. Furthermore, anyone with a discerning eye knew that Jiang Qingshan was Xue Xiuzhuo's weapon.

"This humble subordinate spent sleepless nights in the relay station. Naturally, the gold cannot be accepted, but there was also the concern of sowing the seed of disaster if it was hastily returned." At this point, Liang Cuishan cast a glance at Xue Xiuzhuo. "Moreover, His Excellency Jiang has an unimpeachable reputation out there, and this humble subordinate, having worked with him for quite some time, more or less has some understanding of his character. For that reason, this humble subordinate went ahead and summoned that Tax Circuit Intendant over."

This was a dangerous and risky move. Liang Cuishan, who did not dare to make a rash move, had to find other traces from this breakthrough point. At the very least, he had to figure out if Jiang Qingshan was the mastermind behind the Tax Circuit Intendant.

"The Tax Circuit Intendant handles the matters pertaining to taxation of the transportation of grains via the waterway of the thirteen cities. Getting money is not a difficult matter for him." Kong Qiu said. "But the Censor-in-chiefs under the Chief Surveillance Bureau also have their eyes on the accounts, and the origins of those ships are all clear. How could he have been able to get away with the deception?"

"This is where this humble subordinate has doubts," Liang Cuishan said. "This humble subordinate pretended not to dare accept it and asked the

Tax Circuit Intendant to take the gold back. He then told me that those golds were clean and were not items on record in the Juexi's accounts."

"He is in charge of the transportation of grains by water. Since it's not an entry in the Juexi's accounts," Cen Yu closed the account book, "then it must be from..."

The City of Dicheng or the Prefecture of Hezhou.

"Yan Heru of Hezhou is a thieving and unscrupulous merchant. He attempted to bribe me when I went to check on the transportation of grains by water in Hezhou last year. But this man is immensely wealthy, and there is no need for him to take the risk and embezzle money from the imperial court's internal account books." Liang Cuishan was even more careful when he came to the part about the City of Dicheng. "The Prefectural Prefect of Dicheng is the son of a concubine from the Fei Clan who married into the Hua clan.<sup>1</sup> He is very much in the Empress Dowager's good graces, and his track record of political achievements in the yearly appraisal these few years have been outstanding too. This humble subject dare not incriminate him without any evidence and could only contend with that Tax Circuit Intendant in the hope of obtaining more details."

A bribery meant that there was something to be done in exchange, especially for someone in Liang Cuishan's position. He initially thought that the Tax Circuit Intendant was Jiang Qingshan's man, and that he had come to offer a bribe because of the Juexi's salt tax they were auditing at that time, but very quickly, he discovered this to be not the case. Since these golds were not on record in the Juexi's accounts, then it meant that there was someone else behind the Tax Circuit Intendant, and this person could only be a high-ranking official of a noble clan close to Dicheng.

Liang Cuishan would never bring up the Hua clan of Dicheng, because this was the empress dowager's clan and birth home. When Hua Siqian fell from power, the only property the imperial court confiscated from the Hua clan was Hua Siqian's manor. In less than a year, the Empress Dowager had staged a comeback and was presently in charge of the administration of government affairs. Even if Liang Cuishan was every inch a dauntless and gutsy one, he would not dare to incriminate the Empress Dowager.

But Liang Cuishan only had to think of this matter from Qudu's perspective, and he could understand what these golds were supposed to buy. Who would be the most flustered during the time when the Empress

Dowager drafted up an edict to have Liang Cuishan check the fields in Dancheng with the Court of Judicial Review? The Pan clan of Dancheng.

At this point, Cen Yu had already figured it out. After going around in one big circle, it turned out to be Marquis Helian who bribed Liang Cuishan through the Tax Circuit Intendant in order to preserve the Pan clan. The Marquis Helian's daughter, the Commandery Princess Zhaoyue, had married a lad from the Pan clan, and his common son born of a concubine was betrothed to a maiden from the Hua clan. He was the only one who matched the profile, except that this move of his was truly unwise.

Liang Cuishan owed Pan Lin a debt of gratitude for the kindness the latter had shown him by promoting him. Pan Lin had initially granted that favor at Xiao Chiye's behest, but Liang Cuishan later went on to prove himself to be capable, and that was why Pan Lin was willing to let him step into the limelight. As long as Liang Cuishan had a smidgen of selfish interest, he would, for the sake of this kindness, think twice before acting when it came to the matter of Dancheng. This was something he could not refuse. But this was just great now. The Marquis Helian sent someone to bribe him. Liang Cuishan only had to skip reporting this to the top, and he could be considered to have repaid Pan Lin's kindness to him. Subsequently, he would no longer be encumbered when checking Dancheng's accounts in the future.

And that was not all. Liang Cuishan even secretly re-examined the eight cities' accounts following along the trail of this bribe and repeatedly reviewed the accounts of the Marquis Helian's Fei clan of Chuancheng. The so-called money that could not be found in the account books actually came from the invisible checkpoints the noble clans set up within their own cities when ships or caravans of traveling merchants passed through the checkpoints. In order to transit through, the merchants could only pay private taxes to the noble clans at double the price. Later on, men like Yan Heru joined the fray. He wanted to get back all the money he had forked out, so he took the Xi clan's place and started to resell the copper, iron, and salt within the territories on behalf of the noble clans and the local officials of various ranks, thereby bypassing the tariffs. The small trade market of Dunzhou was thus established.

Cen Yu reopened the account book Liang Cuishan had put into order and looked at the sum of silver for a dizzying moment. They had been caught in a tussle with the noble clans all these years in Qudu, and many a

number of capable officials had all successively met their ends in their quest to get to the bottom of the accounts. The two account books of Hua Siqian and Pan Rugui that Hai Liangyi recovered during the reign of Xiande had been merely the tip of the iceberg!

Even though the resurgence in the reign of Yongyi had been short-lived, the taxation system it had left behind in the various regions made up for the largest share of the state treasury's annual revenue. Dazhou's rapid decline in just over a decade was inextricably linked to bad debts; it had been internally dug clean, with this lot of money flowing into the pockets of the noble clans.

Cen Yu could barely remain steady in his seat. Even his hands that were holding onto the account book were trembling.

Other than the tax money, there were also the crop fields. Cen Yu did not even have to do the math, and he could already imagine just how colossal the outflow of money was.

"When Libei resorted to arms during the reign of Xiande, it did not receive any military salaries and provisions. Xiao Jiming could only rely on whatever bits of grain farmed by the Libei military garrison who also did farming duties<sup>2</sup> to head down south and fight the Biansha Cavalry back."

Cen Yu's breathing quickened as his trembling hand flipped the pages.

"Qidong did not receive any military salaries and provisions then either. Lu Guangbai supplemented reinforcements up north using Qi Zhuyin's dowry, and for the past few years, Qi Shiyu has spent all the money from his estate on the garrison troops. Then, there was also the time during the first year of the reign of Tianchen, when the Qingshu tribe fought their way to the entrance of the Bianjun Commandery. Lu Guangbai's army was so starved they had to eat sand!"

Every time. Every single time.

The reason the commanding generals of the north and south entered the capital was to ask for money. Qi Zhuyin was even forced into fraternizing with the ruffians-cum-loansharks in Qudu. Meanwhile, Lu Guangbai did not even manage to get a single audience with the emperor during the reign of Xiande. How many people died when Juexi was suffering from drought? Jiang Qingshan gritted his teeth and opened up the granaries to distribute relief grains to the people, and his octogenarian mother even had to weave cloth to pay off the debt. The six prefectures of Zhongbo were helpless in

the face of the empty coffers, forcing Zhou Gui, Luo Mu, Huo Qing, and the rest of them to submit to and grovel before the bandits.

This was the “poor” the Ministry of Revenue bemoaned.

Clenching his teeth in hatred, Cen Yu flung the account book onto the table. “The private crop fields appropriated by the eight cities haven’t even been included. This is all blood money...” At this point, he started to get choked up. “The Secretariat Elder pursued the matter to such an extent... The country was already heading for ruin in the reign of Xiande... is it still salvageable? No, it isn’t!”

The room fell silent. Liang Cuishan hung his head in silence. He was drifting duckweed without roots and connections. If he wanted to continue delving deeper into this matter, he needed a powerful backer. He first communicated with Jiang Qingshan, through which he was granted a meeting with Xue Xiuzhuo. It was only then he finally managed to see Kong Qiu and Cen Yu. He did not accept the gold from the Marquis Helian, but it was useless to merely keep it sealed on hand. Someone had to vouch for him. Otherwise, he would have to die as long as he did not forge the accounts as Marquis Helian wished once he arrived in Dancheng. Not even Pan Lin would be able to protect him.

The handkerchief Xue Xiuzhuo had set at the site had gone cold. “I should avoid doing anything that might cast suspicions on me when it comes to this, but this concerns Chongshen’s safety, and it also involves the investigations of the fields in Dancheng, so I can only discuss it here with both gentlemen.” As he spoke, he poured tea for Cen Yu and Kong Qiu. “I heard news today of Qidong’s use of military forces, and I presume the Ministry of Revenue is going to shirk responsibility again. With all the bad debts from the various areas thrown together into one big mess, I fear that the spring plowing and Qidong’s military provisions will be delayed.”

Kong Qiu had misgivings about Xue Xiuzhuo. Xue Xiuzhuo’s move with the Heir Apparent had been too daring and dangerous. What’s more, he used the storm the Imperial College stirred up to suppress and edge out the officials of humble origins, which left a bad taste in Kong Qiu’s mouth now that the practical doers faction was in full swing. His intuition from all his years of service in the Ministry of Justice told him in no uncertain terms that Xue Xiuzhuo would never ever be at his wits’ end, so he said, “surely you did not call us here just to look at the account books.”

“A matter discussed, a matter concluded.” Xue Xiuzhuo changed his form of address for Kong Qiu. “The Senior Grand Secretary did not question Commander-in-chief Qi’s use of military forces on the Qingshu tribe during the discussion in Mingli Hall. I presume you approve of it, but the Ministry of Revenue is indeed hard-pressed to bear the expense for military salaries and provisions due to the depleted state treasury. That was why you did not discuss it in detail with Her Majesty.”

“That’s right.” Kong Qiu was even more composed now compared to the time when Hai Liangyi was still around. “Commander-in-chief Qi’s use of military force on the Qingshu tribe at this time may seem to be removing foreign aggression for Libei, but in fact, it is to sweep Dazhou clean of invaders. Amu’er has wild ambitions. No egg stays unbroken when the nest is overturned; likewise, no one can escape unscathed if Dazhou is invaded. Helping Libei now *is* helping Dazhou.”

Xue Xiuzhuo retrieved a booklet<sup>3</sup> from his sleeve and pushed it beside Kong Qiu’s hand. “This is a rough estimate of Qidong’s expenses for military salaries and provisions. Deploying troops long distance is not as cheap as stationing garrison troops in the Bianjun Commandery in the past. Just the consumption of grain wagons is enough to eat up the tax silver of the entire Baimazhou territory last year.”

Kong Qiu looked at that booklet and said, “a portion of the silvers was used up last year to provide relief in the disaster-stricken areas. Furthermore, it’s nearing the beginning of spring now. Whether the spring plowing in the eight cities can be carried out without a hitch is a major issue we have to consider too. If the noble clans aren’t willing to return the commoners’ fields and make up for the arrears in land taxes, the Grand Secretariat has no way of giving Commander-in-chief Qi an official written reply with regard to her request to deploy troops. No matter how clear your estimates are, it’s pointless.”

“I do have an idea.” Xue Xiuzhuo looked at Kong Qiu. “The Xue clan can bear Qidong’s expense this time.”

Not only were Kong Qiu and Cen Yu stunned when the words left his mouth, but even Liang Cuishan was too.

It was common knowledge that the Xue clan of Quancheng were already showing signs of waning since the last generation. The lawful son of the principal wife, Xue Xiuyi, was a hypocrite who pretended to be virtuous and lofty. He kept getting hoaxed by a group of charlatans from the

marital fraternity into chalking up debts everywhere. To date, their household only had one Xue Xiuzhuo who was capable enough to stand on the imperial court. So where on earth would the Xue clan have money?

It suddenly dawned on Liang Cuishan, and he remembered Shen Zechuan before Xi Hongxuan came to his mind.

Kong Qiu gazed at Xue Xiuzhuo in astonishment and uncertainty. "It's such a large sum. We might not be able to repay it even if I issue a memorandum of debt to you in my capacity as the Senior Grand Secretary of the Grand Secretariat."

"There is no need for the Senior Grand Secretary to issue me a memorandum of debt." Xue Xiuzhuo poured a cup of tea for Kong Qiu and said with a severe countenance, "all I ask is for the Senior Grand Secretary to join forces with me to audit the eight cities' field taxes."

The lanterns outside the relay station started swaying as the wind swept away the tattered notices on the road. The indistinct reed pipes music from the Donglong Street of Qudu wafted through the long road of the relay station until it was obstructed by the palace walls, where it then disappeared among the double-eaved roofs. Li Jianting, who was within those palace walls, sat by the edge of the couch and recalled her past under the tinkling of the metal wind chimes.

Fengquan was putting down the drapes for Li Jianting when he suddenly heard the Heir Apparent ask, "do you wear earrings?"

With her black hair cascading over her shoulders, Li Jianting gazed at the deep and quiet bedchamber and continued as if answering for both Fengquan and herself.

"I abhor earrings." Her eyes that so resembled Emperor Guangcheng turned towards Fengquan, gradually curving into a smile under the darkness. "Wearing it makes one look like livestock—the kind that lies at the mercy of others."

## CHAPTER 214: COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF



On this day when the sun was shining high in the clear sky, the entrance of the Duanzhou city gates was a riot of noise. Damp snow on the ground went splattering all over under the hooves of the horses. The wheels of wagons transporting provisions skidded between the stone slabs, dragging the horses until they skewed their bodies and neighed, obstructing the path in the process. The Libei Armored Cavalry behind them was unable to enter, so they had no choice but to dismount their horses to lend a hand.

“This cursed weather...” Yin Chang urgently needed to answer the call of nature, and his face was all red from holding it in as he wrung the belt of his pants. “... keeps changing at the drop of a hat. It was so freezing cold a few days back that someone died, yet it’s so blazing hot today it scalds my ass.”

Horses ran along the path, splashing wet snow over the people until they were dirty all over. Fei Sheng bundled up his robe and tucked it into his belt. He lifted a hand to pinch his nose and grouched, “why do these Biansha ponies stink so bad?!”

“They roam the Gobi desert, where they poop as they please.” Just as Tantai Hu was speaking, the Biansha pony before him stuck up its tail to take a dump. That steaming hot dung plopped into the damp snow. Tantai Hu scraped his boots, wanting to pull this horse farther away. Before he could move, a few people on horseback sped past him from behind, splattering hot dung all over them.



Fei Sheng's face was already green from holding his breath. It was so stinky it made him hop. The moment he saw the fresh dung assailing towards them, he dove behind Yin Chang, using the old man as a shield and letting him bear the full brunt of the hit.

"The balls of you to run!" Yin Chang yelled at the Libei Armored Cavalrymen who had sped past him and wiped his face before turning back to snap at Fei Sheng, "the balls of you to dodge!"

Wu Ziyu tugged at the reins, meaning to turn around and head back here when Tantai Hui wasted no time in brandishing his hands and cursing, "motherfucker, get off your horse!"

Wu Ziyu had just changed into a new pair of boots, and the filthy, muddy figures they all cut were enough to deter him from getting off his horse. He slowed his horse and trotted over to them to ask, "why is it just the few of you? Where are the Second Master and the Prefectural Lord?"

"They went in first." Fei Sheng's breathing was ragged as he said in a nasal tone, "Why wasn't this snow cleared earlier? Now the entire path is obstructed. Look how filthy it is. My master's white robe would be ruined if it so much as touched the ground!"

Wu Ziyu had fought a victorious battle and was feeling pleased as punch with his success. He was just thinking about inviting them out for drinks one of these days. Despite being cussed at, he was not at all angry. Smugly, he said, "I'm busy, okay?"

Before he was done laughing, a snowball from the other end flew over and smacked him right in the face.

Gu Jin's nose could not bear the stench any longer. His expression was livid as he broke out in a string of curses after swinging a ball at Wu Ziyu, "the balls of you to laugh! If this hot weather persists, the snow in the city will melt. Just you wait for the sewage in these rotting public ditches to start overflowing. The entire city inside and out will stink to high heavens then."

Gu Jin was usually a man of few words who rarely cussed since he also shouldered the heavy responsibility of raising Ding Tao. He did not even lose his temper when he was humiliated by Guo Weili at the Tudalong Banner last year, but the stench was so overwhelming it almost knocked him out from where he stood a short distance away.

Wu Ziyu used to be quite attentive and thorough in his work, but his victory in the battle this time had gone to his head, leading him to expose his shortcomings and leave behind loose ends in trivial matters. If Chen

Yang were here, he would no doubt remind him. But to Gu Jin, scolding him was more straightforward.

The three men still standing at the back were all struck dumb. Yin Chang held in his pee and stood in a row with Tantai Hu, all just waiting for Gu Jin to give the command to dismount and get to work immediately.

Fei Sheng murmured, “oh, how familiar this curse sounds.”

Tantai Hu vaguely hinted, “balls, he said.”

“Bah,” Yin Chang stooped over and denied, “it wasn’t me who taught him that!”

Wu Ziyu had already obediently rolled off his horse.



Duanzhou had never suffered a great fire as Dunzhou had, and its streets all still looked the same as they did seven years ago. Stores and restaurants had long since closed. Achi had only kept a few cooked meat shops around; the Scorpions loved the braised beef here. The Biansha troops had resided here for a period of time, and they had slaughtered everyone in the residential areas in the east and west. However, they retained the night market to the north.

“It was here Lei Jingzhe carried out his deals with the Scorpions.” Shen Zechuan stepped on the pile of obsolete junk and leaped onto the collapsed courtyard wall. He could see the night market in the north standing here at the top. “*Shifu* used to love to come to this place in the past as he could buy stuff that could not be found on the market.”

“What’s to the south?” Xiao Chiye strode up and looked south. “... Biansha’s riding stables.”

Shen Zechuan exhaled. “So, this is an empty city.”

Shen Zechuan once worried about the overwhelming numbers of refugees swarming to Cizhou and Chazhou from Dancheng, but it now seemed that Zhongbo, with its depopulated population, was a good place to take in the refugees from the eight cities.

“It’s time to reorganize the Yellow Registers.”<sup>4</sup> Xiao Chiye watched Meng soared on the horizon. The warmth of the sun was making him lazy. He was not wearing his armor today, just his arm guard. “It was primarily administered by the three prefectures last year. The garrison troops of Chazhou and Dunzhou were lacking in numbers, so the registrations were all jointly handled by the lesser functionaries. But now that the six

prefectures have fallen under our command, it's time to separate the civilian and military registries."

The civilian registry fell under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Revenue; it actually could not be integrated and jointly managed with the military registry. Xiao Chiye held the post of the Imperial Army's Viceroy back in Qudu, and the Imperial Army's office compound had a place specifically dedicated to the overall management of the Imperial Army's military registry. This was one of the reasons the Imperial Army and the Eight Great Training Divisions were irreconcilably antipathetic to one another. It was not that easy a job to be the overlord of Zhongbo. There were already not enough Cizhou advisors to go around; the six prefectures all needed *yamens* for government administration, warden's offices for military affairs, as well as the corresponding investigation censors of the respective circuits.

"All of these won't pose that much of an issue. Yu Xiaozai has the authority to go on a tour of inspection in the six prefectures, which is akin to being an investigation censor. I actually meant to make him the Surveillance Commissioner of Zhongbo. His appraisals in Qudu are all excellent. Moreover, his job in Qudu encompasses fieldwork in various areas, so he's well-acquainted with the tricks and maneuvers in the *yamen*. And while Chengfeng isn't willing to serve under me, he's willing to assist in the governmental affairs of the remaining five prefectures, which more or less resolve my most pressing needs." Shen Zechuan watched Meng fly back as he continued, "we have no lack of lesser functionaries. As long as the various prefectural *yamens* are willing to open up opportunities, people will naturally come. What we lack are key officials that can govern and administer government affairs in the prefectures."

Not only that, Shen Zechuan lacked generals too.

At present, the military affairs in Chazhou were temporarily managed by Luo Mu. It was no big deal if it was just for a short while, but Shen Zechuan would never let him continue with it for long. This was because Luo Mu had three powers – legislative, executive, and judicial – in his hands now. The Imperial Bodyguards were temporarily standing in as censors, but they did not have the authority of office to interfere with the government administration of Chazhou. If Luo Mu harbored ulterior motives, then it was possible for him to hide it from Shen Zechuan's eyes as long as he did it covertly enough. To avoid this kind of incident from

happening again, Shen Zechuan had to confirm the candidates for the various prefectures as soon as possible.

Meng landed on Xiao Chiye's arm. "We lack a treasurer too."

Shen Zechuan thought of Liang Cuishan when Xiao Chiye brought up this matter. He looked at Xiao Chiye and said, "a pity about Liang Cuishan."

"Liang Cuishan has work to do under Pan Lin's command, so it's not really a waste of his talents." Xiao Chiye soothed Meng's feathers. "I heard from the reports a few days back that Xue Xiuzhuo is going to check the Dancheng's fields? If this can be successfully carried out, none of the eight cities will be able to escape unscathed, and that will be a heavy blow to the noble clans."

"No definite news yet," Shen Zechuan said as he leaped off the wall. "We will have to wait for them to come over before we can know the details."

They walked back along the path. When they arrived before the house they were lodged at, only Fei Sheng was there waiting. There were no signs of Gu Jin or the others.

"They all went to clear the snow." Fei Sheng's words took an about-turn in his mouth. He added, "It's Gu Jin and Wu Ziyu's turn to take over this time."

What he meant was that he was not loafing on the job—he just happened to be taking a break.

Shen Zechuan knew Fei Sheng's temperament, and he had no plans to pursue it further either, so he merely said to Xiao Chiye, "The public ditches in Duanzhou have to be re-inspected. We don't know the state they are in, so we have to make plans for it as soon as possible."

Xiao Chiye cast a glance at Fei Sheng but said nothing. Fei Sheng had done a fairly decent job playing it safe in his handling of Huo Lingyun's matter. He had held his temper in check and did not attack the other man, and even if he could not stand the sight of Huo Lingyun, he did not go around creating trouble for him. As a result, Xiao Chiye was now finally willing to remember and recognize him.

Fei Sheng did not dare to let both of them remain standing at the entrance, so he led the way inside and had the Prefectural Lord take his seat first. This place was the residence of the former Duanzhou's commander of the Zhu clan, the same Zhu clan in which Lei Jingzhe was born. It had

fallen into disuse here, and Wu Ziyu had tidied it up to receive both of them from their journey afar so they could take a rest.

The clearing of snow at the city gates continued until the hour of xu. These were all men who had led troops to fight wars, so Shen Zechuan did not call them over for a discussion all night. The kitchen had long prepared the dishes, and everyone took a few bites before getting on with their rest. Fei Sheng, who shared a dwelling with Yin Chang and Tantai Hu, fainted right there and then as soon as these two men took off their boots.

Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye had only just finished their meals when Gu Jin, who had been waiting outside, entered.

Seeing something amiss with Gu Jin's expression, Xiao Chiye set down the light read in his hand and asked, "what's the matter?"

Gu Jin took out the letter from his bosom and presented it to Xiao Chiye. "There is a letter from Libei to Master."

Xiao Chiye noted that there were two letters—one was official business Xiao Jiming wrote, and the other was a private letter Chen Yang had sent over. He first looked at Xiao Jiming's letter. His eldest brother mentioned the horses would be able to arrive at Mount Luo at the end of the second month, which was also when Xiao Chiye was slated to return to the battle zone. Xiao Chiye had long known about this, but there was one mention of interest worth ruminating over.

When Gu Jin left the room, Shen Zechuan popped his head out from behind and set his chin down on the top of Xiao Chiye's head. He lowered his eyes to read the letter, then said in a calm tone, "so, a surprise from your eldest brother."

Xiao Chiye read that part a few times. "He transferred Guo Weili over to my Sha'er camp, a move that is meant to free up the Shasan Camp for my *shifu*. Guo Weili isn't used to fighting at Hasen's rhythm. It's too aggravating for him to remain in Shasan Camp."

In all fairness, Guo Weili did indeed possess the talent to lead troops. The fact that he could defend the Tudalong Banner for so long was proof enough of his capability. However, this man had a short fuse and a bad temper, and he was extremely impulsive. He was not an easy man to get along with, especially when he was unconvinced or unwilling to concede defeat and would be all belligerent and combative when he opened his mouth. Last year, he wounded Gu Jin and even stripped Gu Jin of his military rank. For that reason, his relationship with Xiao Chiye was rather

delicate, and his soldiers repeatedly clashed with the Imperial Army in the Shasan Camp after Xiao Chiye took down said camp.

The commanding generals of the Three Great Camps in the battle zone were on rotation this year. Both Xiao Chiye and Guo Weili were unaccustomed to each other's troops. Ever since his arrival at the Sha'er camp, Guo Weili had hardly touched and mobilized the Imperial Army. He found the Imperial Army a slippery bunch who played dirty. They relied on their Qudu origins to throw their weight around and had no respect for their superiors. Because of Xiao Fangxu's incident, he no longer acted acrimoniously or created a scene even if he could not stand the sight of Xiao Chiye, but the issue with Gu Jin remained unresolved, like a thorn that stood between them.

This person was difficult to use.

There was also a deeper meaning to Xiao Jiming's arrangement. The other two camps could both communicate and work with Guo Weili; whether it was Zuo Qianqiu, Lu Guangbai, or Zhao Hui, none of them would get into a dispute with Guo Weili. Yet Xiao Jiming just had to transfer him to Xiao Chiye's Sha'er camp.

After a moment of silence, Xiao Chiye said, "as expected of my eldest brother."

This arrangement was truly a blow that hit right at the crux of the matter where it hurt.

After this battle in Duanzhou, Xiao Chiye's words would carry a lot of weight once he returned to the battle zone. He did not get along with the Libei Armored Cavalry, but both of them could slowly get used to each other. Much like this occasion, no army would reject a commanding general that could lead them to victory. Moreover, not only was Xiao Chiye fair in meting out rewards and punishments, but he was also a man of his word. However, if he wanted to put the Libei Armored Cavalry to full use, he would have to overcome the obstacle that was Guo Weili. Otherwise, a lack of unity among the generals who were not of one mind would surely lead to disaster.

Shen Zechuan felt sleepy in the room. With his eyes half-closed, he murmured softly. "Ce'an, the vastness of the ocean comes from its acceptance of hundreds of rivers.<sup>5</sup> This is an opportunity your eldest brother is giving you."

Under the dim light, Xiao Chiye recollected the campfire in the snowstorm. Xiao Fangxu had clenched his fist right before his eyes, and amidst the flickering light of the fire, his old man had asked him:

“You want this position, but are you truly qualified enough?”

## CHAPTER 215: IRON FINGERS



Hasen stood in the vast wilderness and watched the girl leap off the horse a short distance away. Without even removing his scimitar, he spread his arms open to catch that beautiful red figure pouncing towards him in a steady grip.

Duo'erlan gasped softly, her red skirt fluttering as she was spun around, her laughter, clear and melodious. "May the gods bless my heroic eagle!"

Hasen hugged his newlywed wife with a slight blush on his face. He brushed away the snow off Duo'erlan and responded, "and may the gods bless my Duo'erlan."

Hasen had only just gotten married at the beginning of the year, a marriage bestowed upon him by Amu'er. His beloved Duo'erlan was a girl from the Hulu tribe deep in the desert. She wore a jujube-red pleated skirt, and was as beautiful as the morning dew on the shores of Lake Chiti. She was the most intense filly of the Twelve Tribes. Hasen was head over heels in love with her.

Duo'erlan scrutinized Hasen. "Bayin broke his promise to me. You've lost weight."

Hasen laughed in spite of himself. "He can't always stay by my side."

"Then he shouldn't have promised me." Duo'erlan landed on the ground and took Hasen's hands. "I brought fresh goat's milk."

"It's too far." As Hasen was led away by Duo'erlan, he gazed at her. "Let Chagan do all this work next time."

Hasen rested for a mere two days after his marriage before returning to the battle zone. It was hard for Duo'erlan to see him, and she could only depend on the opportunities to deliver supplies to meet him here. She happily showed Hasen the food she brought along, and Hasen gobbled up the flatbread she made with her own hands.



“I want to come here and see you.” Duo’erlan sat on the sack and watched Hasen eat. “I miss you so much, just like the morning dew misses the sun. Will you go back when the snow melts?”

Hasen took a sip of the icy cold milk and met Duo’erlan’s eyes. The color of her pupils was a light shade of green. Each time Hasen gazed into them, it was like gazing into the clear, shimmering waters of Lake Chiti. He would think of everything wonderful, which made it impossible for him to say “no” to Duo’erlan. He lovingly caressed Duo’erlan’s cheeks and answered, “if the war ends.”

“You avenged Gegenhasi. Father is grateful to you. You’re not only the Hero of the Hanshe Tribe, but also the Hero of the Hulu Tribe.” Duo’erlan cupped his face. “The heroic eagle shall fly across the Hongyan Mountains. I’ll always be waiting for you at Lake Chiti.”

The “heroic eagle” Duo’erlan spoke of was more like a term of endearment. In the entire desert, only she and Hasen’s mother could call him that, for Hasen would be shy. Gegenhasi was Duo’erlan’s elder brother. He was also Hasen’s brother that Xiao Fangxu killed.

The wind in the wilderness was too cold. After Hasen finished his milk, he brought Duo’erlan back to the camp. A fire was burning in the military tent, and it was here Duo’erlan steeped milk tea for Hasen. They both liked unrefined tea.

“If the Huiyan Tribe was still around,” Duo’erlan sipped her milk tea, “we would have a never-ending supply of tea to drink in winter.”

Hasen had just finished slicing the roast meat for her and was in the midst of wiping his dagger. With a serious expression, he answered, “They will come back.”

Duo’erlan would be leaving with the squad escorting the supplies tomorrow, so Hasen did not stay with the soldiers tonight. As briefly separated newlyweds who just reunited only to part again soon, they retired for rest very early. Snow suddenly fell in the middle of the night. Hasen was sleeping soundly when he suddenly heard the call outside the tent. He got up carefully, put on his robe, and stepped out.

Snow lunged full-on at Hasen as soon as the tent flap was lifted. With his hair loose around his shoulders, he patted his robe as he asked the soldier before him, “what’s wrong?”.

“Bayin is back!”

Hasen turned his head over and saw the remaining cavalry.

Bayin, who had been galloping on the road for days, rolled off his horse and landed on the snow-covered ground with legs gone weak. Refusing support, he first snatched the water canteen at the side and tilted his head back to gulp the water down. It was only after the front of his robe was drenched that he appeared to have caught his breath.

“What happened?” Hasen picked up Bayin’s scimitar, then looked at Bayin again with a slightly heavy expression as he said with certainty, “Achi has been defeated.”

Bayin rubbed his frozen cheeks and exhaled deeply. He cut an extremely sorry figure, with both his legs covered in mud. He tossed the canteen back into the arms of someone beside him, looking particularly haggard as he stood before Hasen. “Xiao Chiye lured us on the frozen river to Chashi Sinkhole. It was there he killed Achi.”

As he spoke, he reached out to tug hard at the left side of the horse saddle. Achi’s head tumbled off in response and bumped into Hasen’s foot facedown.

“Xiao Chiye let me go.” Bayin’s voice trembled as he said with lips blue with cold. “He had me bring this back.”

Hasen gradually pursed his lips into a grim line—a warning sign of his looming fury. He looked at Achi’s head, and fire blazed in his eyes again. There was dead silence all around, with only the gale continuing on with its rampage. The chill Hasen inhaled swiftly coursed through his limbs. He turned his gaze away and looked into the far distance, where the snowflakes danced.

“Duanzhou has been taken over by the pack of wolves; they’re making peace and colluding with a fox from Zhongbo. Hairigu is there too. He has become Xiao Chiye’s slave.” Bayin’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he recollected the terror of being pursued by the Libei Armored Cavalry that day. He continued in a hoarse voice, “Xiao Chiye has gotten his hands on a new blade, and the scorpions have become weeds in the Gobi desert in the face of his Libei Armored Cavalry. Hasen, the hammers can’t hold him back. That’s no longer Xiao Fangxu’s armored cavalry.”

“That has long since ceased to be Xiao Fangxu’s armored cavalry.” Hasen abruptly turned his gaze back and took a step closer towards Bayin. “The pack of wolves needs a new alpha wolf—a new King of Wolves. Xiao Jiming will deploy him back to the north, and I will be here waiting for him and his new blade.”

A sound suddenly rang out behind him. Duo'erlan stood at the entrance of the tent, watching them worriedly. Hasen curbed his fury and turned back to look at Duo'erlan, but did not smile.

He should have killed Xiao Chiye.

Hasen thought once again.

Back during that autumnal rain hunt, he should have killed Xiao Chiye.



The courtyard was silent in the middle of the night.

Xiao Chiye had just finished washing up and was rummaging through the small box by the candlelight, picking pearls and jade. Shen Zechuan's folding fan was resting on the edge of the table; its owner was still soaking in the bath.

"The horses will arrive at Mount Luo in a few days," Xiao Chiye picked out the agate he had placed inside yesterday and said to Shen Zechuan, who was behind the screen. "Are you going with me for a look?"

Shen Zechuan was exhausted these few days. Even though he did not fall sick again, he had also never touched Yang Shan Xue again. Soaking in the water, he said, "Going to Mount Luo is a must. It's also more convenient for you to return to Libei from there."

The days were passing too quickly; Shen Zechuan merely had a few rounds of discussions and it was already the end of the second month. Tilting his head back, he closed his eyes in contemplation. The curve of his neck was beautiful, its luster smooth and luminous bathed under the dim light filtered through the screen.

"Has the candidate for Secretary of Duanzhou been picked?" Xiao Chiye turned the orb of agate between his fingers as he casually asked.

"Yes," Shen Zechuan said, "a talent."

Xiao Chiye looked over and offered, "Kong Chengfeng?"

Shen Zechuan raised his dripping wet arm to prop his head against it. He cast a sidelong glance at Xiao Chiye's shadow and responded, "nope, guess again."

"Yuanzhuo has limited mobility and isn't suitable." Xiao Chiye genuinely could not think of anyone else. "Who else could there be?"

Shen Zechuan got to his feet and wiped himself dry with a towel at the side. Xiao Chiye did not look in this direction; Shen Zechuan brought the washed blue handkerchief to the tip of his nose and sniffed it lightly. He answered, "Shen Lanzhou, of course."

The thickest wall of all of Zhongbo was going to be built in Duanzhou, and Shen Zechuan did not feel all that assured to hand the job over to anyone else given the connection between Mount Luo and Libei. He had to stay here and build up this wall with his own hands. What's more, by heading south from Duanzhou, he could also directly bypass Tianfei Watchtower to arrive at the Bianjun Commandery. Shen Zechuan found this location to be excellent; by establishing a reserve depot here that was comparable to Cizhou, he would be able to provide reinforcements to both the northern and southern battlefields in the future.

"Do you still remember the 'steel needle'?"<sup>6</sup> Shen Zechuan put the handkerchief back, his fingertips lingering, reluctant as they were to part with it. He continued, "Qiao Tianya is the most suitable candidate to lead this, but he presently has to take care of Yuanzhuo and is unable to leave Cizhou. But if I were to use Fei Sheng, this place is so far from the reach of the central administration that I don't feel at ease leaving him here without anyone to keep him in check."

The 'steel needle' referred to the light cavalry, one that would be deployed to the banks of Chashi River as Shen Zechuan's eyes and ears. They would also stay at a Duanzhou that could go on to become the central hub of both places. Whoever could be the commander-in-chief of this place would be a key official concurrently in charge of both military and governmental affairs. He would also have money coming and going under his hand when the Yan clan's business expanded over after spring, and Yan Heru was no honest man.

Shen Zechuan did not really have much to fault Fei Sheng on, but he had to assess in his heart just how long Fei Sheng's loyalty would endure. He could not gamble it all on the words "share weal and woe, through thick and thin". Never mind if it was just for a year or two. But once Fei Sheng had been stationed here for a long time, he would have gotten a taste of the benefits that came with the convergence of the north and south. With this "steel needle" in his hand and with Yan Heru on the sidelines doing his utmost to butter him up, how much of today's master-servant bond through their shared tribulations of life and death would remain? By then, Shen Zechuan would no longer be the sole party Fei Sheng could fall back on. As long Fei Sheng had so much as an ounce of inclination, he was dangerous.

In this world, authority was not something that could be bestowed on its own. Qi Huilian had long warned Shen Zechuan before, the cornerstone of

the “art” of governance and rulership was checks and balances.<sup>7</sup> Leading a group of outstanding men was akin to overlooking a game match. One should never be biased for private, selfish reasons.

Why did Huo Lingyun have to be placed in the Imperial Bodyguards? It was precisely to fill out the position left by Qiao Tianya. He posed a threat to Fei Sheng and could make the latter knock senses into himself and draw a line in the sand. Similarly, why did Yao Wenyu offer up this suggestion? It was meant to push Qiao Tianya back into the game and remind Shen Zechuan, who was lacking subordinates, that Qiao Tianya was indispensable. If Fei Sheng wanted to advance a step further, Shen Zechuan had to deliberate his moves carefully. In other words, as long as Fei Sheng was promoted up a level, Qiao Tianya would also be discreetly promoted in the same manner. He was the chain that held Fei Sheng in check; Shen Zechuan would never allow Fei Sheng to surpass Qiao Tianya and hold “sole” authority in his hand.

Fei Sheng had said to Qiao Tianya that in Shen Zechuan’s eyes, the latter was the most suitable candidate to be deployed to command the light cavalry in Duanzhou. This was because everyone mutually understood one another; Qiao Tianya was a sentimental man who placed importance on relationships. This was both Qiao Tianya’s strength but also his weakness.

Shen Zechuan slipped on his robe and stepped out from behind the screen.

Xiao Chiye was sitting at the edge of the desk with his long legs all stretched out. Upon hearing footsteps, he clenched his fist and hid away that agate gem, then looked at Shen Zechuan and said, “then I just so happen to have something to tell you.”

Shen Zechuan’s belt was tied rather loosely. When he stepped over the rug, the soles of his feet felt a little ticklish. With his collarbone exposed, he sipped on his tea and nodded at Xiao Chiye to motion for him to continue.

Xiao Chiye then said, “The Biansha ponies that we’ve seized this time will also be placed at Mount Luo. You want a light cavalry, so give these ponies a try. They are swifter than the battle steeds of Libei, and they have great endurance and stamina in the Gobi desert.”

Shen Zechuan held the teacup with both hands and thought about it for a moment.

“Libei can’t use these ponies anyway. Our battle steeds are all specifically born and bred on the Hongyan Mountains for the armored

cavalry; it took several generations to produce the exceptional horses of today that are able to bear the weight of heavy armor.” Xiao Chiye spread his legs apart so that Shen Zechuan could stand before him. He propped an arm up and watched Shen Zechuan contemplate it over.

“Let Fei Sheng take a look at the Biansha ponies here first,” Shen Zechuan said, “use the riding stables Achi left here.”

“That’s my riding track.” Xiao Chiye pinched Shen Zechuan’s chin and pulled it close. “When will you give Shen Lanzhou to me?”

Under the force of the grip pinching him, Shen Zechuan remembered Xiao Chiye’s iron fingers from that day, as well as the hard, solid sense of touch of those iron fingers caressing his nape. His breathing hitched slightly; he wanted to avert his gaze, but Xiao Chiye was holding him in place. It was hot inside the room, and tiny beads of sweat began to materialize on the temples of the Prefectural Lord who had just soaked in a bath.

Staring at Shen Zechuan, Xiao Chiye leaned closer and said, “you got all excited when I touched you that day, didn’t you, Your Lordship?”

## CHAPTER 216: DAMP NIGHT



The address of “Your Lordship” for the Prefectural Lord was usable by all, and for this reason, these two words became even more clandestine coming from Xiao Chiye. It was like they were hiding secret codes in their words in plain sight of the crowd, hinting at a certain kind of unmentionable pleasure and intimacy. Desire was the rising surge of tidal waves, spreading and flowing to the parts where they touched, exuding a thin layer of sweat.

During the day, the Prefectural Lord sat high above the rest and gazed down at the group of outstanding men. His folding fan obscured the rest of his emotions, giving rise to a cold indifference in his eyes, a sharpness that could, with a single glance, send alarm bells ringing in warning of danger. But right now, his mouth was slightly parted as he bit down on Xiao Chiye’s finger. That soft tongue, that overflowing saliva, and that expression of a shame he was silently enduring. They all carried with them a “come-hither” undertone.

Xiao Chiye desired him.

He not only desired his fair neck, but also his wet, slippery tongue.

His calloused finger rubbed against Shen Zechuan’s gums, and given that Shen Zechuan had just drank hot tea, the lining inside his mouth was sensitive. His eyes were now wet with tears, and he had gone so incoherent from the storm Xiao Chiye was stirring up in his mouth that he could not answer Xiao Chiye.

Secreted fluid spilled as the tip of Shen Zechuan’s tongue probed along the pulp of Xiao Chiye’s fingers.

They faced the wall, with Shen Zechuan leaning forward while being pinned by Xiao Chiye's chest on his back. This position made Shen Zechuan feel as though every thrust went in deep to the hilt. He braced himself against the wall, resting his forehead against it as his tears fell in never-ending torrents. And when he lowered his head, he exposed his nape that Xiao Chiye once again bit. The robe beneath crumpled into a ball.

Shen Zechuan could not answer Xiao Chiye sitting on their heels like this. The initiative to call the shots lay in Xiao Chiye's hands.

The tip of Xiao Chiye's nose nuzzled imperceptibly along Shen Zechuan's nape, seeming like both a demand and a coercion. His dangerous gaze lingered on Shen Zechuan's side profile, where he saw the seductive temptation hidden in the upturned corners of Shen Zechuan's eyes.

Shen Zechuan did not know what trouble the corners of his eyes were courting. He was so very innocent, so much that even his grunts on being bitten were exceedingly soft. But Xiao Chiye was so savage that he turned Shen Zechuan's entire person into a small boat adrift amidst the great billowing waves. Turbulent waves crashed over him, not permitting him to even struggle under the intricately woven sound of water permeating the room.

Seeing the intermittent drops of Shen Zechuan's falling tears, Xiao Chiye turned his head aside to drop a kiss on the corner of his eye.

Shen Zechuan sobbed in that kiss and accidentally smeared his robe wet. He turned his gaze towards Xiao Chiye, his voice trembling, "it's all, all—hngh, your fault..."

Xiao Chiye bit down on the tip of Shen Zechuan's ear and whispered, "oh, so you're blaming me now, huh."

This thrust went so unimaginably deep that it left Shen Zechuan too breathless to even grunt out loud.

Shen Zechuan was all drenched in sweat after taking Xiao Chiye in several times, and his robe remained soaked even after a wring. Xiao Chiye pinned him against the rug and made to kiss him. Too exhausted to tilt his head up, Shen Zechuan stuck out his tongue lazily.

Xiao Chiye engulfed it in his mouth and remained in this way, pressing down against Shen Zechuan.

The rug in this room was unlike the one at home; it was not as soft. Instead, it resembled a little brush with fine bristles. Xiao Chiye tore off Shen Zechuan's robe that had long been soaked through, and the friction of



the entire bare front of Shen Zechuan's body against the rug proved too much for him to bear.

"No," Shen Zechuan strained to plead for mercy in between his sobs, "Xiao'Er, I can't."

Pinning him down, Xiao Chiye took that soft tongue back into his mouth again so that all Shen Zechuan could do was cry.

How could Shen Zechuan withstand an onslaught like this? That chafing of his front was making his waist and legs weak, and it was also so brutal back there. He was entirely consumed by Xiao Chiye in between his ragged, hectic breathing, so much that he was incoherent. His face flushed red, and he cut a sorry sight as he vaguely muttered, "turn, turn over, Ce'an!"

"Hush." Xiao Chiye stretched out his arms to hold down Shen Zechuan's sliding arms. His entire chest pinned him down, making all of him sink into the fine fur of the rug. "My wife's about to return."

Why's he still harping on about this?!

With his cheek partially buried, Shen Zechuan cried in a small voice, "y-you, mn."

Xiao Chiye pressed the tip of his nose against Shen Zechuan's soaked temple, his breaths lingering in his ear. The candlelight in the room had long gone out. Light reflecting off the snow penetrated through the window paper, glowing brighter than usual. This exceedingly pure radiance spoke not of gentleness as it incited the beast inside the room, allowing Xiao Chiye to see even more clearly how Shen Zechuan was jade that could not be concealed. A branch outside the window pressed low by the snow hung horizontally from the side. Occasionally, birds would come disturbing, sending the branch swaying and the snow rustling off. But no matter how hard they tried, they received no attention from the men in the room. Subsequently, the branch turned bare, appearing all the more lonesome. Shen Zechuan rubbed against the rug until it was all soaked, and the rug chafed against Shen Zechuan until he was very nearly wet.

Xiao Chiye was almost on the cusp of orgasm as he grasped Shen Zechuan's hand and bit him. Veiled words, dim light, dampness, and the intensity of lovemaking... Xiao Chiye always had a way of making Shen Zechuan cry.

"I—" With tears in his eyes, Shen Zechuan said vindictively, "I'm going to t-tell your wife! Y-you..."

“Sure.” Xiao Chiye let loose a muffled laugh. “Tell him you get all excited on seeing me.”

Shen Zechuan could not hold out any longer. Xiao Chiye was pounding him so hard it was making him tremble. Shen Zechuan clenched the rug with his fingertips, already nearing his climax. The arc of his neck seemed to be a concession of defeat, except that even his posture of surrender was so maddeningly titillating it drove Xiao Chiye crazy.

Xiao Chiye scored a full victory tonight, as he always did, but he was never complacent, only content. This was a scene he would never tire of watching.

The snow on the branch outside the window rustled off again. Shen Zechuan could indistinctly hear a few cries of a night crow. The crow flew away, and Shen Zechuan turned into snow. The heat in the room melted him into water, leaving him too preoccupied to even breathe. There was so much he remembered in his mind, but every time it came to this moment, all that was left in there was Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye, A-Ye. A—

Xiao Chiye grasped Shen Zechuan by the cheeks and kissed him, and Shen Zechuan ejaculated until he was completely spent.

And forgot all about finishing his words from before.



The next few days were all sunny days. Spring hung in the air in Zhongbo as the third month approached. The snow had not only melted in Cizhou but also somewhat in Duanzhou. Gu Jin and Wu Ziyu cleared out the roads and reported the public ditches that ought to be repaired at the first opportunity.

As Shen Zechuan could not return to Cizhou for the time being, Yao Wenyu could only come over to Duanzhou. His mobility was limited, and health, poor, so the horse carriage moved slowly on the way over. Kong Ling and Yu Xiaozai waited for him in Dunzhou, after which all three of them arrived together in Duanzhou.

Fei Sheng received them outside. He sent the gentlemen in first, then followed Qiao Tianya to do an inventory count of the supplies that they brought along. When he came to the front, he saw Huo Lingyun, so he whispered to Qiao Tianya, “why did you bring him too?”

The weather was neither cold nor hot today, so the roads were cleared quickly, and there was no mud to be stepped on when they stepped

outdoors. Fei Sheng was initially in a good mood, but all that was left was impatience when he saw Huo Lingyun. There were many people unloading the cargos around them, and with that many eyes around, Fei Sheng had no wish to fall out with Qiao Tianya over Huo Lingyun. If this made its way to his Master's ears, then his loss would far outweigh his gains. Thus, he endured it and followed behind Qiao Tianya, hoping to seek clarification on the matter.

"Once he hangs up his authority token, he's a legitimately conscripted Imperial Bodyguard." Qiao Tianya jumped onto the horse carriage in a few steps. "Should I not have brought him here?"

Sunlight shone down upon them. Fei Sheng rubbed his slightly icy cold hands, feeling irritable. His gaze on Huo Lingyun was too blunt and undisguised. Qiao Tianya looked over too. On the other side, Huo Lingyun sensed their gaze and turned his head over to meet their eyes, in particular Fei Sheng's.

"This man spells danger if placed close at hand." Fei Sheng shifted his gaze away without a smile on his face. He had no wish to pay Huo Lingyun any attention. "Duanzhou is not like Cizhou. Who's going to take responsibility for it if something goes wrong?"

"I will." Qiao Tianya squatted down and fished out his pipe. As he struck up the fire, he cast a glance at Fei Sheng and said with well intentions, "Don't be too smart for your own good and play mind games with Master."

Qiao Tianya was already making it very clear with his words.

Fei Sheng was none too pleased on hearing it. "Ever since he joined us, I've never caused any trouble for him. So why get all so aggressive?"

"What are you angry about?" Qiao Tianya puffed on his pipe and paid no mind to Fei Sheng's tone. He understood Fei Sheng. "I'm simply telling it as it is. By leaving him idle on the sidelines, are you waiting for Master to use him instead? When the time comes, he will no longer be under your charge."

Shen Zechuan retained Huo Lingyun and did not kill him because he wanted to use him. If Fei Sheng were to keep Huo Lingyun idle like this now that the latter had been set before him, then, like Qiao Tianya said, once Shen Zechuan grew impatient, Huo Lingyun would no longer be under Fei Sheng's charge. When that happened, it would be humiliating for Fei Sheng.

Fei Sheng cast another glance at Huo Lingyun and let Qiao Tianya's words sink in. But those words were adding fuel to the flames in his heart, making him even more displeased. He held back his resentment, having no outlet to vent. He still wanted his dignity before Qiao Tianya, and he was unwilling to lower and demean himself too much. He and Qiao Tianya both served in the Imperial Bodyguards, and he understood all that Qiao Tianya had said; he just could not stand it anymore.

"Your origins formally trace back to Qudu." Qiao Tianya weighed up his pipe in his hand. Feeling that it had to be said, he continued to persuade him. "He is not trained for this at all. His bond with Master is not the same, and neither is his bond with the Imperial Bodyguards. So what the frick are you scared of? You can one-up him with just this mouth of yours alone."

"You're disparaging me with this." Fei Sheng retracted his gaze and thought for a moment before speaking the truth. "This person is both scheming and capable. As long as he remains, it's only a matter of time before he comes out on top."

Shen Zechuan now wanted to remain in Duanzhou to establish a light cavalry. That was not a job that could be secured with just a glib mouth. Fei Sheng initially thought he would definitely be the one in charge on this end, but he never expected Shen Zechuan to directly transfer Yao Wenyu over, along with Qiao Tianya in tow. Fei Sheng did not dare to delve too deeply into it. He knew what was good for him. This was his strong point.

"You are capable too," Qiao Tianya said. "But keep dwelling on this matter, and you will only be holding your own self back. Is there anything that can escape Master's eyes? What's meant to be yours will eventually be yours."

Fei Sheng did not want to talk about this matter in detail with Qiao Tianya. They were not birds of the same feather that flock together, and he did not count on Qiao Tianya to stand with him against a common adversary either. He frowned as he looked at the pipe in Qiao Tianya's hand. Waving away the smoke drifting before him, he asked, perplexed, "why have you started smoking again?"

"Nothing to do." Qiao Tianya put it out, but did not continue with his words.

He appeared to be somewhat taciturn, unlike before, and after rising to his feet, he did not engage in further conversation on the topic and merely watched carefully as the others unloaded the goods.



Shen Zechuan held his folding fan upside down and tapped it gently on the table. He had just changed to a new earring, an agate earring that accentuated the fairness of his complexion. It was so conspicuous that the others dared not keep looking at it.

“I’ve transcribed a copy of Luo Mu’s account book.” Yu Xiaozai presented the book to Shen Zechuan. “Your Lordship, please look it over.”

There was a withered tree branch in a vase on the table. Ding Tao was the one who picked it up and brought it back to put in the vase. Yu Xiaozai did not know that and originally thought of saying a few words of praise, but he was afraid of barking up the wrong tree and finding himself in a predicament he could not get out of. Shen Zechuan nodded for Yu Xiaozai to sit, so Yu Xiaozai took his seat again and calmly concentrated without another glance at that withered branch.

Unaware of this, Shen Zechuan looked over the account and said, “the spring plowing is just around the corner. Pick someone to go over and assist Luo Mu in his official duties. He’s only one man after all, and it’s tough on him to be running around on both ends.”

What he meant was that they could no longer allow Luo Mu to have a monopoly on power in Chazhou this year. They had to send someone over to keep him in check. And Kong Ling was the one who knew best the kind of man Luo Mu was.

“I do have a candidate in mind,” Kong Ling said from the side. “I went down to Dengzhou on Your Lordship’s orders this time and encountered an old acquaintance of the Second Master there.”

“An old acquaintance of Ce’an?” Shen Zechuan closed the account and thought for a moment, but no one came to mind.

What old acquaintance would Xiao Chiye have in Dengzhou? He was rarely in Zhongbo.

Seeing as Shen Zechuan did not remember, Kong Ling reminded him. “Wang Xian. Does Your Lordship still remember this person? He was originally the Secretary of the Ministry of Revenue in Qudu, who managed the Imperial Army’s expenditure during the eighth year of the reign of Xiande. He had several encounters with Second Master.”

It was only then Shen Zechuan remembered.

Come to think of it, this Wang Xian was initially on bad terms with Xiao Chiye, and he had handled the Quancheng silk matter too. During the

assassination case, he was framed by Xiang Yun for bribing Xiao Chiye, and as a result, he was demoted and relegated. Before leaving the capital, Xiao Chiye went to the Ministry of Revenue to pull a few strings so that Wang Xian did not completely lose his official position and was merely sent to Zhongbo to handle affairs.

Even Xiao Chiye himself had forgotten all about this matter, much less Shen Zechuan.

Not long after Wang Xian arrived in Dengzhou, the bandits took them by storm, and he fled the *yamen* by feigning madness, only to be stranded in Dengzhou along with the refugees. It was not until Kong Ling went to inspect the *yamen* after Yang Qiu's death that Wang Xian could come to the fore and make a fresh start again.

"Going by Second Master's intent, this person was originally meant to come over to our Cizhou, but shortly afterward, something cropped up," Kong Ling said tactfully, "so the Ministry of Revenue changed his posting and sent him down to Dengzhou. He suffered a lot in Dengzhou, and the kindness Your Lordship and Second Master showed him was still on his mind when he saw me."

Shen Zechuan thought about it carefully for a moment. "Since he's willing, assign him to Chazhou. His original position was that of a Ministry of Revenue official, so he won't be a stranger to assisting on taxation matters in Chazhou."

Shen Zechuan could not trust Luo Mu, so this was just perfect. By putting a Wang Xian who was proficient in taxes in Chazhou, he would be able to bring Luo Mu's account books under strict control. What really mattered most in Chazhou at present was money. As long as he had the money in his grasp, Luo Mu would not be able to rebel.

It was still early, so after settling this matter, Shen Zechuan set aside the miscellaneous affairs of the three prefectures and asked Yao Wenyu, "how is Yuanzhuo doing these few days?"

Yao Wenyu, whose knees were covered with a woolen blanket, answered upon hearing him, "thank you for your lordship's concern; it's nothing serious."

"Although there is a bridle path from Cizhou to Duanzhou, it's still a long distance away. I was worried you would catch a cold on the way, but seeing as you're fine, I can now put my mind at ease."

Yao Wenyu waited for Shen Zechuan to finish with the pleasantries before he said, "I've brought a message from Cizhou for Your Lordship." After a moment's pause, he continued, "there's a rumor in Dancheng a few days ago saying that Pan Lin and Pan Yi have been dismissed from their posts pending prosecution and have been handed over to the Court of Judicial Review and the Ministry of Justice to await trial."

Shen Zechuan's eyes swiveled to Yao Wenyu. "So soon?"

Three members of the Pan clan of Dancheng – Pan Xiangjie, Pan Lin, and Pan Yi – were all significant ministers of the imperial court. What's more, they were connected to the Fei clan of Chuancheng via a marriage alliance. They carried a lot of weight among the remaining noble clans at present. If the Empress Dowager still wanted to monopolize state power, then she could not do without the Pan clan's valuable assistance. For this reason, Pan Lin's dismissal was the Empress Dowager's loss.

"As soon as Liang Cuishan and Xue Xiuzhuo arrived at Dancheng, they immediately set about auditing the fields' accounts," Yao Wenyu said. "They did not ask for Pan Yi to submit the original accounts, but assigned someone down directly to measure the lands personally."

Pan Yi initially thought that with Pan Xiangjie and the Marquis of Helian as guarantors, and with the assistance of Liang Cuishan whom Pan Lin had assigned to act as an intermediary, they would be able to fool their way through the audits of the accounts this time, or at the very least, hang in there until spring was over, but who could have expected Liang Cuishan to come here for the deliberate purpose of checking the accounts?

"In the meantime, there was a memorial impeaching Xue Xiuzhuo with the demand to check the Quancheng accounts, but Kong Qiu overruled it." Kong Ling said.

Shen Zechuan's folding fan paused on the table. His brows slowly furrowed into a frown. "It has not even been a year since the storm the Imperial College stirred up last year. Kong Qiu and Cen Yu were both successively denounced in writing then, and they were at daggers drawn with Xue Xiuzhou, so why did they so quickly..."

"The Tax Circuit Intendant of Juexi has also been imprisoned, with the Chuancheng accounts implicated as well. There is talk that something is off with the tariffs. He is now impeached by the Chief Surveillance Bureau. Even the City of Dicheng is feeling the repercussions." Yao Wenyu, having been born of a noble clan, was far more perceptive to the "thread of clue"

than others. He continued, "The Tax Circuit Intendant of Juexi, by all reasonings, has nothing to do with Chuancheng, but the Chief Surveillance Bureau impeached them together."

"The Marquis of Helian of Chuancheng is close to the Hua Clan," Shen Zechuan said. "But he apparently doesn't concern himself with the Chuancheng accounts. Cen Yu's impeachment of him now means that he has a handle against the Marquis of Helian in his hands."

He caressed the edge of the fan with the pulp of his fingers and thought it over.

"There's something fishy about this matter... Where's Yan Heru? Call him over."

There must be a reason Kong Qiu was willing to bury the hatchet with Xue Xiuzhuo. Shen Zechuan's eyes were blocked off outside the city of Qudu, but he had to be cognizant of what Qudu was doing at all times. If Pan Lin was really taken down because of this, then it would not only mean that the noble clans had suffered a setback, but also that the Empress Dowager was now all on her own in the struggle for power in Qudu.

As soon as Yan Heru's butt touched the bench, he rambled, "oh man, these days have been stifling the life out of me! Your Lordship, if you hadn't called for me, that Wu Ziyu wouldn't have let me go out. Qidong's military provisions have yet to be fully delivered. I was so anxious, my temper rose. This Duanzhou is so rundown... can I have a cushion or not? This seat's killing my ass..."

Yan Heru's voice gradually trailed off under Shen Zechuan's gaze. He shifted his body.

"... Bribery, of course," Yan Heru said in a small voice. "What other handle would the Marquis of Helian have on this? He's a marquis with a sinecure that has practically no obligations. For the sake of his son's future, he runs all over and usually likes to gift others a little something. That Liang Cuishan is going over to Dancheng, isn't he? The Marquis of Helian must have had his head slammed by a door to ask the Tax Circuit Intendant of Juexi to deliver a bag of gold to Liang Cuishan. Isn't that just playing into the hands of others? I told you Liang Cuishan is not an easy man to mess with. He's cut from the same cloth as Jiang Qingshan. See what happens now? This one bag of gold from the Marquis of Helian screwed over an entire bunch of people..."



“Bribery?” Yao Wenyu suddenly piped up and looked at Shen Zechuan. “Pan Lin’s willingness to assign Liang Cuishan means that he sees Liang Cuishan as his trusted aide. Why would the Marquis of Helian make the redundant move of sending him gold?”

“He’s foolish, I guess.” Tapping the teacup lid, Yan Heru recalled how Fei Sheng had pressed down his head. Still bearing a grudge, he said, “the Fei clan are fools. They aren’t all that bright. That Junior Marquis Fei Shi is already of age,<sup>8</sup> yet he’s still a loafer. Is their household even capable of being up to any task?”

“For what it’s worth, the Marquis of Helian is on the Empress Dowager’s side, and he did not even die when Hua Siqian fell from power.” The light in Shen Zechuan’s eyes dimmed slightly. “Even if he wants to have Liang Cuishan in his grasp, he shouldn’t have sent him gold. He even turned it over to the Tax Circuit Intendant of Juexi. He is simply delivering himself with a ribbon to Liang Cuishan. What is he trying to achieve?”

“Who knows...” Yan Heru suddenly hit upon a thought and straightened up in his seat, then he leaned over the table, showing Shen Zechuan an astonished expression. “If this was not done by the Marquis of Helian himself, then he’s really too tragic! This simply allows Xue Xiuzhuo to deal a direct stab to his clan and drag the entire Pan clan down into hot water at the same time!”

In a flash, Shen Zechuan connected the dots. The folding fan smacked down on the tabletop with a “thud”, startling Yan Heru so much that a shiver ran through his body.

Yao Wenyu suddenly broke out in a coughing fit. He covered his mouth, clutching the handkerchief. With his back slightly arched over, he recovered and continued, “What a brilliant scheme... Xue Yanqing, well-played!”

**Note:**

This is a combination of the uncensored version and the revised (censored) version on JJWXC. We took some liberty in rearranging the sentences and/or paragraphs in order to bring you the best of both worlds. (There are whole chunks of paragraphs in the censored copy but removed in the revised, and newly added paragraphs in the revised but not in the original.) As usual, the final version will be based on the uncensored traditional

Chinese physical copy when it is released in 2075. In the meantime, please bear with us. Thank you! <3

Credits: Special thanks to papapa senpai Alex for consulting on the \*ahem\*

## CHAPTER 217: HEWEI



It was sleeting heavily in Qudu today, with a chill that cut deep. The Marquis of Helian had been kneeling in the hall until his legs had gone numb and his sleeves were soaked through with his tears.

“That Xue Yanqing is so shameless and unscrupulous he would stop at nothing to frame me. How is it possible for the Tax Circuit Intendant of Juexi’s act of bribery to implicate our Chuancheng? That’s Jiang Qingshan’s territory, so if one were to dig to the bottom of it, it’s Jiang Qingshan who is the instigator!” The official hat that the Marquis of Helian had taken off was resting by his knees. He cried, “And then there’s that Cen Xunyi who keeps incriminating me relentlessly. He’s clearly colluding with Xue Yanqing to set up a trap and dispose of those who stand against him. They shamelessly engage in shady deals for personal gains, yet Kong Boran still wants to tolerate and abet them. It’s the imperial court’s ethos they are ruining!”

“Stop trying to fool me with such words!” The Empress Dowager was in a towering rage. “If you had behaved yourself, would Xue Xiuzhuo have been able to track down the issue with the accounts? The Tax Circuit Intendant of Juexi has been engaging in his fair share of corruption in the City of Chuancheng. If you had not backed him in this, would he have the capability to do so?!”

It was brightly lit inside the hall. All the palace maids and eunuchs had retreated outside the doors, leaving only Matron Liuxiang kneeling in attendance at the side. The Marquis of Helian, having come to apologize, was flimsily dressed, and now he was trembling with fear and trepidation under the wrath of the Empress Dowager.

After the death of Emperor Tianchen, the Empress Dowager has been covering up for the noble clans' failings from this position of hers, and she was already bone-weary having done so all this time to such an extent. She sighed in disappointment across the beaded curtain at the Marquis of Helian.

Sensing that it did not bode well on hearing her sigh, the Marquis of Helian hurriedly shuffled forward on his knees and said, "Your Majesty, please be appeased. The wise strategy now would be to sacrifice the pawn to save the rook. No matter what, we have to first preserve Pan Lin."

Pan Lin was Pan Xiangjie's lawful son and a key official of the Ministry of Revenue. They lost Wei Huaigu last year, and now they only had Pan Lin who could still get a foothold in the Ministry of Revenue. If they were to lose Pan Lin at this point, then the noble clan would be without a money-keeper.

The Empress Dowager said, "Even if we can save Pan Lin's neck, we can't save Pan Yi."

Pan Yi was the husband of the Commandery Princess Zhaoyue. Without Pan Yi, Zhaoyue would be widowed. Momentarily grieved, the Marquis of Helian bent over the ground and choked with sobs. Wiping his tears, he said, "As a father, how would I cast aside such a fine son-in-law had I not been forced into such a desperate situation? I have no other choice. I would rather have her widowed than have her get implicated in this."

The Empress Dowager's face behind the beaded curtain was haggard. Eventually, she merely said, "Go back and have Zhaoyue and Pan Yi mutually agree to a divorce."

Sleet outside the palace drummed against the palace eaves, blanketing the top of the vermilion walls with white snow, while the mournful wails of the ancient watchtower bell pushed their way into the joint hearing hall. Pan Lin was an official of rank, so he did not have to kneel and pay his obeisances to the various presiding judges in the hall.

"After the reign of Yongyi, the City of Dancheng no longer received rewards of fields, but the land surveyance conducted by the Ministry of Revenue threw up a wholly different total amount of land than was reported by the City of Dancheng." Xue Xiuzhuo sat upright and looked at Pan Lin. "As the Prefectural Prefect of the City of Dancheng, Pan Yi concealed the additional fields from the Ministry of Revenue instead of reporting it.

Meanwhile, you have the important duty of presiding over taxation matters in the Ministry of Revenue, and you have never voiced any doubts about the field taxes discrepancies in the audits all these years. Let me ask you, were you aware that the City of Dancheng was forging accounts for its field taxes?”

Pan Lin had been locked up for a few days, and his official robe was wrinkled as he sat across the table and looked at Xue Xiuzhuo without answering.

Xue Xiuzhuo faced off against Pan Lin in confrontation.

Pan Lin was not an easy man to put on trial. These kinds of top-rank imperial court officials were all familiar with the investigation process. The smart ones would maintain their silence when interrogated and cross-examined by the Court of Judicial Review and Ministry of Justice. This was because the presiding officials were all proficient in the art of probing, and it was too easy to trip up and give them a handle against oneself when contending with them. Pan Lin was obviously a smart man, as he held his silence in response to all of Xue Xiuzhuo’s questionings throughout.

If the case were to get stuck at an impasse here without any headway made, then the remaining seven cities would have sufficient time to clean up their accounts and get rid of the evidence of their sordid deeds before Xue Xiuzhuo focused the investigation on them. Xue Xiuzhuo had lied low in wait for many years before he managed to get this opportunity. He could not let Pan Lin get away with it at this point.

“Pan Xiangjie’s original position remains untouched.” Xue Xiuzhuo laced his fingers. “Her Majesty commended him for being a minister of significance who assists in the governance of the state. He is expected to be transferred out of the Ministry of Works after the imperial examination held in spring. This is a hint that he will be promoted to the Grand Secretariat. Get yourself locked in a stalemate with me here, and his appraisal after spring is bound to get affected.”

Pan Lin leaned over and gave a contemptuous spat. “You manipulated the Tax Circuit Intendant into carrying out bribes and made use of the chance to build a bridge to Kong Qiu of the Grand Secretariat. You want to take down our Pan Clan only because I let Yao Yuanzhuo go. You’re but one twisted common son born of a concubine, so what’s with this capable pillar of the state act?”

Xue Xiuzhuo's expression remained unchanged as he said, "Before Pan Xiangjie took up the post of Minister of Works, your Pan clan was already appropriating the common folks' fields in the City of Dancheng. During the reign of Yongyi, Cao Chong, a commoner of Dancheng, entered the capital to lodge a complaint of injustice, but he was trampled to death by Hua Shisan's horse on Shenwu Street, and his octogenarian father killed himself by banging his head at the entrance of the Dancheng's *yamen*—you are right. I'm indeed taking down your Pan clan because of Yao Wenyu, but Yao Wenyu was merely an opportunity you handed me. Even without Yao Wenyu, the Pan clan still has to pay their dues."

Pan Lin's limbs were icy cold. He leaned back in his chair and avoided Xue Xiuzhuo's gaze.

"During the reign of Xiande, Secretariat Elder Hai received orders from the Emperor to audit the City of Dancheng's field taxes. The official assigned was a man named Jiang Jun, a fellow official of mine in my position as the Chief Supervising Secretary of the Ministry of Revenue. There were already signs of issues with the Dancheng's field taxes at that time, but Jiang Jun fell off his horse and died on his way back to the capital to submit his report, and the account book he had on him vanished without a trace." Xue Xiuzhuo said calmly. "In the second year of the reign of Xiande, when the Secretariat Elder continued digging into the accounts, Hua Siqian thought we had evidence in our hands, and so he ordered the noble clans to make up for the deficit in taxes. You people were unwilling to cough up the money from your own private coffers, so you intensified efforts to encroach on even more land in the eight cities in order to make up for the sum. In that year, seven households in the City of Dancheng successively consumed poison to commit suicide. You know why, right?"

Of course, Pan Lin knew why.

That year, Hua Siqian was pushed into such a corner that even Pan Xiangjie grew anxious too. Thus, at the same time he appropriated even more of the commoners' fields, he had the original fields taxes split up between the commoners in the city. These common folks had lost their fields that could feed them, and they were still burdened with hefty amounts of taxes to pay. Unable to have this gross injustice redressed, they could only seek death.

This was not exclusive to the City of Dancheng. It was a common scene in the eight cities after the reign of Xiande.

There was no longer anyone else left in the hall by the time Xue Xiuzhuo spoke to this point. He continued, “later on, Juexi was hit with a disaster, and Jiang Qingshan... Do you know why Jiang Qingshan refused to wallow in the mire with Hua Siqian at that time? Because Jiang Jun was his brother from the same clan. There’s karmic retribution in this world.”

Pan Lin’s throat tightened, and he forced a laugh. “Then aren’t you afraid of retribution by framing the innocent now?”

“Innocent? Is the Tax Circuit Intendant of Juexi innocent? He was able to take up the post of Tax Circuit Intendant because you people vouched for him. Then the Ministry of Revenue gave him a favorable appraisal and had him placed in Juexi as a counterbalance to Jiang Qingshan. Using this position, he had dealings with the Yan Clan of Hezhou, reselling copper and steel in the territory on behalf of the two Cities of Chuancheng and Dicheng. The tariffs he obtained from embezzlement and corruption are enough to rebuild this office compound.” Xue Xiuzhuo rose to his feet. His official robe appeared dark in the hall. He continued, “If the Tax Circuit Intendant had no connections whatsoever to the Marquis of Helian, how would he have heeded the hint and hurried over to make a heavy bribe? You people called this a frame-up, but this is merely a ‘tactic’ all of you habitually used in the past. I’m just following your example.”

Pan Lin gulped. Anxiety started to burn in him. “You go to great lengths and efforts in an attempt to support the Heir Apparent ascend to the throne, but I fear it will all be for naught in the end, much like trying to draw water with a bamboo basket.”

“My Heir Apparent to the Throne<sup>9</sup> is called Li Jianting, not Li Jianheng.” Xue Xiuzhuo braced himself against the edge of the table and looked down at Pan Lin. All of a sudden, he asked, “do you know about the Scorpions?”

The expression in Pan Lin’s eyes was blank. He maintained his silence to refuse to fall into Xue Xiuzhuo’s trap again.

“Zhongbo’s troops suffered a military defeat in the fourth year of Xiande, giving Hua Siqian a chance to catch his breath. Whether it was Shen Wei’s evasion of the battle or the Biansha’s invasion, Heaven seems to be helping the noble clan escape a calamity,” Xue Xiuzhuo said. “But you know what? I don’t believe that.”

Pan Lin had no idea what Xue Xiuzhuo was talking about at all, but he smelled danger. He could remain tight-lipped and evade the topic on the

appropriation of the commoners' fields, but he could not just breeze past the subject when it came to colluding with the foreign foes. This kind of matter would be a catastrophe leading to their ruin once it reared its ugly head!

"Are you trying to frame me again?" Pan Lin snapped. "You ingratiate yourself with the Heir Apparent for power and position, yet you get rid of those who challenge you in the imperial court and bend the law to suit your own purposes! If you truly have the state's interest at heart, then why do you have to force Lu Guangbai to turn against the state?"

"Who exactly was it that tampered with the Bianjun Commandery's military grains?" Xue Xiuzhuo abruptly flung away the confession statement in his hand. "And who was it who misappropriated and embezzled nearly half of Qidong's military salaries and provisions? You people repeatedly suppressed Qi Zhuyin and let the military power of a single clan in Libei grow so unchecked that their 120,000 Armored Cavalry soldiers overran the northeast. Without Xiao Chiye, who would have been able to tether Xiao Fangxu and Xiao Jiming and keep a hold on them? Why don't you ask yourself how the Secretariat Elder has been remedying all of your transgressions all these years?! The Empress Dowager holds sway over the imperial court and the common people, and yet even now, she is still unwilling to give up the noble clans to make up for the shortfall in Qidong's military funds!"

Xue Xiuzhuo's chest heaved. He turned his head to calm down some.

"I'm indeed getting rid of all those who stand against me." Xue Xiuzhuo looked at Pan Lin once again. "I want to weed out the dregs of society like you people at its roots, along with that 'Scorpion'."



Yao Wenyu, having suffered a cold from traveling a long distance, collapsed on the first night he arrived in Duanzhou. Seeing as Yuanzhuo was quick to fall ill but slow to heal, Shen Zechuan had the physician remain on standby in the courtyard.

Xiao Chiye was having his meal when he saw that Shen Zechuan was about to go over, so he said, "Let's go together. I'll go pay him a visit too."

After their meals, both men draped on their overcoats. Fei Sheng followed far behind them, while Xiao Chiye held up the umbrella and walked with Shen Zechuan to Yao Wenyu's courtyard.

Shen Zechuan saw it was empty under the eaves, so he asked the maidservant who came over to receive them, "why aren't all of you inside



waiting on him?”

The maidservant bowed in greetings and answered in a hushed tone, “the Mister doesn’t want anyone to wait on him at night.”

Xiao Chiye held Shen Zechuan’s hand and motioned for the maidservant to take her leave. He shook the umbrella and said, “Yuanzhuo is a man of pride.”

“I don’t see Qiao Tianya around.” Shen Zechuan looked around before his eyes stopped on the principal room. “Let’s knock.”

Both men were in the midst of talking when the door opened. Qiao Tianya was in his regular clothes. He bowed slightly in greetings to both of them and made way for them. “Yuanzhuo... Mister has yet to retire to bed. He’s waiting inside the room for Your Lordship and Second Master.”

Yao Wenyu was already up. His washed face was resting against the back of the chair. Hunu scratched away at the book on his knee until it fell to the ground. Xiao Chiye bent over to pick it up for him and took a look at it in passing. “Oh, an atlas. There is a set in the study of your Plum Blossom Residence.”

“Second Master had spent such a large sum of money that it’s a pity to leave that residence in Qudu.” Yao Wenyu’s voice was like the tinkling of jade. He had already schooled away his fatigue. Turning around his wheelchair, he motioned for Xiao Chiye to take a seat.

Shen Zechuan removed his overcoat and observed Yao Wenyu’s complexion. “You have been on the go for such a long distance. I shouldn’t have summoned you to the hall today.”

“With the snow melting of late, falling sick is inevitable and just a matter of time.” There was no one else around, and Yao Wenyu could be considered to be long-time friends with Xiao Chiye, so he was naturally much more relaxed than usual. He poured tea for Shen Zechuan, showing no sign of suffering from a chronic ailment in his movements. “Your Lordship must be still thinking about Qudu right now.”

“The spring plowing is just around the corner.” Shen Zechuan pressed his index finger against the teacup. The agate gem on his ear swung under the dim light. “If the Dancheng case continues to be investigated, the remaining seven cities will be affected too. This matter has a bearing on the granaries in Dazhou.”

“Sacrificing a pawn to save the rook is a habitual practice of the noble clans. If Xue Xiuzhuo had truly pushed them into a corner, then their

throwing away of a Pan Lin,” Xiao Chiye rearranged the remaining chess pieces on the small table at the side, “... is not entirely impossible.”

“Xue Xiuzhuo killed three birds with one stone this time. He used gold to pull Liang Cuishan over to his camp, push Dancheng’s field taxes onto the agenda, and set the stage for future investigation into Chuancheng’s tariffs,” Yao Wenyu said. “What’s so brilliant here is that such a thing had indeed gone down between the Tax Circuit Intendant and the Marquis of Helian. The Empress Dowager would be hard-pressed to voice her woes. However, this must not be the only reason Kong Qiu was willing to lend him a helping hand.”

Seeing Hunu running over to the side of his foot, Shen Zechuan quietly shifted aside a little and looked at the cat as he said, “... Qi Zhuyin’s mobilization of troops against the Qingshu Tribe was of pressing urgency. The Empress Dowager held back the Ministry of War in her refusal to give permission because she feared another investigation into the Ministry of Revenue’s accounts. Had Xue Xiuzhuo been willing to give the Grand Secretariat several millions of taels of silver at this juncture, Kong Qiu would naturally not turn it down.”

Hunu set its paws on Shen Zechuan’s boots and stuck its butt up in the air as it stretched itself. It “meow-meowed” a few times and nuzzled itself against Shen Zechuan’s calf. Just as it was about to paw at Shen Zechuan’s robe, Xiao Chiye picked it up by the scruff of its neck.

Xiao Chiye looked askance at it and said, “oh right, I almost forgot. Xue Yanqing still has a sum of silver in his hands.”

Hunu turned around in the air. On seeing Xiao Chiye, it shrank its ears back, put up its front paws, and dared not move again. Xiao Chiye tossed it back, and it landed deftly on the ground. With its tail sticking up, it moved over to the side of the wheelchair and climbed back onto Yao Wenyu’s lap for a petting.

Yao Wenyu stroked Hunu and said, “Commander-in-chief Qi is much obliged to Xue Xiuzhuo for making up for the shortfall in military salaries and provisions this time. If the Empress Dowager keeps up with her wait-and-see attitude, she’s going to lose her chance to make a preemptive strike.”

“This matter is also an easy one to resolve.” Shen Zechuan raised his eyes to look at both of them. “The Empress Dowager only needs to arrange

a marriage for Commander-in-chief Qi, and Qidong's military powers can be split into two."

"Marry Commander-in-chief Qi..." Xiao Chiye said, "even so, he has to have a noble title, and the few old men with noble ranks in Qudu at present are all not suitable, nor can they hold her in check."

"Since the Marquis of Helian is already implicated in the City of Chuancheng's saga, might as well kick him out." Shen Zechuan took the chess piece in Xiao Chiye's hand and set it down on the chessboard. "The Junior Marquis, Fei Shi, still doesn't have an official post, does he? Let him marry Commander-in-chief Qi and go over to Qidong to play the role of a pretty 'vase'. Military power that has been divided away to him can then be handed over to the Empress Dowager's charge. What's more, Fei Shi and Pan Lin are bosom friends. With this layer of relationship, Pan Lin will have a chance to stage a comeback as long as he doesn't die."

The Hua Clan had been marrying off their girls for nearly a hundred years, and now, it was finally the Empress Dowager's turn to "marry" off boys. Just as Xiao Chiye had said, abandoning a pawn to protect the rook was a tactic the Empress Dowager habitually used, only that the pawn she was going to cast aside was not just Pan Yi but also the Marquis of Helian. Xue Xiuzhuo already had a handle against the City of Chuancheng in his grasp, and Liang Cuishan had the City of Chuancheng's accounts in his hand. Since it was Chuancheng's accounts, then let Chuancheng bear responsibility for it.

The Empress Dowager was at the mercy of others in the earlier half of her life. Being passive was not necessarily a desperate situation to her. Rather, she was already used to dealing out passive strikes. There was only one supreme ruler in the world. Since the Heir Apparent, Li Jianting, could be one, then why not her, Hua Hewei?

"To date, the Li clan has, through the hands of the Empress Dowager, lost Emperor Guangcheng, Emperor Xiande, Emperor Tianchen, and the Crown Prince of the Eastern Palace during the reign of Yongyi." Xiao Chiye looked at the white piece in his palm. "If she loses again this time, Dazhou will really change hands to a different master."



With her cloak draped around her, Li Jianting stood in the sleet and faced the Empress Dowager from afar through the curtain of snow.

The Empress Dowager looked at the young Heir Apparent and saw shadows of Emperor Guangcheng in Li Jianting's facial features. That was the husband who had held her in check for half her life, and also the shackle who had her trapped in the harem. Now that she stood at the pinnacle of supreme power, she no longer feared these eyes.

The Empress Dowager smiled benevolently at Li Jianting and soundlessly thought,

Vile spawn of incest.



## CHAPTER 218: PREPARATIONS (FOR A RAINY DAY)



In the blink of an eye, it was already the end of the second month. The Dancheng case became a major case known to all in Qudu. No headway was made even with Pan Lin cooped up for half a month in the joint hearing hall. Discussions were rife among the students on the streets. They pinned their hopes on Xue Xiuzhuo, and the memorials impeaching Pan Xiangjie in the imperial court increased by the day.

When the snow stopped, a row of merchants from Juexi also arrived in Qudu.

Xiaowu<sup>10</sup> was all wrapped like a dumpling, yet he was extremely agile as he leaped from the carriage and stood at the checkpoint to chat merrily with the minor functionary in charge of tax collection. The drapes of the carriage behind him lifted, and Ge Qingqing, who had grown a short beard, stepped off.

Ge Qingqing flicked up a copper coin with his thumb and caught it with a steady hand. He smiled at the minor functionary. “With these goods of ours coming and going all the time, we’ve long grown to be on familiar terms. I hope my lord will grace us with your presence at Donglong Street tonight. I have to thank you properly for looking out for my younger brother last year.”

The minor functionary with the book of taxes under his arm knew that this person was a merchant from Juexi. When Xiaowu had escorted the

goods to and fro last year, he had forked out a considerable sum of money. Now that the minor functionary had finally met Ge Qingqing, he was all chummy with him despite it being his first time meeting the latter.

The minor functionary jumped off the wagon with an exclamation of surprise and cupped his hands at Ge Qingqing as he said with a merry laugh, "I'm just a lowly clerk doing menial work. How would I presume myself worthy of being called 'lord' by Master Ge? You are the master—our master!"<sup>11</sup>

Ge Qingqing, having returned to Qudu again after a year, noted the many checks being carried out at the entrance of the city gates in which they were carefully scrutinizing the travel permits and registers of the coming and going companies of merchants. Without batting an eyelid, he said to the minor functionary, "It's such a chilly day. How long do you have to stand here? The queue of merchants in the back still seemed rather long to me."

Standing at the side, the minor functionary accepted the tobacco Ge Qingqing passed him. He had received a substantial amount of "ice respect" bribes<sup>12</sup> from Ge Qingqing, so he was naturally more than willing to socialize with him. He promptly started grousing half in jest. "I have to stand here until the city gates close! If it wasn't for the lack of other capabilities, who would be willing to stand like a pole around here? You may not be aware of this, but around a hundred or so merchants pass through the checkpoints in a single day, and a great number of them resort to various means of skulduggery to evade taxes."

"They are really scums." Ge Qingqing took the opportunity to carry on the conversation. "Isn't this a deliberate attempt to hinder all of you from carrying out your duties?"

"Exactly!" The minor functionary paved the way for Ge Qingqing as he met the latter's eyes. "I've been collecting taxes here for so long. Of all the people that I've met, you, Master Ge, are the most righteous."

Ge Qingqing patted the minor functionary on the shoulder and offered a few words of comfort.

The minor functionary asked, "Did Master Ge make this trip in person this time because of a big deal?"

Ge Qingqing was presently smoking a pipe. He never did so during his time in the Imperial Bodyguards, but these were indispensable tools for socialization in Juexi. He answered in the affirmative, then turned his head

aside to exhale smoke. "It's not easy to do business now. The various regions are strict with their checks, so we have to go through the city of Dicheng if not the city of Chuancheng. The taxes for transporting large shipments of goods through the territories are too exorbitant. I've long lost hopes of making a fortune." After he finished, he lamented again, "All of you are in a much better position. You won't go wrong working for the imperial court, and you look mighty imposing doing it too."

"Master Ge hasn't been here much." The minor functionary sucked on a pipe as he continued, "there are some arrogant sons of a bitch that don't even see us as human beings just because they have money. They throw their weight and boss us around when they pass through the checkpoint. There have been many incidents of them trampling all over us."

The words spoken by the minor functionary were laced with half-truths and half-lies. Tax collection was a lucrative job; the people he dealt with day in and day out were all merchants who hailed from various lands. What's more, there were few troublemakers given that it was the honorable capital city of the Son of Heaven, and the slightly more discerning merchants would all take the initiative to grease the officials' palms. That was why the minor functionaries who could be stationed at this checkpoint typically had someone in the higher authorities to look out for them. But it was also true that they could not afford to offend those like the Xi clan when they occasionally came across them.

"It has been hard on all of you, brothers." Ge Qingqing waved his hand at Xiaowu to signal him to bring the goods in. "Then let's do this. I'll host a banquet at Yanyu Tavern on Donglong Street and wait for you there. Once you and the other brothers are off duty, head straight over. We shall drink to our heart's content then."

The minor functionary answered, "Master Ge is too kind. Then I shall not stand on ceremony and accept the invitation!"

Ge Qingqing smiled and followed the company of merchants into the city. Xiaowu led the horse over and asked, "Qing-ge, why are you giving them a treat? They're all rats, and extremely greedy and corrupt ones at that!"

"Master said to go fishing." Ge Qingqing tossed the copper coin between his fingers to Xiaowu. "How are we to hook a fish without bait?"

The tariffs at the city gate checkpoints were administered by the Qudu Commercial Tax Office that fell directly under the jurisdiction of the



Ministry of Revenue. The minor functionaries were mediocre and unqualified, relying solely on their backers in the higher authorities to vouch for them. Even if they embezzled silver here, they had to consider the gravity of it. For instance, the large shipment of goods that Ge Qingqing had transported last year was easily several thousands in private taxes. How would the minor functionaries have the guts to swallow it all? They only dared to embezzle a small fraction of it, for the majority of the tax still had to be handed over to the “higher-ups”.

It was on Shen Zechuan’s order that Ge Qingqing returned to the capital this time to fish for these “higher-ups”.

“Let’s go,” Ge Qingqing patted Xiaowu on the back as he looked at the fresh snow on the glazed tiles, “and get back our ‘old residence’ first.”



Yao Wenyu’s illness did not take a turn for the better, and taking multiple bowls of medicine did not help any. It was only today when the Imperial Bodyguards were testing out the new horses that he had the opportunity to venture outdoors to enjoy the breeze. Fei Sheng, being meticulous, had already prepared a screen before Shen Zechuan gave his orders. He had also placed a charcoal brazier under the shack to keep Yao Wenyu from freezing.

Shen Zechuan saw Xiao Chiye standing at the very front, saying something to Hairigu about something. Without shifting his gaze away, he simply tilted his head slightly to say to Yao Wenyu, “It’s inevitable for Ge Qingqing to be homesick after having been in Juexi for a long time. As a native of Qudu, he still has kinfolks at home.”

The agate on the Prefectural Lord’s bright and clear earlobe swayed as he moved and brushed against his fur collar, appearing all the more breathtakingly captivating. Red suited him. All those white fur robes of his diminished the dazzling gorgeousness of his facial features, giving him an overly amicable appearance when necessary. Only red could draw out his sharp, penetrating edge. This was a process of “honing the blade”. The higher he sat, the more conspicuous those sharp edges hidden away in the depths would become.

“All the officials in key positions in the Qudu Commercial Tax Office are from the noble clans.” Yao Wenyu was unwilling to reveal even a hint of frailty in the presence of outsiders, so he had a blanket over him and appeared sufficiently spirited. “Since Your Lordship intends for Ge

Qingqing to start making his move here, you can make use of Xi Hongxuan's old acquaintances."

"That won't do." Shen Zechuan watched as Hairigu got on the horse. The Imperial Bodyguards on the other end got on their horses too. Fei Sheng was leaning over to speak to Qiao Tianya. He continued, "Most of Xi Hongxuan's old acquaintances are involved with Xue Xiuzhuo. Xi Hongxuan could enter the capital during the reign of Xiande because Xue Xiuzhuo went to a lot of effort. These people are a motley crew, so we have to screen and select them carefully before using them."

"With Pan Lin dismissed from his post," Yao Wenyu said, "Liang Cuishan is now the pawn with the most promising future. I only fear that Ge Qingqing won't be able to make it in time for the Dancheng case if he is to explore a new pathway of clues under his watch."

"We can't intervene in the Dancheng's case." Sensing something moving at his waist, Shen Zechuan lowered his eyes and saw Hunu reaching its paw out for the tassel on his folding fan. "It is of no benefit to me regardless of who wins or loses in this game that is the Dancheng's case. I had Ge Qingqing return to Qudu not to have him stir up a storm in the Dancheng's case, but to wait for a winner to emerge."

Yao Wenyu did not notice Hunu; his eyes were on Qiao Tianya on the riding tracks.

The recruitment criteria of the Imperial Bodyguards of Zhongbo were set according to Qiao Tianya. All dressed in a body-fitting outfit<sup>13</sup> today, he bent over and lowered his arm to pick up a boisterous Ding Tao who was running all over and tossed the latter to Gu Jin, who was behind him. Then he hooked Li Xiong's collar with his horsewhip and tossed Li Xiong to Gu Jin too.

"... The fifth month is when the busy farming season ends," Yao Wenyu said. "Libei is still fighting a war. Your Lordship is planning ahead in preparation for a rainy day."

The end of the busy farming season meant that farm work such as plowing and the like would be wrapped up, and the pressure on the Grand Secretariat would subsequently ease, leaving them with enough energy to start confronting Zhongbo and Libei. Shen Zechuan had to ensure that his supply line would not break. He had to shoulder the military provision supply for three parties this year, but he had lost the Xi Clan's copper mine in Juexi, and the Liuzhou's port which he was planning for with Yan Heru

was only in its fledgling stage this year. If they were to get further contained by Qudu, then the battle zone would become even more perilous.

"If Xue Yanqing wins," Yao Wenyu looked at Shen Zechuan, "where will Your Lordship look for his weakness?"

"I can't find one." Shen Zechuan swung the tassel. "I couldn't find Xue Yanqing's weakness even way back in Qudu. There is nothing this person can't forsake. He cut me off from Xi Hongxuan's money vaults, and yet he's still willing to wear old official robes and head down to the local areas to carry out fieldwork. He has my admiration."

Lang Tao Xue Jin sped past the field, and cheers erupted. Xiao Chiye pulled the reins and smiled at Shen Zechuan from afar.

The frostiness in Shen Zechuan's eyes disappeared. He turned the folding fan over.

"He did a clean job with the Quancheng's silk case too. I can't catch him... but no man is an island, himself included."



Xue Xiuyi pressed the handkerchief down to blow his nose. He prided himself on being a virtuous and lofty man of letters, yet his actions were rather crude. His official robe was slovenly worn, with the corners black and wrinkled. Xue Xiuzhuo was now at the height of his career and the peak of his power, but Xue Xiuyi had only muddled his way into a sinecure post. Having squandered away the family fortune in his early years, he now even had to think twice just to eat a bowl of noodles worth a copper coin.

The fellow official at the side was fed up with Xue Xiuyi, but he dared not show it openly and merely said, "You're still sick, so it's fine even if you rest at home for two days. Why push yourself so? I'll call for a physician to take a look at you later."

Xue Xiuyi felt as if he had lost face when he heard that. He was the lawful son of a noble clan, and yet the way his fellow official put it made it seem like he could not even afford to pay the fees of a physician, so he crumbled up his handkerchief and said at the top of his voice, "I have an in-house physician waiting in attendance at home! When have we ever lacked a physician at home? I've just been so busy with my official duties that I forgot about it. I'll call for him to take a look when I get back later."

His fellow officials all knew he was just pretending to be leading an extravagant life when he was, in fact, so poor that he was fighting with his wife over it all day long at home. Furthermore, all his maidservants and

whatnot had already been sold off. So they simply mumbled a few vague words in a perfunctory attempt to beg off the conversation and no longer bothered themselves with him.

It was getting dark at this point in time, and people were leaving the office compound one after another. Xue Xiuyi sat on the cold bench facing the stove with the intent to dry his wet boots, but as it turned out, the candle was blown out. He was used to a life of luxury when he was young, and there were always the maidservants – young and old – to accompany him even when he slept. He feared the dark, so on seeing the candle gone, he hastily stood up and hurried outside.

Several fellow officials were standing around in the courtyard smoking their pipes as they made plans to go drinking later. Xue Xiuyi walked over to the door with great haste and heard them say,

“Isn’t it obvious enough? I’ve long heard that the Xue clan treated their common-born sons extremely harshly, especially this Xue the Eldest.” The fellow official said in a hushed tone. “Back then, during the reign of Yongyi, the Old Master of the Xue clan was willing to let His Excellency Yanqing study with him precisely because Xue the Eldest was really not cut out for it. Mister Changzong even called him a hopeless case beyond teaching!”

Xue Xiuyi’s heart went cold. He was particular about his reputation, so he promptly shrank back behind the door and put up with the shame as he listened to them continue the conversation.

“That’s why Xue Yanqing is reluctant to promote him now,” someone said, “and just had him placed in a *yamen* position with practically no obligations. His monthly salary can’t even be compared to the beggars outside. It would have been fine if the heirs of their clan had noble title to inherit just like the Fei Clan, but unfortunately, that’s not the case.”

“The men Xue Yanqing recommended for office all seemed to me to be unaffiliated scholars<sup>14</sup> from the Hanlin Academy. Most of these people were successful candidates in the imperial examinations held in the spring in the previous years and have passed the palace examinations.<sup>15</sup> They are all virtuous talents. How is this Xue the Eldest going to get promoted? He knows nuts about nothing. I told him to sort out the old court cases, and he can even somehow transcribe eight words on one piece of paper wrong.”

They put their heads together and snickered.

Both of Xue Xiuyi's hands trembled. He gripped his drenched robe, wanting to charge out and rage at these despicable people mocking him behind his back. But he was not the same person as he used to be back then; he had no part of the Xue clan's honor and glory, and he relied on this bit of salary to make a living. He did not dare to shoot his mouth off like he had done so when he humiliated Pan Lin back then.

Who does Xue Yanqing think he is?

Xue Xiuyi craned his neck and spat.

Contemptible common-born son of a concubine!

### **Author's Notes:**

For Li Jianting's background, refer to [chapter 120](#).

For the autumnal rain round-up hunt Hasen spoke of, refer to [chapter 151](#).

Don't quarrel. Don't quarrel. Don't quarrel.

\*sends a cosmic wave of love your way\*



## CHAPTER 219: REWARD



Lang Tao Xue Jin was invincible on the riding tracks. It was the undisputed, uncrowned king of the Hongyan Mountains, and even when faced up against the Biansha battle ponies, those that could rival it were few and far between. After having his fun for two laps, Xiao Chiye called it a day and dismounted to drink up Shen Zechuan's remaining tea on the table. Still lingering on the rim of the cup was the Prefectural Lord's warmth.

"A day like today is hard to come by." Xiao Chiye finished the tea and took a hot handkerchief to wipe his hand. "Let's put up a reward and let them have their fun."

"Ready-made rewards are aplenty." Shen Zechuan turned his head and said to the maidservant before him, "Tell them I have a big reward for them if they win the race."

Xiao Chiye sat down, his long legs crowding up all the space until Shen Zechuan barely had the legroom to put his own. He asked, "What's the reward?"

Shen Zechuan smiled without answering.

The few of them who were riding their horses on the field stopped in their tracks. Tantai Hu was entertained to hear that there was a reward. "This is taking unfair advantage of our Zhongbo."

The various generals of Libei were all adept in the art of horsemanship, but the guards of Zhongbo were not. As far as the prize was concerned, Gu Jin and Wu Ziyu would be expected to win it; there was no suspense at all to this race.

Fei Sheng, who was sitting on horseback, said to Qiao Tianya, “Why not you participate?”

Qiao Tianya pulled the reins, greeted Gu Jin at the back, and answered, “You represent the Prefectural Lord. Aren’t you ashamed to surrender without a fight? Tao-zi, come on up. Do a run with your *Laoshi-ge*.”<sup>16</sup>

Ding Tao grasped over the reins and said to Fei Sheng, “Don’t be afraid. Jin-ge has never outrun me back in Libei. I’ll block him for you later. You just focus on racing Wu Ziyu.”

“I’m not afraid.” Fei Sheng saw Qiao Tianya withdrawing and hurriedly added, “Then you can’t retreat either. Us brothers have to work as one.”

Qiao Tianya pointed at the back with his horsewhip. Fei Sheng took a look—Huo Lingyun was there too. Qiao Tianya said, “The last track is narrow. Don’t over-engage with Wu Ziyu. Just shut your eyes to everything else and spur your horse on. There will be no lack of people behind you to help you block the others.”

By this, he meant to give Fei Sheng a leg up with Huo Lingyun and hand Fei Sheng the limelight. For a while, Fei Sheng did not know what to feel. He cupped his fists at Qiao Tianya and said, “You’re truly a real brother in my time of need!”

Yao Wenyu could not hear their conversation, but on seeing Qiao Tianya backing away, he understood what they meant to do.

Holding the teacup with his fingers, Xiao Chiye looked at the track and ruminated it over. “This Qiao Tianya is way too self-effacing.”

The horse race was a spur-of-the-moment affair, meant for everyone to just have fun. But it did not mean that the Imperial Bodyguards could lose too badly and make a disgrace out of themselves. The Libei Armored Cavalry and the Zhongbo Garrison Troops were both present too, and yet Qiao Tianya still handed the opportunity to Fei Sheng.

The Second Master was saying that Qiao Tianya had no drive and spirit.

With Hunu in his arms, Yao Wenyu looked at Qiao Tianya and said nothing.

Shen Zechuan spread his folding fan open a little and closed it again. He looked as if he had it all figured out as he maintained his silence and remained calm.



“Xiaosheng!” Yin Chang stepped on the fence and straddled it as he let loose a heartrending shout at Fei Sheng, “Quick, run! Faster! Win, and this old man will take you drinking—”

Before Yin Chang could finish his words, Gu Jin’s horse went racing past like a whirlwind. The old man ate a mouthful of dust and got all so anxious he very nearly bolted to his feet.

Gu Jin and Wu Ziyu worked hand in glove to obstruct Fei Sheng’s path ahead. Fei Sheng was half a step too slow and could not overtake them. Behind him, Ding Tao spurred his horse on and passed by Fei Sheng to block the backside of Gu Jin’s horse from the outer flank. He pressed so close that Gu Jin had no choice but to slow down and give way to Wu Ziyu.

“Jin-ge! Did you hide a tael of silver in your old boots? It’s soaked through! Before I set off, *Liu-shen*<sup>17</sup> at the entrance of our residence even asked me when you’d be paying for the wine you took on credit. That was so embarrassing!” Ding Tao spoke with increasing gusto as he continued, “So I took the liberty of taking the money out of your boots and paid off half of it. Half! Can you imagine? Exactly how much of a tab did you rack up? My accounts are all a mess now...”

Driven beyond the limit of his forbearance, Gu Jin turned his head aside and yelled, “Shut up!”

The instant his attention was diverted, Fei Sheng took over the inner lane. Gu Jin treasured horses and was unwilling to force his way through. Both of them raced neck to neck with one another for a while and gained in on Wu Ziyu until Wu Ziyu could feel the chill on his ass.

The width of the riding tracks differed. Once they cleared this distance, a slightly wider bend lay ahead. Gu Jin wanted to close in on Fei Sheng and push him back here, while Fei Sheng wanted to overtake Gu Jin here. Both of them shut their mouths tight and galloped in the dust. Seeing as the bend was just right in front, Gu Jin clamped down hard on his horse’s belly. Ding Tao had long withdrawn behind him, and Huo Lingyun had taken over his place now.

As soon as Huo Lingyun approached, Gu Jin realized that this man’s horsemanship was pretty decent; he was a more intimidating rider than Fei Sheng was. The bend turned abruptly, and the head of Gu Jin’s horse veered over. Unexpectedly, Huo Lingyun, who was catching up from the side,

suddenly accelerated. His pony's sturdy foreneck turned direction as well, pushing Gu Jin towards the inner lane.

Gu Jin urgently pulled at his reins, but the horse could not brake in time. It was cornered so aggressively that it slanted sideways and was about to bump into Fei Sheng, who was in the innermost lane. With his spot suddenly narrowing, Fei Sheng subconsciously tightened his right grip on the reins in an attempt to avoid a collision. His horse promptly turned its head aside and scraped against the fence, breaking the wooden rails as it tore along it. Alarmed, the horse tripped over the rails in its haste and instantaneously went falling head first.

"Fuck!" Tantai Hu jerked to his feet.

The horse twisted its front knees when it fell over. Fei Sheng acted quickly amidst the kickup of dust and immediately hugged his head to protect it as he rolled on the ground, so startled was he that he broke out all over in a cold sweat.

Gu Jin, having already stopped, dismounted first and pulled Fei Sheng to his feet.

Fei Sheng kicked out his legs as he stood up. His robe was full of mud and soil all over. He wiped the sweat off his face and turned his head aside to spit out a tooth, then assured Qiao Tianya behind them, "I'm fine!"

Huo Lingyun cracked his horsewhip, vaguely looking as if he was going to overtake Wu Ziyu on the gradually narrowing track.

Having heard the commotion, Wu Ziyu said as Huo Lingyun pressed in towards him, "isn't that rather underhanded, buddy?"

Huo Lingyun half-bent his body down as he shot forth like a sharp arrow slicing through the wind. The momentum of his forward charge was too swift and fierce, and he was so bent on overtaking Wu Ziyu that he totally disregarded the fences on both sides of the track and simply let his calves scrape against the railings until they drew blood.

Wu Ziyu's stirrup scraped against the fence until fragments of wood broke off. He cursed gruffly, "motherfucking..."

This half of the fence was already teetering on the verge of collapse after Fei Sheng's incident. Wu Ziyu heard a "crash" as the fence broke apart on impact. Not daring to race to the death with Huo Lingyun, he promptly turned around and led his horse out of the track.

Wu Ziyu gave a light spat and bent over to hug his horse's neck, his voice hoarse as he said comfortingly, "this is so aggravating for my

Cangwei!”

Huo Lingyun was unstoppable as he galloped across this last stretch of track. His breathing slightly urgent, he tossed all the noise to the back of his mind as he sped in the wind. All his eyes could see was the finishing line.

He had to fight for his future!

No one here was his brother, and no one was his old acquaintance either. He knew what his placement in the Imperial Bodyguards meant, but it was far from enough. His aspirations lay in the battlefields. He had to fight a path out for himself in Shen Zechuan’s presence, and only then would he be entrusted with heavy responsibilities.

Yin Chang was so antsy that he slapped his thigh. He was burning with the desire to break into a run and chase after this lad. He hollered, “No cheating! How can you do that to your own people...”

Horse hooves suddenly sent mud splattering as they followed hot on Huo Lingyun’s heels, like a bolt of lightning breaking through the dust.

“Qiao Tianya!” Tantai Hu excitedly leaned out of the fence and roared, “QIAO TIANYA!”

Yao Wenyu’s throat was parched. He seemed to hear the sound of solid ice cracking open as he saw Qiao Tianya’s wildly fluttering hair in the gale of wind, as well as the proud and bold spirit in his brows.

Huo Lingyun frowned slightly when he saw Qiao Tianya closing in on him out of the corner of his eye.

Qiao Tianya held back the taste of soil on the tip of his tongue and barked out a short laugh at Huo Lingyun. Both men simultaneously lowered their bodies as they squeezed onto a single track between the unsteady fences.

Qiao Tianya rarely seemed to have the impulse to “win”, but in this boisterous din today, he was once again the lad of the Qiao clan who galloped his horse all over Qudu ten years ago.

A riotous racket of intense shouts thundered through the riding track. The rich multi-colored silk ball was hanging just right ahead. Fences fell over one after another like dominos under the rapid beats of horse hooves.

Huo Lingyun gritted his teeth. The gale whipped the dust all over the sky, where they swirled and danced. His chest was almost bursting with the desire to win. Right at this moment, a horizontal bar of iron suddenly materialized before him. The force of the impact of a direct head-on collision would have been sufficient to knock a person over to the ground.

Huo Lingyun made a split decision and let go of his hand to flip over. As the horse continued sprinting, he dropped and rolled onto the ground, avoiding the iron bar. But after he landed, he heard Qiao Tianya still continuing on his charge ahead. He could not help but blurted in astonishment, “Qiao—”

The burgundy red battle steed charged over the iron bar with no one on its back.

Yao Wenyu gripped the handles of his wheelchair. His breathing came to a standstill.

A brief moment later, Qiao Tianya swiftly flipped back into position from the side of his horse. A hubbub of voices instantly broke out on the field.

Xiao Chiye said, “beautiful.”

As the Imperial Bodyguards pounced at him, Qiao Tianya took down the multi-colored silk ball and burst into hearty laughter. The bright, sunny day dissolved away all that was downtrodden and disillusioned of him into glistening sweat as he sat on horseback, looking the very picture of a valiant, dashing hero.

Yao Wenyu’s calm and composed face betrayed almost nothing as he released his grip, only to realize that Qiao Tianya was looking in this direction.

Qiao Tianya withdrew his gaze and dismounted. He bumped shoulders with Fei Sheng and blocked Fei Sheng’s line of sight that was drifting towards Huo Lingyun. Fei Sheng did not say a word. The race was over, and now they had to go before Shen Zechuan to receive their reward.

Carrying his folding fan in hand, Shen Zechuan cut a tall, graceful figure as he said, “Since I’ve said it’s a big reward, then I naturally can’t use money and material commodities to fob all of you off. The commander-in-chief position of the Duanzhou Imperial Cavalry has been vacated all this time.” He paused for a moment. “Today, this seat shall be handed over to Qiao Tianya.”

Exactly as expected!

Fei Sheng, who was kneeling, lowered his head, all crestfallen. There were people all around here. He could not pull a long face at his master, but his disappointment was real. He could only manage with some difficulty to raise his spirit and maintain the composed expression on his face.

“Fei Sheng is transferred to assume the post of the Imperial Cavalry’s Vice Commander. Same goes for Huo Lingyun. The Zhongbo Imperial Bodyguards are thereby renamed ‘Imperial Cavalry’.<sup>18</sup> You still have the authority to make urgent reports directly, and you are not subordinate to the Duanzhou Garrison Troops.” The tassel of Shen Zechuan’s fan swayed in the wind. He continued, “You belong directly to me, Shen Lanzhou.”

A private cavalry!

Tantai Hu and Gu Jin exchanged glances in slight astonishment. Everyone knew about the preparation for the establishment of the Imperial Cavalry, but they thought that this light cavalry would be merged into the Duanzhou Garrison Troops to be placed under the charge of the Duanzhou Prefectural Prefect’s *yamen*.

A private cavalry meant that the posts of the Imperial Bodyguards practically remained unchanged; they were still a troop directly under Shen Zechuan’s command. They were not subjected to the supervision and inspection of the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo; in fact, they even had the authority to supervise and inspect the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo. Unlike military forces with progressive ranks like the garrison troops, they would only serve and pledge loyalty to Shen Zechuan.

Xiao Chiye propped up the teapot and drank another cup of hot tea. Seeing as it was already late, he said, “Tend to the horses first before sending them back to the stables. Take good care of them.”

Fei Sheng immediately rose to his feet and instructed the others to clear away the screen and charcoal brazier, while Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye took their leave first. Yao Wenyu bent over to take Hunu into his arms. When he straightened up again, he saw Qiao Tianya standing before him.

Blocking Huo Lingyun, Qiao Tianya pointed to Fei Sheng on the other end, and said, “Once you’re done cleaning up, wait in the main courtyard for your orders.”

The atmosphere around Huo Lingyun did not bode well. He gave an indifferent nod of his head and stepped around Qiao Tianya.

Yao Wenyu was looking at the cat when a colored silk ball suddenly fell into his arms. He raised his eyes—Qiao Tianya was still looking at Huo Lingyun. Yao Wenyu grasped that multi-colored ball; it still had Qiao Tianya’s sweat on it.



## CHAPTER 220: FIGURE



While the Prefectural Lord and Second Master were having their meal, Kong Ling and the other gentlemen were drinking tea in the side hall waiting for them. Yu Xiaozai said quietly to Kong Ling, “I just hope that everyone will get along today and not dampen His Lordship’s spirits.”

All of them were present at the riding tracks, where they had a clear look of the fierce battle that had gone down between formidable foes on horseback. Fei Sheng’s reputation among the Imperial Bodyguards was not one to be trifled with, and he had also previously rendered meritorious service serving under Shen Zechuan. Huo Lingyun could not afford to shoulder the blame for offending him.

Kong Ling covered his mouth with a handkerchief and set aside his chopsticks. “Since His Lordship did not say a word about it, there’s no way anyone can kick up a commotion about this incident. You should not belittle Qiao Tianya either. He naturally must have his strengths for His Lordship to value and respect him to such an extent.”

Kong Ling had the clearest idea of what Shen Zechuan was thinking, having already figured him out. This horse race might have been a spur-of-the-moment idea, but the Prefectural Lord’s awarding of reward was not. Fei Sheng took credit for risking his life to protect the Prefectural Lord before, and then he had the tangible result to show for as the attendant officer in the taking down of Fanzhou. No doubt Shen Zechuan would put Fei Sheng to use somewhere more suitable, but at the same time, Shen Zechuan would not let Fei Sheng get a monopoly on power either. He had

to simultaneously mobilize Qiao Tianya and Huo Lingyun so that these three people would form an iron triangle of a powerful trio who mutually held each other in check under his command. The outcome of today's horse race was exactly as the Prefectural Lord expected.

Shen Zechuan drew a clear distinction between his personal relations and official business. From the Imperial Bodyguards to the Six Prefectures, he was in the process of quietly establishing an equilibrium of power imbued with checks and balances. Shen Zechuan was not as forceful and striking as Xiao Chiye was when it came to the management of his subordinates, but he always remained securely seated at the peak, holding every single subordinate firmly in the palm of his hand as he had them achieve a delicate balance.

Kong Ling could not help but sigh ruefully as he thought to this point. Qi Huilian truly was the teacher of the emperor.



Shen Zechuan tapped the chess piece as he played a game against Xiao Chiye. They had rekindled an interest in it after the last round in Yuanzhuo's residence and were presently sitting around digesting their meals.

"What happened with Qiao Tianya was not in the cards," Xiao Chiye said. "Seeing how he made no attempt to vie in Cizhou, I even suspected that he had already seen through the secular world and was on the verge of renouncing himself from the pursuit of fame and fortune."

"I had the same sentiments." With his fingertips, Shen Zechuan turned around the chess piece that was cold to the touch. "But opportunities abound everywhere in life. There's always light at the end of the tunnel."

Xiao Chiye propped his arms on his knees and gave the Prefectural Lord his undivided attention.

Shen Zechuan set the chess piece down. "Qiao Tianya was a Vice Commander in the Imperial Bodyguards who could even take the liberty to mobilize the Imperial Bodyguards back then when he apprehended you at the Nanlin Hunting Grounds. This in itself is evident of Ji Lei's preferential treatment of him. Even as an official slapped with a crime, he could eke out a spot for himself in Qudu and one-up Fei Sheng. To be able to do that, he can't do without both craftiness and drive. My guess is that he bowed out in Cizhou because of Yuanzhuo's debilitating health, but despite his desire to retreat, Yuanzhuo pushed him back into the game."



Shen Zechuan hesitated over Huo Lingyun's placement when Fanzhou scored a great victory. At that time, Yao Wenyu proposed to place Huo Lingyun into the Imperial Bodyguards. As long as Shen Zechuan agreed, he would have to put Qiao Tianya to use again, because Huo Lingyun could not hold Fei Sheng in check in the Imperial Bodyguards.

"Both of them sure are interesting." At this point, Xiao Chiye remembered the Venerable Master Yideng of whom there had been no traces of for a long time. "Yuanzhuo's chronic ailment is a tough one to heal..."

Shen Zechuan nodded slightly. "This is the reason Yuanzhuo pushed Qiao Tianya back into the game."

After a moment of silence, Xiao Chiye said, "The paths of talented men never run smooth."<sup>19</sup>

The atmosphere was slightly heavy as Shen Zechuan nudged the chess piece under the candlelight and said, "The medicine Yuanzhuo is taking can't cure the illness once and for all at its root. Physicians come and go, but not a single one of them dares to give a definitive answer."

"The poison he was fed with in Dancheng was meant to take his life." Xiao Chiye tossed the chess piece between his fingers into the chess box. "The Venerable Master Yideng became untraceable after the tenth month last year. I asked *shifu* back in Dajing, and he had no idea either. The Venerable Master made it clear when he left Dajing that he would return after the new year to check on my eldest brother again. But it's already almost the third month, and there's still no sign of him."

Shen Zechuan's health was a constant worry to Xiao Chiye, and seeing Yao Wenyu so frail and weak now, he could not help but feel as if Shen Zechuan would share the same fate. He rose to his feet and pushed aside the chessboard, disregarding the chess pieces bouncing all over the table as he stubbornly stroked Shen Zechuan's cheek.

"By the fourth month at the very latest," Xiao Chiye's gaze spoke volumes as he said in a deep voice with his palm on Shen Zechuan's cheek, "I'll find the Venerable Master, even if I have to dig to the very center of the earth."



Lanterns hung high in the office compound, with the slab stones swept so clean that there was not a single speck of dust on them. This courtyard was newly selected. Several years ago, it was a compound for the officials

of the Duanzhou *yamen* to rest their feet while on duty, and now it had been vacated out for the Imperial Bodyguards to use as an office compound, with several rooms excavated to form a main central hall.

Fei Sheng sat inside with one foot on a stool drinking his wine. Several of his fellow brothers surrounded him and dug into the wine dishes until the plates were a mess. Every one of them was glancing outside.

Huo Lingyun was squatting on the steps with his back to them, eating dry rations with cold water. He was midway through when a *cuju* ball<sup>20</sup> suddenly came flying over from the side and smashed into his water canteen, which fell to the ground and wetted the corner of his robe. He swallowed the ration in his mouth and turned his head over to look.

The Imperial Bodyguard under the tree grinned at him. "It's dark in the courtyard. I didn't see clearly."

Huo Lingyun reached out an arm to pick up the ball, then rose to his feet and wiped his mouth.

The Imperial Bodyguard teased Huo Lingyun. "At the count of two, throw it back to—"

Before he could finish his words, Huo Lingyun threw the *cuju* ball out. That leather ball flew over the wall, and in no time, disappeared from sight.

Huo Lingyun rubbed away a handful of snow and answered, "It's dark in the courtyard. I didn't see clearly."

Fei Sheng picked up the food and ate without turning his head around. Meanwhile, the Imperial Bodyguards beside him had all stood up. The one across from him crossed past the branch and went over to bump into Huo Lingyun, scolding in jest, "Son of a bitch, throwing it that far. You going to pick it up?"

One of the lanterns in the courtyard suddenly went out, casting a veil of darkness over this side. Huo Lingyun felt a blow to his abdomen. He rolled up his sleeve and threw out a fist. The steps were slippery, and the few of them tripped him, causing his punch to strike at empty air. The next moment, Huo Lingyun was thrown down to the ground. He protected his head and took a few more blows.

Qiao Tianya strode in from the courtyard entrance and kicked them one after another without even lifting the hem of his robe. His voice was frosty as he berated them, "Get up, all of you!"

"What's going on here?" Fei Sheng shifted his butt and turned his head aside to look down the stairs with a placid expression. "Why are you

creating a scene here?”

Huo Lingyun was still protecting his head. He had been kicked until he was covered in shoe prints all over. He spat out a mouthful of blood from the gap between his arms and leaped to his feet.<sup>21</sup>

Qiao Tianya looked at Fei Sheng, who said, “I didn’t hear a thing. Xiaohuo, why didn’t you shout for me?”

It was all ice fragments in Huo Lingyun’s mouth. He spat out several more mouthfuls of them, paying no heed at all to Fei Sheng.

“A few years ago when we received our authority tokens...” Qiao Tianya pulled off the authority token on the waist of the Imperial Bodyguard before him and held it up for everyone in the courtyard to see. He raised his voice. “I bloody said that we have to be of one heart and one mind, to be brothers—take off your tokens now, all of you!”

Not daring to hesitate, the Imperial Bodyguards in the courtyard raised their hands in unison to remove their authority tokens.

The Imperial Bodyguards’ authority token was a symbol of their identity, one they had to hold on to carefully; even loaning it out was out of the question. They once wore the tokens when they basked in those days of glory back in Qudu, and they also wore the tokens when they followed Shen Zechuan in his rise to power in Zhongbo. The authority token itself was an embodiment of their own honor and dignity.

“Go on, throw it.” Qiao Tianya tossed the authority token down at his feet and kicked it away without so much as a look at it. He looked around at everyone. “Or are you keeping it to trample all over it? I said, throw!”

The Imperial Bodyguards tossed their authority tokens on the ground, none of them daring to meet Qiao Tianya right in the eyes. They lowered their heads in dejection and stood at the side like wooden statues.

Fei Sheng’s smile faded. Wiping the corners of his lips, he said, “Isn’t that too much of you? What is there that you can’t sit and talk over instead of having to throw everyone’s dignity to the ground to trample on?”

“Whose dignity are you talking about?” Qiao Tianya asked Fei Sheng. “Everyone’s? Or yours?”

The flames of the fury that Fei Sheng had been forcibly suppressing suddenly leaped up high. He pushed back the chair with a clatter as he stood up and said, “Is my dignity what he’s trampling on today? He’s clearly trampling on me as an individual! What? So it serves me right to be a

stepping stone for someone else? You, Qiao Tianya, had it all worked out, didn't you?!"

Qiao Tianya ordered, "Get out."

The Imperial Bodyguards in the courtyard immediately withdrew, leaving only the three of them behind.

Fei Sheng flung the chopsticks in his hand into the wine cup. His unwillingness to take it lying down blazed along with his fury. He kicked over the table with a foot and turned around to point at Huo Lingyun. "Does it feel good to trample on me, hm? You have to snatch the limelight, make a grab for Master's rewards, and even take credit for the venerable old man's military achievements before. You really don't give a shit about anyone, huh?!" Then he pointed at Qiao Tianya and questioned in an icy tone, "Did you already have it all planned out with him?"

"Oh yeah." Qiao Tianya straightened up. "All to plot against you."

The candlelight in the hall shone bright, and it was here Fei Sheng stood, while Huo Lingyun stood outside in the pitch-black darkness. Meanwhile, Qiao Tianya stood on that boundary line between black and white, partially blocking off both parties. A dark crow on a snow-tipped branch of an old tree cawed a few times. Fei Sheng's chest heaved. He took a few sudden steps closer.

"I put my life on the line being on the go with Master, and you screwed me over with this son-of-a-bitch of a newcomer!" Fei Sheng pointed at himself, so overwhelmed with resentment that both his eyes went red. "I was the one who opened the gates of Qudu, defended Wuxian Peak in Dunzhou, and took down Fanzhou with the venerable old man! So why can't I assume this position? On what grounds does it have to be you, Qiao Tianya?! To think I even consider you as my fucking brother!"

Qiao Tianya pressed in a step closer. "You think of me as your brother, and yet you say I plotted against you? I told you a long time ago, don't keep dwelling on this matter. What's meant to be yours will eventually be yours!"

Fei Sheng immediately retorted, "Shouldn't this position be mine?!"

The startled night crow on the snow-tipped branch promptly took off. The remaining lanterns swayed in the courtyard, distorting the shadows on the ground. In this tense, antagonistic atmosphere, Fei Sheng shoved Qiao Tianya aside, descended the stairs in a few steps, and ignored the shouts as he headed right for the exit.

He could not stay here for even a moment more!

Fei Sheng ignored everyone else after stepping out of the courtyard. Having consumed quite a fair bit of wine, he supported himself against the wall as he walked. He slipped a few times and bumped his head, bruising it. All of a sudden, he squatted at the foot of the wall and wiped his eyes in aggrievement as he lashed out at whoever, "Fuck..."

Sobering up a little, Fei Sheng blew his nose. Someone ahead blew his nose too. Startled, Fei Sheng jerked to his feet and saw a head popping out in front.

Yin Chang had his hands folded under his sleeves as he leaned up ahead to wait for him. He smacked his lips a few times and asked, "The heck you crying for?"

Fei Sheng did not move even after having discerned that it was the old man. He merely remained motionless in place and said nothing.

"Come on, let's go." Yin Chang urged as he stomped his freezing feet. "We'll find a place to drink. It's rather cold to be standing around like poles here!"

Fei Sheng did not want to. He could be rather bullheaded when he was being stubborn, and he was still fuming inside.

Yin Chang rubbed his arms. "It's just one tooth that got knocked off, man. Why get into a hissy fit with them over it?"

Fei Sheng tossed away the handkerchief he used to wipe his hands, his expression as capricious as the weather. Eventually, he forced out a smile and said, "What's there for me to get into a fit with them over?"

Yin Chang craned his neck to look at Fei Sheng's expression. The reach of the light from the lanterns ahead did not extend to this spot. Fei Sheng stood with his head lowered and averted his head away in refusal to show the old man.

Yin Chang was so cold he could not stand it. Taking small, brisk steps, he said, "Since that position has already been given to him, then so be it. The way I see it, you're formidable too! Gu Jin is a man of outstanding abilities, and only you in our Zhongbo can compare to him. Qiao Tianya doesn't have the capability to. We still have a future, so why insist on getting in a huff at him here? Mind that His Lordship doesn't see it, or he'll rebuff you for being petty."

Fei Sheng's fury blazed with even more vehemence.

Yin Chang took no notice of him and continued, "You oppress Huo Lingyun to the extent it is so unwarranted and unbecoming of the occasion. How can you convince and win over the others? There are still those from the Dengzhou Garrison Troops in the Imperial Bodyguards! Would they not feel disillusioned? What does a commander-in-chief do? He oversees an entire army. So how can this position be given to you if you can't show a little tolerance?"

Fei Sheng raised his voice. "Only Qiao Tianya can do it. Only Qiao Tianya is capable!"

"When it comes to people, Qiao Tianya does indeed have the capability." Yin Chang sighed and went around to the other side of Fei Sheng. The old man was short, so when he stood near Fei Sheng, he was several heads shorter. "Look at him. He didn't vie with you in Cizhou, yet his prestige remains intact. Has he or has he not advised you not to keep oppressing Huo Lingyun? Alright, don't say a word! I know you're going to say that you didn't oppress Huo Lingyun, but have you ever assigned him to any of the Imperial Bodyguards' tasks? No, right?"

Fei Sheng said, "I'm his mother? I even have to take care of all his needs from eating to drinking and pissing to pooping?!"

Yin Chang leaped up to whack him. "You dope, why don't you get it? You yourself know best what you did!" With that, he shoved Fei Sheng. "Move it, now!"

Fei Sheng staggered under the force of the shove.

Yin Chang kicked his ass and cursed, "I'd totally whip you if you were my son!"

Fei Sheng tugged at his dirty robe. He was so pissed he turned back and yelled, "I have a fucking father!"

"Keep your eyes on the road! If you want this position that badly, I'll go beg His Lordship tomorrow and kowtow to him until you get it back. See if that shames you!" Yin Chang took a few steps and added, "I have a fucking son too!"

This was something new to Fei Sheng. In all the time Yin Chang was in Cizhou, he rarely spoke of his past.

"If my son were still alive, he would be of the same age as you."

After keeping his mouth shut for a while, Fei Sheng suddenly asked, "So how did he die?"

Yin Chang's feet crunched noisily on the snow; he was finally able to get a clear look of the path with aid from the starlight overhead. He shrank his neck and answered, "Starvation."

Fei Sheng held on to the wall, not daring to talk back to the old man again.

When Yin Chang was young, he used to hang around the marketplace. He was a lad of lowly origins, with no trade skills and education. To earn his bread, he went to great efforts to enlist in the army. At that time, the registration of households in the census registers<sup>22</sup> that Qi Huilian implemented had just come to Cizhou, and Yin Chang made it in time to exploit the last loophole to join the garrison troops where he stayed for thirty years. He lived hand to mouth, one day at a time, in the garrison troops. Although he was illiterate, he got himself well-acquainted with the terrains. It was just as he had boasted to Fei Sheng. As long as it was in Zhongbo, he would not go the wrong way even with his eyes closed. Ordinary bandits were no match for him at all.

Yin Chang did not want to bring up his wife and son because they died of starvation during the reign of Xiande. That was the prelude to Yin Chang's problematic drinking. He looked back on his past and felt himself to be like the mud beneath his feet, one who had never amounted to much in this life.

"You have a future serving His Lordship, and you have so much more promise than me." Yin Chang looked at the road under his feet. "Xiaosheng, one has to be down-to-earth in their journey through life; you can't just look upward. You know it better than I do that the wiser and mightier the master is, the harder he is to serve. You can't fool His Lordship, and you can't hide what you're thinking from him. Do you think His Lordship doesn't know about this temperament of yours? Didn't he still go ahead and put you to use by his side? That's because you have talent. You fixed your eyes on Qiao Tianya and Huo Lingyun, but they both don't walk the same path as you. You're an intelligent lad, albeit a silly one. Don't bear a grudge against them over this bit of trivial matter and ruin the bond you have forged with His Lordship and wreck your future prospects."

Fei Sheng felt even more aggrieved at this point. He walked up ahead and wiped his face.

Fei Sheng's father was the common son of a concubine from the Fei Clan. By the time it came to Fei Sheng, he had become so far removed from

the legitimate lineage that he could not even benefit from a connection to the Marquis of Helian from his very same clan. What's more, his father was a gambler. Had he not died early, Fei Sheng would probably not have been able to hold on to his position of the Assistant Commander of the Imperial Bodyguards. Fei Sheng had served under many a number of people. In order to make connections with the Marquis of Helian back then, he spent all day bootlicking the Junior Marquis, Fei Shi. Then he followed Han Cheng, who kept bossing him around like he was his son.

He was not a gentleman of virtue. He was not anything. He merely wanted to come out of his ordeals stronger and etch out a name for himself.

The old man said, "You make little of Huo Lingyun, but I heard he is also of decent origins. His father was someone who fought the bandits. It's not easy to survive and stay alive. Don't keep giving him such a hard time."

Fei Sheng said, "He stole your military credits!"

"Then just give it to him." Yin Chang walked behind Fei Sheng and looked up at Fei Sheng's back while the latter was unaware. After a long time, he said, "How many years more do I have to live? It's pointless for me to hold on to it anyway."

Fei Sheng was still young, with a tall stature and a strong, healthy physique.

Without realizing it, Yin Chang stopped. It seemed as if this was only as far as he could go. Even if he refused to concede defeat to old age, he could not catch up with the pace of the younger generation. It was another world ahead of them. For a long time, he watched as Fei Sheng continued walking forward along this road.

"Xiaosheng, this old man is a good-for-nothing who can't even keep his son alive in his lifetime. But believe me, I can tell that you will live to a hundred years and retire with merit to your name! So keep walking." Yin Chang paused for a moment and suddenly shouted, "Onward and forward!"

Fei Sheng looked back at Yin Chang, finding the old man's gaze foreign. In this life of his, he had never been gazed upon this attentively by his father, so he did not understand the hope and expectation that lay behind this gaze. He stopped in his tracks and said, "Keep walking too, you."

Yin Chang inexplicably started to laugh. He smoothed up his messy white hair to reveal his weathered and worn face. "I'm already old."





In the end, the Imperial Bodyguards did not stir up a commotion. Even if Fei Sheng was displeased, he knew his place. The next day, as he handed the medicine to Shen Zechuan, he heard Shen Zechuan ask, “Did you drink?”

Fei Sheng saw that the Prefectural Lord was still approving the cases and was not looking up at him. The latter seemed to be just asking in passing. Feeling unsettled and unable to figure out Shen Zechuan’s intent, Fei Sheng could only answer truthfully, “... I drank a little last night.”

Shen Zechuan handed the cases he had finished approving over to Fei Sheng and said, “Head over to the office compound yourself to forfeit your salary as penalty.”

It was not Fei Sheng’s turn to be on duty yesterday. Unable to make any sense of it, he took the cases and gingerly attempted to explain, “It wasn’t my turn yesterday to...”

“Didn’t I tell you to handle the recruitment?” Shen Zechuan finally raised his eyes to look at Fei Sheng. “This job is not complete so long as the register of names has not yet been submitted.”

Fei Sheng was taken aback, and then delight took over. Grasping the cases, he fell to his knees with a “thud” and said, “Master is wise. I’ll get it done right away!”

With the Imperial Cavalry’s commander-in-chief position given to Qiao Tianya, Fei Sheng thought that his previous assignments would be handed over to Qiao Tianya too. This was an important assignment that involved the vetting and recruitment of soldiers, which carried a lot of weight in the newly established light cavalry. He never expected the task to fall to him still.

Shen Zechuan exercised his neck a little and cast a sidelong glance at the window. It was sunny days on end in Duanzhou now that it was nearing the third month, and the snow in the courtyard had more or less melted. Faint light filtered through the window paper and shone upon his right ear, creating a gorgeous but tiny glow swaying on his neck.

Xiao Chiye was standing in the courtyard at this time, having received new information on Qudu from Gu Jin.



## CHAPTER 221: QUANDARY



Xiao Chiye pulled open the bamboo blinds upon entering the room, and Fei Sheng took his leave. Bringing with him a trail of cool breeze from outside, Xiao Chiye placed the opened letter on Shen Zechuan's desk. "In the second trial of the Dancheng case, the Pan clan had an errant servant from their manor take the blame. They intend to extract Pan Lin out first on grounds of Pan Yi's lapse in management."

Shen Zechuan read the letter. "The Pan clan misappropriated the commoners' fields, and it's now a scene of desolation everywhere in Dancheng with nine out of ten houses standing empty. All they need to do is to check Dancheng's census register, and they will know that the displaced commoners left destitute and homeless last year numbered in the thousands. Just handing over an errant servant alone isn't enough to plug in the missing pieces. Pan Lin manages the eight cities' taxes in the Ministry of Revenue. It's impossible for him to be unaware of how much is missing."

"The men in charge of the matters pertaining to the Pan clan's field taxes have already been thrown in prison." Xiao Chiye blocked out some of the light. "All these people insisted they were blinded by their own obsession for money and that they did not do so at the Pan clan's behest."

Shen Zechuan gently rubbed the paper with his fingertips. "Pan Xiangjie, that wily old fox."

Pan Xiangjie had seen firsthand just how formidable Hua Siqian and Wei Huaigu were, so he had long made preparations in order to take precautions against such a day. The men he arranged to be in charge of the Dancheng's field taxes were all sons of his servants<sup>23</sup> who shared a common

interest with the Pan clan. Protecting Pan Lin at this juncture was akin to protecting the lives of their whole family, young and old. Naturally, they would be willing to keep their mouths sealed and take the blame.

Xiao Chiye said, "Since Xue Xiuzhuo dares to strike at this moment, he must have a handle that could be held against the Pan clan in his hand."

"He was even able to bring Kong Qiu and Cen Yu on board, so it's not entirely out of the question for him to have Dancheng's real accounts in hand." Shen Zechuan thought for a moment. "But he didn't show his hand."

This case already had the Three Judicial Offices conducting a joint trial. Pan Lin had also been dismissed from his position pending prosecution. Xue Xiuzhuo only had to instruct Liang Cuishan to present the evidence as per procedure, and they would have emerged victorious. Even if only one Pan Lin was taken down in the end, it also had a pivotal effect on the current division of power in Qudu.

"I thought about it, and the only thing that can hold Xue Xiuzhuo back from making a move is the spring plowing." Sunlight filtered out from behind and spilled onto the side of Lanzhou's face. Xiao Chiye raised an arm to block it, refusing to let it peek. "The spring plowing of the Thirteen Cities of Juexi is right around the corner."

"But Juexi didn't suffer from a disaster last year, and the granaries of the thirteen cities are in abundance." As if unaware of Er-lang's possessiveness of him, Shen Zechuan said, "They didn't allocate military provisions to the Five Commanderies of Qidong in winter and merely replenished Qudu's granaries, so they should still have reserves for spring plowing. What is Xue Xiuzhuo afraid of?"

"There's naturally no issue going by the original plan." Xiao Chiye sat at the table's edge and looked at Shen Zechuan. "But what if something went awry in between?"

A hint was all Shen Zechuan needed to make the connection. He set down the brush. "Looks like the Empress Dowager wants to use Qi Zhuyin's mobilization of troops to shift and empty out Juexi's granaries."

The requisition of military provisions was what enabled Qudu to empty out Juexi's granaries at this moment. If Xue Xiuzhuo acted arbitrarily now and insisted on continuing to dig deeper into the matter, then there was no way the spring plowing in Juexi this year could be carried out. The meals of

tens of thousands of people were hanging over Xue Xiuzhuo's head, putting him in a situation where he had to beat a retreat even if he did not want to.

"What the Empress Dowager is doing here is getting the better of him by letting him strike first before launching a counterattack." Xiao Chiye said. "If Xue Xiuzhuo agrees to the requisition of military provisions, then the Juexi's granaries will be left vacant. For the sake of the spring plowing, Juexi must borrow the grains from the Eight Cities that still have reserves. In that case, Xue Xiuzhuo can't offend the noble clans now. He has to cease pursuing the matter of the field taxes and make peace with the Empress Dowager, who represents the noble clans. If Xue Xiuzhuo refuses the requisition of military provisions, there will be no one to replenish the military provisions of the Five Commanderies of Qidong, and Qi Zhuyin will not be able to mobilize troops."

Juexi not only had to shoulder the load for Qudu's granaries, but also Qidong's military provisions. If they lacked grains during the spring plowing season, the various prefectural prefects of the various areas would have to report the exact amount of grain shortage in the territories to the Provincial Administration Commission. As the Provincial Administration Commissioner of Juexi, Jiang Qingshan would have to think of ways to make up for these shortages. Under normal circumstances, the Ministry of Revenue would proceed to coordinate based on the harvest situation in the various local areas last year, and Jiang Qingshan would issue memorandums of debt to the Provincial Administration Commissioners of the nearby regions that had bumper harvests last year to borrow grains. When the time came, everyone would make their own negotiations as to whether to exchange those grains with their own territories' agricultural products or with silver. However, at this time, only the Eight Cities could loan out grains to Juexi. To convince the Empress Dowager to loan them grains after Juexi's granaries were emptied for the requisition of military provisions, Xue Xiuzhuo had to drop his investigation into the field taxes of the Eight Cities, and even Dancheng's.

"Even if he has the money, he won't be able to buy grains. The whole thing about the field taxes has already alerted the perpetrators. If he missed his opportunity now, it would be even harder to investigate it in the future. Besides, this case has drawn the attention of the Imperial College. If Xue Xiuzhuo were to beat a retreat, the students would denounce him in writing." Shen Zechuan slowly leaned on the table. "This trap the Empress

Dowager laid out is brilliant. She merely seized the opportunity to move around the chess pieces, and she managed to put Xue Xiuzhuo on the horns of a dilemma.”

The Empress Dowager also drew from Shen Zechuan’s influence here. The military provisions Shen Zechuan supplemented Qidong with were all “stolen” grains Yan Heru consolidated from the Hezhou and Juexi’s granaries. With the requisition from Qudu, Juexi was no different from having undergone two rounds of military grain replenishment in just half a year. Of course its granaries would not be able to bear the burden.

Xiao Chiye covered the top of Shen Zechuan’s head and said, “And so, Xue Yanqing, ever so meticulous and thorough in his strategies, found himself trapped in a deadlock.”

“There is still a way out.” Shen Zechuan raised his eyes and said guilelessly to Xiao Chiye, “If I were in his shoes, I’d simply just take the Empress Dowager out of the game.”



With the snow in Qudu melting fast in the past few days, water started trickling off the eaves along the streets. Fortunately, the public ditches had been newly repaired last year, so a repeat of the clogage incident did not occur. The location of the Xue residence was not remote, but it was too close to the abode next to it, and the foot of the walls of both homes ended up so waterlogged they collapsed.

Xue Xiuzhuo had been staying over in the Court of Judicial Review of late. When he returned home to get a change of clothes, he saw that the courtyard wall had already been rebuilt anew, so he asked the steward-in-charge serving in residence, “When was it repaired?”

Xue Xiuzhuo did not bother with the unnecessary formalities in the management of his household. The steward, already getting up in the years, was still respectful and deferential as he followed at Xue Xiuzhuo’s side. He answered truthfully. “The eldest madam came back a few days ago to visit Jin-ge’er. Seeing that the courtyard wall had collapsed, she brought up the matter to the eldest master on her return, and he called for someone to come over and repair it.”

Upon hearing those words, Xue Xiuzhuo’s eyes darkened slightly. He pondered it over for a moment, finding his eldest brother Xue Xiuyi’s actions unusual. Xue Xiuyi did not get along with Xue Xiuzhuo. He had squandered away his remaining family fortune after dividing up family

property to live apart. Benefiting from his relationship with Xue Xiuzhuo, he held a sinecure position in the Ministry of Revenue, where he could barely make ends meet, so where in the world did he get this disposable money to help Xue Xiuzhuo repair the courtyard wall?

“Get the accountant to reimburse him accordingly,” Xue Xiuzhuo said, “and ensure that the eldest madam doesn’t visit Jin-ge’er again for no reason.”

Jin’ge-er was Xue the Eldest’s lawful son. He was eight years old this year. Xue Xiuzhuo kept him by his side to raise him, and even when Xue the Eldest divided up the family property and left to live apart, Xue Xiuzhuo did not return Jin’ge-er to Xue the Eldest and his wife. Xue the Eldest came to ask for him back several times, but as he always failed to see Xue Xiuzhuo, he could only give up.

The steward acknowledged his order with an “understood”.

Xue Xiuzhuo’s bundle<sup>24</sup> was light. He never wore silk and satin, and his most ornate clothing was his official robe, so it was quite convenient for him to pack them up. He often stayed over in the office compound, with only a mute lad following by his side to prepare the ink for him. He had no maidservants and usually ate plain, simple fares. These were all habits he had retained from working hands-on at the local levels as Chief Supervising Secretary of the Ministry of Revenue.

Xue Xiuzhuo had to return to the office compound once he was done packing. The steward held up the umbrella for him and gently advised him, “Third Master always stays over at the compound without anyone to serve you. This weather is given to such sudden changes that you still need to put on thick clothes.”

When Xue Xiuzhuo reached the entrance, the mute lad stepped forth to take over the umbrella and spoke to him, making “uh, uh” sounds. Xue Xiuzhuo nodded to indicate his acknowledgement and turned back to the steward. “I’ll leave all household affairs in your hand. My monthly salary will be sent back on time. See if there’s anything we can acquire for the residence, and you can just go ahead and buy it.”

Ever since Xue Xiuzhuo was promoted, he never took the sedan again; instead, he walked to and fro on foot. Now that he was done giving his instruction, he turned around to walk into the drizzle, with the mute lad holding up the umbrella. When he arrived at the office compound, he saw Liang Cuishan, who had already been waiting for a while.

“Your Excellency Yanqing.” Liang Cuishan descended the steps to meet and pay his obeisances to Xue Xiuzhuo.

Xue Xiuzhuo dismissed the mute lad and said to Liang Cuishan, “We’ll talk inside.”

Liang Cuishan slowed down a few steps and followed Xue Xiuzhuo into the house. It was lit inside, but the charcoal brazier was empty. Liang Cuishan found the chair cold when he took his seat. While waiting earlier, he had taken a look at this house. It was simple and unpretentious, and the only thing of worth here was the deceased Old Master Yao’s writings hanging on the wall. Other than that, the table, chairs, and benches were all standard furniture.

Who would have expected Xue Xiuzhuo to be capable of shouldering the Qidong’s military salaries?

“Chongshen, no need to hold back.” Xue Xiuzhuo opened a window and sat down. He spoke in a mild tone, “You’re here today regarding the Dancheng field tax case, right?”

Xue Xiuzhuo’s stature was tall, and his demeanor, poised; being around him made one feel as if they were standing amidst the spring breeze. He was now a significant official in Qudu, but Liang Cuishan felt very comfortable in his presence. He not only lacked the haughtiness of a noble family’s descendant, but also did not have the reservations of an official of humble origins. What’s more, he had the tendency to impress upon the others a favorable impression when he spoke frankly and in measured tones.

“That’s right.” Liang Cuishan took out a securely wrapped account book in his arms. “This humble subordinate is here precisely because of the Dancheng’s field taxes case.”

Xue Xiuzhuo waited for his next words.

Liang Cuishan continued, “The Empress Dowager issued a decree last time for Third Missy Hua to return for a visit. Commander-in-chief Qi will have to accompany her in her father’s stead. In my humble opinion, she meant to hurry His Excellency.”

No doubt the Empress Dowager called for Qi Zhuyin to enter the capital at this time to put pressure on Xue Xiuzhuo. The requisition of military provisions was still stuck in limbo, and time waited for no man.

Xue Xiuzhuo said, “The Grand Secretariat has already drawn up the writ to allow Commander-in-chief Qi to mobilize troops against the



Qingshu tribe, but the Empress Dowager kept putting off the approval. It is not entirely a bad thing for Commander-in-chief Qi to enter the capital at this time.”

Liang Cuishan replied, “But the requisition of military provisions is still up in the air. If this drags on, I fear it will delay Juexi’s spring plowing.”

The dilemma here was the reason Xue Xiuzhuo had not rested for days. He and Jiang Qingshan went to great lengths to straighten out the account books of the thirteen cities of Juexi so as to prevent Juexi from falling into the displacement problem that was plaguing the eight cities. The Empress Dowager held his Achilles heel in her hands; this was not a move he could afford to make rashly.

Even if Liang Cuishan did not come to see Xue Xiuzhuo today, Xue Xiuzhuo would still have to go and meet him. He said, “Chongshen, you are in charge of all affairs pertaining to salt taxes in Hezhou and Juexi. Why don’t you tell me the details of Hezhou?”

This implied an intention to borrow grains from Hezhou.

Liang Cuishan looked hesitant. “This humble subordinate shall be direct. It will prove difficult for Your Excellency to borrow grains from Hezhou. While it’s true that Hezhou had a bumper harvest this year, the public grains are being supplied to Qudu, and the remaining grains will also have to be kept in reserve for the spring plowing. We can only borrow from the Yan clan. That Yan Heru is a tough nut to crack, and he’s also overbearing because of his wealth. He may not necessarily be willing to loan the grains even if we give him money. My fear is that he will take the opportunity to demand something else and end up being the fly in the ointment that ruins the entire game in Hezhou.”

Xue Xiuzhuo contemplated it over.

His struggle right now was over grains and not money, and the crux was that he could not purchase grain even if he had the money. Had it been Qidong’s military salaries he was fretting over at present, he could still raise the tariffs in Hezhou and Juexi and fleece the merchants for this sum of money. But it just had to be grains they were lacking.

Hai Liangyi’s plans had been to transfer Jiang Qingshan over to restore Zhongbo. By doing so, they would be able to round up some grains this year and put together more from Huaizhou when the time came. Resolving their predicament over the military provisions was not hard. However, Zhongbo was now Shen Zechuan’s territory, and the commercial route

between Cizhou, Huaizhou, and Chazhou had cut off a relatively large portion of Qudu's grain supply.

"When Commander-in-chief Qi enters the capital," Xue Xiuzhuo said, "I'll discuss it with her."

**Author's Note:**

I see a few of you can't distinguish between Xue Xiuzhuo and Xue Xiuyi, so I'll be using Xue the Eldest (pinyin: *Xueda*) from now on.

Thank you for reading.

## CHAPTER 222: BLUFF OF A MOVE



Horse hooves stirred up the mud and came to a stop at the entrance of the city gates.

With a cloak hung over her arm, Qi Zhuyin looked at the towering city walls of Qudu with her back to the overcast sky. Day had yet to break at this time, and the young general of the Eight Great Training Divisions stationed at the top of the city wall instantly drew out his voice in a shout, “OPEN—THE GATE. Our respectful welcome to Commander-in-chief Qi!”

A few city soldiers shouted in unison as they pulled the gate open. The mechanism issued a muffled noise, and the mottled city gate slowly rose. The Eight Great Training Divisions soldiers in the city stood solemnly on both sides, their faces to Qi Zhuyin at the entrance as they held down their swords in greeting.

Qi Zhuyin raised an arm, and the Qidong cavalymen behind her stepped back in unison, leaving a considerable distance between them. She shook the reins and led Hua Xiangyi’s horse carriage onto the public road of Qudu.

The soldiers on both sides stood with solemn respect, their eyes never once wandering.

Qi Zhuyin was wearing court attire today. Although she was not conferred a noble rank and title, the Empress Dowager’s personal appointment of her gave her the right to wear the court attire of a marquis. The court attire had a scarlet base, with a *baize*<sup>25</sup> representing the transcension of ranks embroidered on the mandarin square.<sup>26</sup> She had also

swapped out the *liangguan* headgear<sup>27</sup> that went with the male attire into a *wuzhu* ornament<sup>28</sup> that swung in the air along with the horse's movements.

Court officials who were there to welcome them waited right ahead of the public road, while the Imperial Bodyguards' Commander-in-chief, Han Cheng, and palace eunuch, Fuman, stood at the side.

Both sides exchanged pleasantries before they had to lead Qi Zhuyin into the palace.

The streets had been cleared out, and no one made a ruckus. Qudu was so silent that all that could be heard was the melodious chirps of a lone sparrow. Han Cheng mounted his horse and followed at Qi Zhuyin's side. With a smile, he said, "Commander-in-chief Qi has performed a valuable service now that the Bianjun Commandery has scored a victory. There's bound to be tremendous rewards on your entry into the capital this time."

Although these words were spoken genially, they hit Qi Zhuyin's sore point. She had never been conferred a title despite having rendered meritorious service several times. Now that Libei had revolted, Qi Zhuyin and the Qidong's Garrison Troops' standing rose, and they became the Empress Dowager's support on the outside. Qi Zhuyin seized the opportunity to remove the eunuch serving as Army-inspecting Censor and subsequently became the thorn in the southeast that could threaten Qudu into making concessions; she had long incurred the displeasure of the Empress Dowager. Then, there was the war with Biansha. The noble rank and title was the Empress Dowager's chain to hold Qi Zhuyin in check, so there was no hope of conferment in the foreseeable future.

Qi Zhuyin did not get along with Han Cheng, and their previous encounters had all been unpleasant. Feigning cordiality with Han Cheng now, she said, "I hope it is as you say."

Both of them socialized on horseback. When they arrived at the palace gates, Fuman, who had been following them the entire way from behind, hurriedly rolled off his horse and personally came over to take over Qi Zhuyin's reins. The Eastern Depot fell into decline after the death of Emperor Tianchen, and the twenty-four yamen no longer had a eunuch of significance like Pan Rugui who had the world at his command. Thus, Fuman behaved himself and kept a low profile.

Qi Zhuyin did not have a good opinion of the palace eunuchs. Shuangxi, whom the imperial court had assigned to them as Army-Inspecting Censor, was still locked up in a cell in the Cangjun

Commandery. In order not to incur Qi Zhuyin's ill will, Fuman had gone to the special effort of dressing up. Only daring to go for simplicity, he wore a gourd-patterned mandarin square, a coral *duozhen*<sup>29</sup> on his head with a cover on the outside, and a pair of black boots on his feet.

Fuman bent at the waist to take the reins from Qi Zhuyin and was all smiles as he said, "This is our Dazhou's 'warhorse'.<sup>30</sup> This humble slave gives his assurance that he will feed it well on behalf of Commander-in-chief Qi."

Qi Zhuyin nodded and cast a look back at the horse carriage. She stood in front and waited for Hua Xiangyi.

Han Cheng tossed his reins to the eunuch at the side and snorted when he heard Fuman. Pointing at Fuman, he said with a laugh, "You sneaky old crook, kissing up to Commander-in-chief Qi seeing how she's about to be rewarded."

Understanding Han Cheng's character, Fuman immediately said, "Commander Han, you're making this humble slave ashamed!" He lowered himself and drew closer to toady up to Han Cheng. "This humble slave usually depends on Commander Han. Say, when will you be able to fulfill this humble slave's wish?"

"You're the same age as me, and you call me grandpa," Han Cheng said. "Even I'd feel so embarrassed if this were to get out."

Fuck you!

Fuman dissed him inwardly. This motherfucker kept putting on air all day, saying he'd feel embarrassed, but doesn't he still treat others like wrenched bastards when bossing them around? But heaven has eyes and made him sonless; there's divine justice after all. How very gratifying!

Fuman soothed his chest and said with a merry laugh, "When the *Lao-zuzong*<sup>31</sup> was still around, this humble slave was the 'son'. So won't I need to address you as 'grandpa' going by seniority?"

Han Cheng despised these buffoons who served as eunuchs, but he was more than happy to boss them around like dogs. After the reign of Yongyi, the eunuchs were all *zuzong*. Back then, when Pan Rugui led the Eastern Depot to oppress the Imperial Bodyguards, Han Cheng was not yet its commander, and it had filled him with envy to see Ji Lei acknowledge Pan Rugui as his 'father'. Now that the tables had turned, he was naturally gratified to watch Fuman bowing and groveling before him.

Having attended the Eunuch School, Fuman was literate. During Emperor Tianchen's time, he joined forces with Xiao Chiye to work from both within and without and managed to get into the Directorate of Ceremonial. Later on, when Emperor Tianchen was assassinated by Mu Ru, he instantly switched sides. Under Han Cheng's orders, he summoned Xiao Chiye into the palace with an imperial edict, and consequently, Han Cheng framed Xiao Chiye for regicide. With this credit under his belt, Han Cheng was willing to continue letting him manage the important affairs of the inner palace. Fengquan had stepped down from the stage now anyway. Fuman just had to rack up some experience and build up his record of service, and he could be a "*lao-zuzong*" too.

Seeing that Hua Xiangyi had yet to get off her carriage, Han Cheng asked Fuman as if in passing, "How has the Heir Apparent been lately?"

Han Cheng made a bad move in the imperial prison back then and failed to kill Li Jianting. As a result, his own attempt to support a Han clan's descendant ascend to the throne failed to come to fruition, and he made an enemy out of Xue Xiuzhuo. Thus, he specifically arranged for Fuman to keep an eye on every single move the Heir Apparent made in the palace.

Turning his body sideways as a cover, Fuman answered in a hushed tone. "It's all as usual."

"Xue Yanqing's recent investigation of the Dancheng's field taxes has thrown the imperial court into chaos." Han Cheng looked at Fuman. "The Empress Dowager has been grieving over it day and night, and she's now in ill health. See if you can drop a hint to the Heir Apparent to get Xue Yanqing to cool it down a notch."

Fuman was momentarily taken aback before he lowered his head in acknowledgment.

The key point in this sentence was to make Xue Xiuzhuo "cool it down a notch". As for how, that was for Fuman to figure out.

Li Jianting was no longer young, yet the Empress Dowager still showed no intent to return power to the Heir Apparent. She sat in place of the Son of Heaven, acting on his behalf and banishing Li Jianting outside the imperial court. Li Jianting's right to sit in on the proceedings was all at the suggestion of the officials participating in the classics colloquium.<sup>32</sup> And now Xue Xiuzhuo was pushing them into such a corner in the outer court. The Empress Dowager meant to teach Xue Xiuzhuo a lesson.

Fuman's heart pounded, but he dared not let his expression betray his emotion and remained bowing until Han Cheng left.



Water dripped off the eaves, turning the windowsills damp again, while the old books on the table started to crease. Yao Wenyu drew up his wide sleeves and flipped the pages open to dry.

In the third month, when the ice and snow melted, Duanzhou suddenly turned warm, and everywhere was damp all around. Shen Zechuan stood beside the table and casually looked at those old books of Yao Wenyu.

"Xue Yanqing has to have a detailed discussion with Commander-in-chief Qi regarding the requisition of the military provisions." Yao Wenyu smoothed the creased corners with the pulps of his fingers. "Only the Bianjun Commandery of Qidong fought a war last year, and the military provisions at that time were supplied by Qudu. The remaining four commanderies' garrison troops that also worked on the fields<sup>33</sup> suffered no loss either. Xue Yanqing keeps a book of accounts in his mind; he will not fall for the Empress Dowager's trap easily."

"It's easy to stump him." Shen Zechuan did not raise his eyes, looking as if he was pondering over the content in the book. "The specifics of Qidong's harvest have yet to be reported. If Commander-in-chief Qi insists that it's insufficient for their use, he won't be able to force it either."

The longer Yao Wenyu stayed by Shen Zechuan's side, the easier he found it to distinguish between the Prefectural Lord's moods. Like how Shen Zechuan was clearly jesting now. This kind of shameless denial could not fool Xue Xiuzhuo, who was proficient in the art of auditing accounts.

Yao Wenyu was in no hurry. Instead, he asked, "In Your Lordship's opinion, what bargaining chip should Xue Yanqing use in his discussion with Commander-in-chief Qi?"

"Naturally, his biggest trump card." Shen Zechuan said without hesitation. "He has the Heir Apparent in his hand, so on certain occasions, he has more of a leg to stand on than the Empress Dowager. Qudu is a stickler for ethics and virtues. Even if the Empress Dowager is effective in her administration of the state, she's merely a stand-in for the Son of Heaven and is not the real Son of Heaven."

The Empress Dowager was dependent on Qidong, but she married Hua Xiangyi over, then suppressed Qi Zhuyin by refusing to promote her. At the same time, to ingratiate herself with Qi Zhuyin, she treated Qi Zhuyin with

magnanimity to the extent that she could. Qi Zhuyin turned a blind eye to Qudu's deployment order during Shuangxi's and Lu Pingyan's incidents last year, and the Empress Dowager tolerated it all the same without calling her to task. This was to maintain the status quo of both parties. She kept Qidong pinned down under her own control at all times, so that Qi Zhuyin would remain at her own disposal and, at the same time, unable to fall out with her since she would be handicapped by her lack of a noble rank.

But Li Jianting did not have this misgiving. She was Dazhou's rightful Heir Apparent, with the Grand Secretariat guiding her on the inside and her prestige as a student to bolster her on the outside. She also had the full support of the practical doers faction helmed by Xue Xiuzhuo. It was perfectly justified for Qi Zhuyin to pledge loyalty to her. As long as Li Jianting could hold up against the censors' impeachments, conferring a title upon Qi Zhuyin was just a matter of words. And this happened to be something the Empress Dowager could not do given the awkward position she was in.

Shen Zechuan closed the page. "Qidong's military power remains unstable for each day Commander-in-chief Qi in-chief isn't conferred. Being without a noble rank and title is the root source of Qi Zhuyin's inability to become 'legitimate'. Imagine if she were to die on the battlefield or resign due to injuries suffered. Her brothers of common birth in the family would be able to grab the opportunity to seize Qi Shiyu's title. The Commander-in-chief of the Five Commanderies' armies sounds impressive, but without a noble rank, she's merely a temporary guest in that position who could not inherit everything Qi Shiyu had. The Empress Dowager fears that Qidong would become a second Libei, so she dare not bestow a noble rank upon her, and this 'dare not' is the Empress Dowager's greatest weakness."

What did Li Jianting lack the most now?

Military power.

The noble clans lost Wei Huaigu, and then they found themselves at a disadvantage with Hai Liangyi's remonstrance to his death. The Empress Dowager could still stand on an equal footing with the Grand Secretariat and Xue Xiuzhuo in this game because she held Dazhou's remaining two major military powers firmly in her grasp. Whether it was Kong Qiu or Xue Xiuzhuo, they were all civil officials who only had the authority to engage in military discussions but not deploy troops.



If Xue Xiuzhuo gave Qi Zhuyin the promise to confer the rank and title of a marquis on her at this moment, then Qi Zhuyin could give up going around in circles with the Empress Dowager and switch camp to the Heir Apparent. The Qidong military forces would then naturally pledge allegiance to Li Jianting, and this would be akin to hacking off an arm of the Empress Dowager.

“Money makes the mare go.” Yao Wenyu took the book Shen Zechuan returned to him. “If Xue Yanqing didn’t have the Xi clan’s money vaults, then he would not be able to convince Commander-in-chief Qi with just a verbal promise. But now that he is bearing the expenses for Qidong’s military salaries, Commander-in-chief Qi would have to deliberate over it carefully.”

The above hypotheses were based on the premise that the Qidong’s garrison troops who also worked the fields were truly able to be self-sufficient and did not need to forcibly requisition grains from the Juexi’s granaries. However, Qidong’s military provisions this year were, in fact, in Shen Zechuan’s hands. Qi Zhuyin had to take Zhongbo into account, and she had to weigh it over carefully. If Shen Zechuan were to be displeased with her decision to switch sides to the Heir Apparent, then the Yan clan could sever the supply of Qidong’s military provisions, and Qi Zhuyin would still need to ask Qudu for grains. Xue Xiuzhuo would be back to square one, where he would have to face his initial dilemma all over again.

“Xue Xiuzhuo. Hua Hewei.” Shen Zechuan smiled as he tossed Yao Wenyu’s spent brush into the brush holder. “Who should I play with?”

Shen Zechuan’s wrist bone bathed under the sunlight. He held in his hand an invisible thread, one that could steer the situation in Qudu without so much as a sound.

Yao Wenyu straightened the brush and said with certainty, “Your Lordship already has a plan.”



Day had yet to break. Palace maids stood waiting in attendance under the palace eaves, keeping out of the way while silently carrying lanterns in hands to illuminate the path. Qi Zhuyin entered the palace for her audience with the empress dowager. She had to head for Mingli Hall, while Hua Xiangyi had to wait in the Empress Dowager’s bedchamber, so both of them could only walk together for a brief distance.

As Hua Xiangyi could not stand the cold, she wore a *wotu* fur hat<sup>34</sup> on her forehead as well. She had such excellent deportment that not even the tinkling of her jade ring pendant could be heard when she walked, and when she stood beside Qi Zhuyin, she was only a little shorter.

Qi Zhuyin had been spending all day in the Bianjun Commandery back in Qidong, and to date, she had barely spoken more than a few words to Hua Xiangyi. Finding it a little stifling, she was just about to speak when Hua Xiangyi asked,

“Has Commander-in-chief Qi taken a look at the household accounts?”

It was then Qi Zhuyin remembered. “I looked through it when I returned home the last time. Thank you...” She stuck on the word “mother” for a long time, truly unable to voice it out as she looked at Hua Xiangyi’s face that was two years younger than her. All she could do was to hastily skip it over and continue, “... for going to the trouble.”

Hua Xiangyi covered the hand warmer<sup>35</sup> and watched the crow flit across the dark, gloomy sky. In the blink of an eye, it disappeared among the palace eaves. This was a sight familiar to her. She responded, “You’re welcome, Commander-in-chief.”

Qi Zhuyin glanced out of the corner of her eye at the stalk of a small sunflower embroidered on Hua Xiangyi’s collar. It was like a kind of delicate charm hiding under a dignified veneer, and it was completely out of place in the deep, silent inner palace. For that reason, it appeared particularly exquisite and lovable.

All of a sudden, Hua Xiangyi turned her head and looked at Qi Zhuyin for just a brief moment before she averted her gaze. Softly, she said, “The reasons my aunt summoned Commander-in-chief Qi is, firstly, for the mobilization of troops against the Qingshu Tribe and, secondly, for the requisition of military provisions. Both of these matters can be consolidated into one. Commander-in-chief Qi needs to make a decision.”

Qi Zhuyin could not figure out Hua Xiangyi’s intent in telling her these right now. Her entry into the capital this time was being used by the Empress Dowager as a weapon to coerce Xue Xiuzhuo and the Grand Secretariat. Qi Zhuyin had long heard about the issues with Dancheng’s field taxes.

But Hua Xiangyi changed the topic and said, “Qudu is a stormfest all year around. Even if one were to stand at the top of the building, one still can’t get a clear look at the splendor before its stairs. What’s more, the

weather is so cold. Many a number of stores on Shenwu Street have closed, and those who drink themselves drunk at night are those with empty stomachs.”

Slightly stunned, Qi Zhuyin looked at Hua Xiangyi, who had already stopped in her tracks. The latter turned sideways to the silent Fuman behind them and said with a smile, “Like neutered tomcats.”

Fuman’s mind was in a whirl himself. He vaguely heard the word “cold weather” and so he wasn’t really registering what was being said. He saw Hua Xiangyi standing all daintily ahead of him and felt Third Missy Hua to be a beauty too peerless to be gazed at up close, so he lifted the lantern and said with an apologetic smile. “This humble slave was afraid of putting a damper on Your Ladyship and Commander-in-chief Qi’s mood and so did not dare to make a din.”

“Since we’re already here,” Hua Xiangyi said to Qi Zhuyin softly, “Commander-in-chief Qi may go on ahead.”



Thin frost hung over the newly planted flowers and plants at the side of the stairs to Mingli Hall. The front of the hall was wide and spacious, with the floor so polished they gleamed. The inside of the waiting hall announced her name, and a eunuch led Qi Zhuyin up the stairs. She felt the chill under her feet stepping up those stairs. This was a sensation she could not get used to no matter how many times she had gone through it.

The curtain in the hall opened to both sides, and Qi Zhuyin strode in.

The various court officials waiting inside rose to their feet. Qi Zhuyin looked at no one as she paid her obeisances to the Empress Dowager. Without letting down the beaded curtains, the Empress Dowager said with a smile, “I have not seen Zhuyin for only two months, and already I miss her. It’s bitterly cold over in the Bianjun Commandery. Rise, and let me have a closer look.”

Qi Zhuyin raised her head. In the periphery of her vision, she saw the Heir Apparent standing at the side.

The Minister of War, Chen Zhen, stood with his sleeves brought together and looked at Qi Zhuyin with somewhat worried eyes. Cen Yu did not look too good. Only Kong Qiu could be considered to be his usual self. The atmosphere in this hall was odd, just like those newly planted flowers outside which looked to be joined at the stems but were, in fact, merely a

show on the surface, for its roots had long been damaged by the freezing cold.

The Empress Dowager was confident of victory and was in no hurry to cut to the chase. After exchanging pleasantries with Qi Zhuyin for a while, she said, "You are stationed at the frontier all year round, rain or shine. I heard you even refuse a maidservant. Even the most robust of health can't withstand such torment without someone to attend to your needs." Without waiting for Qi Zhuyin to answer, she said to the Marquis of Helian with a sideways glance, "Just look at her."

The Marquis of Helian met the Empress Dowager's eyes and lamented, "Seeing Commander-in-chief Qi reminds this humble subject of that good-for-nothing son of mine, Fei Shi. He may be born a man, but he has no ambitions to speak of. This truly worries me."

"Fei Shi has only just come of age. There has to be someone at his side to supervise and guide him, or even a good-natured child will go wayward." The Empress Dowager looked at Qi Zhuyin again. "Zhuyin, do you still remember your Fei-*didi*?"

Qi Zhuyin answered, "Vaguely. He's Zhaoyue's younger brother."

She seemed to be used to being forthright as she answered offhandedly. But even the Commandery Princess Zhaoyue had to address her as *jiejie*. By doing this, she was pulling apart the gap in seniority between her and Fei Shi.

But the Empress Dowager said, "Fei Shi is young, and the lack of people to teach him is worrisome. You are the commander-in-chief of the Qidong military forces, and he admires you very much. He keeps talking about Qi-*jiejie* all day long and is only dying to run over to Qidong. You are on good terms with Zhaoyue, and both of your families aren't strangers to one another. If you have the time these days, share with him anecdotes from the frontiers to satisfy that fascination of his."

Fei Shi was already of age, so what was there that he couldn't do and needed her, Qi Zhuyin, to teach him? Furthermore, Fei Shi was just a junior marquis who still had yet to inherit the Marquis of Helian's noble rank and title, and he had no official post either. He was so way down at the bottom of the rung compared to Qi Zhuyin that calling her *jiejie* was simply messing around.

The Empress Dowager's intent was clear. She intended to appoint Fei Shi in marriage to Qi Zhuyin in order to hold her down. For the sake of the

military salaries, Qi Zhuyin could not fall out with the Empress Dowager either. She said, "Given that it's Your Majesty's instruction, I ought not to decline, but I did indeed enter the capital this time for military affairs. The issues at the frontier are of utmost urgency. It's inadvisable to delay any further."

The Empress Dowager sat back slightly and did not put her further into a spot. Instead, she rolled with it and said, "Of course. The military report last month gave an account of the Qingshu Tribe's invasion. You won the battle. You deserve a reward."

Qi Zhuyin had a clear handle on the filthy side of Qudu. By stuffing Fei Shi to her at this juncture, the Empress Dowager meant to remind her to behave at the same time she dealt a blow to Xue Xiuzhuo. The issue of the military provisions was a knotty issue—that is, if she did not have Shen Zechuan's supply.

Qi Zhuyin abruptly recalled those words Hua Xiangyi had spoken earlier.

Qudu is a stormfest.

What was Hua Xiangyi hinting at her?

"I've already taken a look at the memorial you submitted to the Ministry of War. It is not wrong to press home the attack and strike while the iron is hot, but it's not the right time now." Unable to get Qi Zhuyin to compromise, the Empress Dowager continued, "The third month happens to coincide with the spring plowing. If Qidong wishes to go to war, the fields the military garrisons work on will have to be left idle, and that means the supply of grains is bound to see a reduction after autumn. The shortfall will have to be obtained from other granaries, but it's no longer possible to make up for it as the common folks of Juexi have to eat too. The imperial court has its own difficulties. Bellicose militarism is never a wise policy; the ones to suffer will still be the common people."

The Empress Dowager did not mention the granaries of the eight cities, which meant that she was leaving it to Qi Zhuyin to bring it up on her own. Qi Zhuyin only had to broach the subject, and the problem could be kicked over into Xue Xiuzhuo's court. Everyone would be caught in a deadlock when the time came, which meant that they still had to heed the Empress Dowager's arrangements. If Xue Xiuzhuo did not drop the case and Qi Zhuyin would not marry, then Qidong would neither be able to deploy its troops nor receive grains.

The sudden silence in the hall was so deafening one could hear a pin drop. No one on either side made a sound, while Qi Zhuyin ruminated over Hua Xiangyi's words from where she was in the middle.

"The Ministry of Revenue reported on the harvest status in each region at the beginning of the year." Li Jianting, who had never interjected before in Mingli hall, suddenly spoke up out of the blue. "If Juexi is unable to bear the burden, we can consolidate with the granaries of the other prefectures to make up for the shortfall."

The Empress Dowager rebutted, "The Heir Apparent doesn't manage court affairs and so does not know the ins and outs of the matter. Hezhou already had its turn last year, and they still have to supply grains to Qudu with Juexi this year. The various regions are all in a difficult position."

In their exchange, they serendipitously avoided bringing up the eight cities. Qi Zhuyin had a sudden flash of insight.

The eight cities surrounded Qudu; were they not Qudu's 'splendor before the stairs'? Hua Xiangyi spoke of not getting a clear look—what was it that one could not get a clear look at? The detailed data of the eight cities' harvests! Since the Dancheng field taxes could be falsified, then how many of the remaining cities' field taxes were even genuine? The fields were not even thoroughly surveyed, and there were plenty that could be concealed within. Hua Xiangyi's final words mentioned those with empty stomachs. There were countless refugees from Dancheng last year, all of whom had fled with their stomachs empty. Pan Yi clearly knew he would not be able to hide this fact, so why did he not set up booths immediately to hand out porridge to the poor?

Sweat was already trickling down Qi Zhuyin's temples in just those few brief moments, and she inwardly exclaimed, *what a close call!*



The rattan chair rocked slightly, with folds of meandering snow-white sleeves lying on the knees in it. Shen Zechuan opened his folding fan to block out some of the sunlight. Yao Wenyu was still tidying up some old books on the table. It was all quiet in the courtyard.

Shen Zechuan looked at the mottled plum blossoms leaves above his head in tandem with the rocking. The dappled light fell upon him, and he reached out with his folding fan to catch it and hold it before his eyes to scrutinize it.

Yao Wenyu flipped to a stack of cases amidst the old books. He opened it and saw that it was Chazhou's earliest grain records. He had seen this previously, but by some curious coincidence this time, he flipped to the back page, then turned his wheelchair around to speak to Shen Zechuan, who was by the door. "The exorbitantly priced grains of Chazhou for the past years have been grains from Hezhou, but last year, Hezhou even had to bear the burden for both the military provisions and Qudu's granaries. As I see it, the goods being transported and traded in this account book are all large shipments. Suppose Yan Heru still has to shoulder the grains for the bandits of Mount Luo, then even if Hezhou enjoys a bountiful harvest every year..." He slowly straightened out the account book. "... it should be just about empty by now."

"I initially suspected that Yan Heru stole the grains from Juexi and Hezhou to sell. But when Fanzhou's account was released, I realized that the granaries of these two places had no surplus grains left for him to trade."

"Liang Cuishan started to take charge of all affairs pertaining to taxes in Juexi and Hezhou last year. Yan Heru said the last time that he did not manage to get through to Liang Cuishan." Holding on to the door frame for support, Yao Wenyu's expression shifted slightly. "Then where did the grains he sold last year come from?"

Shen Zechuan turned his head and locked eyes with Yao Wenyu for a moment.

"The granaries of the eight cities. The grains Yan Heru resold last year to the various prefectures in Zhongbo came from the eight cities." Yao Wenyu swiftly flipped through the book in his lap. "The exorbitantly priced grains in Fanzhou and Dengzhou were sold through Cai Yu's hands. Your Lordship killed Cai Yu, and Yan Heru did not tell the truth."

The folding fan in Shen Zechuan's palm suddenly closed. He was still leaning back, gazing at the sunlight. Enlightened in that instant, he said, "That means the Empress Dowager did not have enough in reserves to shoulder Qidong's military provisions. She was making empty promises."

This bluff of a move completely had Xue Xiuzhuo trapped. The eight cities' accounts were too corrupted. Even Pan Lin himself would not necessarily know which were genuine and which were forged. The Dancheng fields that Xue Xiuzhuo investigated were indeed off, and the harvest data that Pan Yi had handed over to the Ministry of Revenue at the

earliest was fake too. However, the grain surplus that the noble clans had submitted was real. They misappropriated the commoners' fields, and yet they did not have grains, because the grains had been rerouted over on the sly to Yan Heru to resell at a profit.

The eight cities' granaries had always been empty.

"Hua Hewei..." Shen Zechuan laughed aloud, unable to refrain from marveling with a sigh, "Outstanding of the Empress Dowager!"

If Xue Xiuzhuo were forced to drop his investigation into the Dancheng fields due to the requisition of military provisions and take a step back to express goodwill to the Empress Dowager, then by the time he was done doing it, he would realize that the Empress Dowager had no grains at all, and Qidong could still not mobilize their troops. When the time comes, Xue Xiuzhuo would not only lose his current advantage but also bear the risk of a revolt from the Imperial College. He would even find himself doubted and being called into question by the practical doers faction.

Hua Hewei was not an official of the imperial court.

She had her own way of playing among this group of shrewd and astute men.



## CHAPTER 223: TIDE



The gears turned rapidly in Qi Zhuyin's mind in that instant as she weighed up the relative importance of both sides. She had to find the most suitable ally for Qidong in this tussle for power. The victory and defeat of this game were equally important to Qidong; it even determined just how long Qi Zhuyin could remain in the commander-in-chief position in the future.

Qi Zhuyin made up her mind and said, "This humble subject has yet to have an in-depth discussion with the various excellencies from the Ministry of War and Ministry of Revenue, so I'm not familiar with the reserves situation in the various regions' granaries. However, the harvest in the four commanderies of Qidong last year was decent. So if the troops are mobilized, we can manage with some difficulty to hang on for two months assuming we consolidate the grains from the other granaries."

"You are a general; naturally, you understand it more than I do that it takes a month just to advance the troops if you want to continue penetrating deeper into the desert." The Empress Dowager spoke softly. "It's already the third month now. If you hold up the spring plowing of the four commanderies, but still fail to return after two months, then you will end up delaying the autumn harvest in the seventh month. Zhuyin, it's not that I'm unwilling to mobilize troops, but that I can't."

Qi Zhuyin seemed to be stumped, and once again, silence descended upon Mingli Hall.

The Empress Dowager rose to her feet slowly and held her sleeves together<sup>36</sup> as she looked at the various ministers in the hall and advised in all earnestness. "Were the Dazhou's granaries in full abundance, I'd have fought this battle even if Zhuyin didn't ask to. But the imperial court is hard-pressed for money at present and is really in no position to fight a war. Besides, food is the number one necessity of the people. Fight this war, and the commoners of three regions will have to go hungry. Isn't that getting our priorities all wrong? Boran, you saw the Ministry of Revenue's report at the beginning of the year, and you understand the situations in the various areas like the back of your hand."

With Qi Zhuyin in the hall, how would the court ministers dare to speak frankly and refute her? The Empress Dowager was so calm and composed as she forced them to bring up the eight cities. Kong Qiu stood at the side, clutching his own memorial without so much as an expression.

After a moment, Kong Qiu said, "Qidong's mobilization of troops is no small matter. There should have been a specific procedure in place. Commander-in-chief Qi has just entered the capital. Since she has yet to discuss in detail with the Grand Secretariat, why not wait for us to finish the discussion tonight before making a decision?"

By this, Kong Qiu was stalling for time without going along with the Empress Dowager or making a decision for Xue Xiuzhuo. He had transcribed a copy of the account book Liang Cuishan had straightened out. It was truly a pity to have it in hand, yet still be unable to take down Dancheng.

After the court session was dismissed, everyone stepped out of Mingli Hall in successive order. Fengquan stood in front to drape the overcoat over Li Jianting, who slowed down a few steps to wait for Kong Qiu to emerge. Kong Ling raised an arm to guide the way for Li Jianting. He led the Heir Apparent down the stairs and into that open and spacious area.

"Your Highness pulled no punches today," Kong Qiu said. "The suggestion to consolidate the various areas' granaries is indeed an option."

Li Jianting pursed her lips a little before smiling as she said to Kong Qiu, "The Senior Grand Secretary spoke to me about it a little at the start of the year. Naturally, I wouldn't dare to forget about it. It just seems to be too tough to gather sufficient military grains at present."

The day had already broken. Water puddles on the ground invertedly reflected the blue dome of heaven, while the upturned eaves covered up that

last dim light of the night.

Li Jianting took a few steps and said, "His Excellency Chongshen is truly outstanding. I heard his mental arithmetic is both fast and accurate, and there would never be a mistake with the accounts that pass through his eyes. Since Dancheng's field taxes case is temporarily deferred, why doesn't the Senior Grand Secretary ask him to calculate the various areas' surplus grains? If the three areas aren't enough, there are still the eight cities. Let everyone work as one."

Kong Qiu said with a bitter smile, "The requisition of military grains now has to come from Juexi, and the quandary right now is broaching the subject of borrowing grains from the eight cities..."

Kong Qiu suddenly stopped talking and turned his head aside to look intently at Li Jianting.

What Li Jianting said was to get the Grand Secretariat to calculate, not to get the Grand Secretariat to investigate, and yet there was a whole world of difference in the meaning of this one word. Whether or not the Empress Dowager agreed to the former, the Grand Secretariat could get Liang Cuishan to do a count of the eight cities' surplus grains. As the Dancheng's accounts were problematic, and Pan Lin was still locked up in prison, the Ministry of Revenue now ought to do a recount of the eight cities' surplus grains; this was the duty of the Ministry of Revenue, and they were not wrong to do so.

The flower embellishment<sup>37</sup> between Li Jianting's brows was brilliantly red, and yet it did not detract from the Heir Apparent's spirited demeanor. She seemed to have just mentioned it in passing, even looking to be a little at a loss under Kong Qiu's gaze.



As soon as Qi Zhuyin stepped out of the palace gates, she saw Xue Xiuzhuo standing a short distance away. She pulled the overcoat off her shoulders and tossed it to Qi Wei, who had come over to receive her. Then she pointed ahead to Xue Xiuzhuo as an indication to talk as they walked.

"I heard from Minister Chen earlier that you were the one who forked out the military salaries this time," Qi Zhuyin said. "Thanks a lot."

Naturally, Qi Zhuyin's word of thanks was not so simple. Xue Xiuzhuo heard the intent behind it and walked for a while with Qi Zhuyin before saying, "Commander-in-chief Qi is mobilizing troops to keep Amu'er in

check. The war in the north is at a critical stage. This war ought to be fought.”

Steering clear of the fact that she already had military provisions, Qi Zhuyin said, “Before I enter the capital, I heard that the military provisions this time have to be requisitioned from Juexi. Jiang Qingshan won’t agree to it, will he? You people have your own difficulties too.”

The mornings in Qudu were no longer that cold, and the vendors on the streets started bustling around. As both of them were wearing official robes, no one around them dared to approach. The common folks all kept their distance. Once the pair of them walked past, they looked at Qi Zhuyin again and whispered among themselves.

The Wind Guiding the Scorching Plain, Qi Zhuyin, of the legends was merely tall and lanky. She did not have a herculean physique, nor was she majestically imposing, but she had a certain calm and composure that could stand up to these prying and speculations.

“But you are right. This battle ought to be fought.” The wuzhu ornament Qi Zhuyin was adorned with swung in the wind, and her slightly messy hair at her temples brushed against the side of her cheeks. She continued, “Libei may have revolted, but the Libei Armored Cavalry is still Qudu’s impenetrable fortress in the northeast. The Prince of Libei died in battle, and the battle zone has yet to receive reports of success this year. The fight is indeed tough. You people are far away in Qudu and have limited knowledge of the Biansha Twelve Tribes. Just a few military reports are not enough to fully depict the scale of Amu’er’s ambitions. Don’t keep thinking that they really can’t breach the defenses and invade.”

Qudu was the capital of the Son of Heaven, the culmination of Dazhou’s hundred years of golden age. Unlike the worn and weary frontiers, it had never been under attack. Only seven years had passed since the military defeat of Zhongbo, yet there were no longer any signs of the panic that had been prevalent at that time in Qudu. Here, the fear of the Biansha Cavalry had long faded.

“Amu’er has already taken command of the six tribes, and he’s imitating Dazhou’s military farming system, in which the stationed garrison troops carried out farming duties, in Gedale. If Qidong doesn’t deploy troops this year, Qudu will no longer be able to detach themselves from the matter. I’ll be frank. My soldiers can’t outrun the Biansha Cavalry. If Libei

falls and Luoxia Pass can't hold up, then even if the Biansha Cavalry slaughters their way into Qudu, I won't be able to hurry over in time."

The wind intensified. Qi Zhuyin stood still and turned to look at Xue Xiuzhuo. Towering behind her were the vermillion walls with its stacked tiers of upturned eaves soaring into the clear sky. There was not even a cloud overhead. It was in this way Qudu lay bare and exposed to the first light of the day.

"I must mobilize troops." There was no joy in Qi Zhuyin's eyes.

Qidong rarely participated in Qudu's political affairs. Qi Shiyu was smart. Whether it was handling Qidong's relationship with Libei, or maintaining Qidong's amity with the noble clans, he could always find the most appropriate time to pick sides. But not so for Qi Zhuyin. She did not possess the kind of patience Qi Shiyu had. She would rather risk being dismissed and prosecuted by Qudu to attack the Qingshu Tribe, because she knew that the war situation was far more pressing than the political situation.

The trap in which the Empress Dowager set to coerce Xue Xiuzhuo into giving in was brilliant, but she also coerced Qi Zhuyin to get married with Fei Shi, which meant that she would not be giving Qi Zhuyin any noble rank. In fact, she had even shown signs of wanting to split up the military power in Qi Zhuyin's hands.

Perhaps there were indeed people who were more capable of fighting wars than Qi Zhuyin was. However, at this time, at this moment when the battlefields in the north and south were at stake, Qi Zhuyin would never hand over Qidong's military power to anyone else but herself. Since the Empress Dowager already had the thought of moving her, she would never sit still and resign herself to her fate.

"As long as the memorial to mobilize troops can be approved and the deployment order from the Ministry of War can be issued before I leave," Qi Zhuyin suddenly smiled, "then the military provisions that are keeping you at a standstill isn't hard to deal with; I won't forcibly make a requisition for Juexi's food."

Xue Xiuzhuo brushed aside the willow branch that came flying towards him and said, "Deal."



The incense in the hall was a tad strong, and it made Hua Xiangyi feel sick after smelling it for a long time. Matron Liuxiang hurriedly had the

maids open the windows. She helped Hua Xiangyi sit on the couch near the window and said ardently, "Third Missy has left for only half a year, and this humble slave can see how much thinner you have become. That Qidong lies close to the desert. It has been hard on the Third Missy."

Hua Xiangyi clutched her handkerchief and said, "Auntie is the one who has lost weight." She turned her eyes to look at the small prayer hall in the inner chamber.

Matron Liuxiang said, "Her Majesty misses the Third Missy, and she prays to the Bodhisattva every day to ask for blessings for the Third Missy. Last time, she caught a cold in the night and wanted to see the Third Missy. Taking medicine didn't work either, so she had this humble slave lit the lamp to read the letters Third Missy sent."

They were in the midst of conversing when the eunuch outside gave a shout to announce the arrival of the Empress Dowager. Hua Xiangyi walked over to greet the Empress Dowager, but the Empress Dowager dispensed with the formalities and held her hands as she stood at the doorway to look Hua Xiangyi over carefully. "Why have you lost weight? Are you not used to the food in the Qi's residence? I picked a few chefs from our Dicheng for you. Take them with you when you leave." The Empress Dowager grew so emotional speaking that her eyes indistinctly glistened with tears. She stroked Hua Xiangyi's temple. "Is my baby girl all well?"

Hua Xiangyi held the Empress Dowager's hands back and choked slightly with sobs as she answered, "I've been missing my aunt."

The Empress Dowager led her inside, her heart breaking on hearing her. She would not let Hua Xiangyi sit at the side when she took her seat on the couch, instead insisting on having her sit next to her. "Does that Qi Shiyu treat you well? What about Qi Zhuyin? I heard those concubines of his are a restless lot who don't know their places. If anyone dares to affront you, get the maidservants to tie them up and send them away. I'll back you up."

Hua Xiangyi broke into a smile through her tears.

The Empress Dowager hugged her like a child and said, "I used to think that I could still send letters when you marry over. Only now do I know how it feels to be so far apart."

The Empress Dowager originally wanted to pick the best husband for Hua Xiangyi, but never in her wildest dreams would she have expected Hua Xiangyi to be eventually married away to Qi Shiyu. To the Empress Dowager's mind, Qi Shiyu had at least been a hero for a lifetime, and

except for his age, he could be begrudgingly said to be worthy of Hua Xiangyi. But who knew he would suffer a stroke in the end? The Empress Dowager regretted making this move and wished with all her heart to give all that was good to Hua Xiangyi as she faced her now.

Hua Xiangyi leaned against the Empress Dowager and asked once the latter was done reminiscing, "Is Auntie all well?"

"The principal hall is in such a mess that I can't eat or sleep well." The Empress Dowager paused for a moment before continuing self-derisively. "I'm old, after all. My mind and spirits are not as they were before."

Hua Xiangyi slowly straightened up a little and said in a gentle voice, "Why do you have to go so far as to work so hard? There's the Grand Secretary to assist in state affairs. I heard that the Heir Apparent is a keen learner too."

The Empress Dowager supported Emperor Xiande, so she could also support the Heir Apparent now. In Hua Xiangyi's opinion, Li Jianting was far more reliable than the previous two. Although she was physically in Qidong, she was very well aware of all the major happenings in Qudu.

The Empress Dowager gave a long sigh. She recalled the way Li Jianting looked earlier when she spoke up in Mingli Hall earlier and felt even more on guard against the Heir Apparent. "You are looking at it too superficially. How is that Heir Apparent easy to get along with? She's merely a cheap, lowly lass from out there whom a few scoundrels instigated to challenge me."

After a moment of silence, Hua Xiangyi said, "Having married over to Qidong, I have some understanding of Biansha and Zhongbo. Auntie, Shen Zechuan is now in power in Zhongbo, but he isn't bad by nature. Reclaiming Duanzhou and drawing up the fields again are all good things... I asked Zhaoyue last year how the situation in the City of Dancheng was, and she said Pan Yi couldn't say for sure either. Too many people have died of starvation. The pair of them had the thought to provide aid relief to the refugees, but with the granaries void of grains, there was nothing they could do either."

The Empress Dowager gradually shut her eyes. After listening for a while, she said, "I know you have a kind heart, but this is the moment that decides whether we succeed or fail." The Empress Dowager opened her eyes once again and looked at Hua Xiangyi. "You lived in the palace away from Dicheng, and there are things you don't know. Our family properties

were confiscated during the reign of Xiande, and I was stranded and trapped in the harem. During those periods, even the eunuchs of the inner court's yamen dared to come before my palace and blackmail me for silver. There are plenty waiting to humiliate and trample over us had the Marquis of Helian not bribed them. Look at that Xue clan. The legitimate son of lawful birth is a good-for-nothing who squandered away all his family properties and is now being bossed around. Where are his nobleman's dignity and respectability? Then look again at that Xue Yanqing. He's the most bastard of all bastards. His desire to audit Dancheng's field taxes means he wants to use us as a stepping stone for the Heir Apparent. How many of those from the eight cities will be able to escape if we were to be investigated by him for real?"

The Empress Dowager straightened up in her seat too.

"Without the noble clans, what else can I use to vie with them? If there's a problem with the field taxes, I will square the accounts myself in the future. No one else has the prerogative to interfere. And that Shen Zechuan, acting in cahoots with Xiao Chiye. I can tell what they are thinking of doing. You think he's looking at the land under his feet, but he's clearly eyeing the throne. Traitors of such ilk seek fame in everything they do. Shen Wei's treachery is still hanging over his head!"

The words Hua Xiangyi said were already tactful. She watched as the Empress Dowager's chest heaved and knew that the Empress Dowager's mind was already made up. She would never be willing to co-exist with the Heir Apparent. Hua Xiangyi made as if to speak, but stopped as she heard the sudden sound of rain starting up outside; to her surprise, a sun shower had started to fall.





## CHAPTER 224: ABRUPT CHANGE



The sun shower stopped as abruptly as it came. Liang Cuishan's swiftly-moving boots were covered in specks of mud. He lifted the hem of his robe and strode through the door, where the officials waiting in the office of the Ministry of Revenue were already all ready to go. He listened as the sound of the rain outside came to a sudden stop and took out his handkerchief to wipe away the thin film of sweat on his face. Succinctly, he announced, "Start the count."

The sounds of abacus beads being flicked noisily in the room started up, as if the sudden rain earlier had begun to fall again inside the office.

Carrying the Grand Secretariat's writ in his bosom, Liang Cuishan sat on the *taishi* chair<sup>38</sup> and reopened those eight cities' account books that had been stacked up into a pile and buried his head in them to do his recalculations. His mental arithmetic was outstanding, and he understood how taxes worked, so he was pretty fast going through the accounts. But to be on the safe side, he still had an abacus, brushes, and paper prepared within hand reach.

The "rain" in the Ministry of Revenue's office fell throughout the night. Only errand runners went in and out during this time to brew strong tea for the various gentlemen to perk themselves up. In the midst of this din, however, the Empress Dowager did not sleep a wink.

Smoke from burning incense inside her palace spiraled upwards. The Empress Dowager turned the prayer beads in her hand as she reclined on the couch, while Matron Liuxiang pounded her legs in a massage. There was no one else inside this hall. The Empress Dowager, having already

removed her eastern pearls, looked rather haggard as she shut her eyes for a nap.

“Commander Han has already communicated with Fuman.” Matron Liuxiang reassured her in a soft voice. “There should be movements on the Heir Apparent’s end by now.”

The Empress Dowager opened her eyes slightly. “The Heir Apparent butted in while we were discussing affairs in Mingli Hall today. I can see that Kong Boran has a change of heart towards her; he really thinks of her as a student now.”

“Isn’t this all instigated by Xue Yanqing?” Matron Liuxiang massaged with rhythmic finesse. “She was raised outside the palace. How would she understand political affairs?”

“She doesn’t know when to stop pushing it, and she has no sense of propriety. Even if she wants to interfere in the affairs of the state, she has to have the capability to. Qi Zhuyin’s reluctance to accede to me today must be because she thinks Xue Xiuzhuo still has a way out. Since they are so anxious to do a count of the eight cities’ surplus grains,” the Empress Dowager scrutinized her hand that had the prayer beads wound around it, “then, by all means, go ahead.”

Under the slightly dimmed lights, the Empress Dowager appeared calm and unruffled, without so much as a semblance of panic.



The more Liang Cuishan did his calculations, the more alarmed he was. He maneuvered the abacus several times under the noisy sound of its beads being flicked, but the result was the same as his mental calculations. There was no problem with the reserves of the Dancheng’s granaries that the Ministry of Revenue was rechecking. According to the calculations of the quantity of these surplus grains, the granaries in the Eight Cities were now Dazhou’s most abundant granaries.

How could that be?

Liang Cuishan pushed away the abacus and stood up, once again wiping the sweat from his face with his handkerchief.



Pan Lin sat back in his chair, his face pale under the candlelight. He had been locked up here for several days. If nothing else, the creased corners of his robe only served to show just how wretched a sight he cut for a young

master of a noble clan. He pushed himself to hang on and looked at Xue Xiuzhuo with tired eyes.

“You knew the detailed situation of the eight cities’ granaries when you audited their field taxes at the start of the year.” Xue Xiuzhuo was tired too. He covered his eyes with a damp handkerchief for a moment to gather himself. “The granaries of the eight cities have long been vacant, am I right?”

Pan Lin answered with silence.

“Chengzhi.” Xue Xiuzhuo switched over to calling Pan Lin by his courtesy name. “You let Yao Yuanzhuo go because you are still kind at heart. You are not of the same ilk as Wei Huaigu, so why work for them against your conscience? So many people starved to death in the City of Dancheng last year. If the imperial court is unable to resurvey the fields and return them to the commoners, many people will still die of starvation in Dancheng next year.”

Pan Lin’s Adam’s apple bobbed. He tilted back his head a little and stared at the pitch-dark roof.

“Qi Zhuyin made repeated trips into the capital to ask for the military salaries, and even at this time, the Qidong Garrison Troops still have no way of dispatching their troops. The Biansha Twelve Tribes have already fought their way to the Bianjun Commandery.” Xue Xiuzhuo’s bloodshot eyes from the lack of sleep revealed his struggle, as if he was being tormented. He continued, “Chengzhi, I need grains.”

A moth flew out of nowhere and rested on the window. In the long, endless silence, it took flight once more and lunged into the night. It wandered in the dark, brushing past a speeding horse carriage that came to a stop before a residence. Hua Xiangyi leaped off the carriage just as Hongying lifted the carriage curtain.

“Madam...”

Hua Xiangyi lifted the hem of her skirt and broke into a run after striding through the main gate. The pearls that adorned the hairpin in her hair swung violently as she ran. Gasping for breath, she passed through the labyrinthine front courtyard and long walkways, ignoring the startled shouts around her as she ran into Qi Zhuyin’s courtyard.

Qi Wei was talking to the attendants when he suddenly saw Hua Xiangyi running over. Startled and thinking that there was an assassin, he promptly shouted, “Protect the Commander-in-chief!”

In a split second, the guards in the courtyard drew their blades, their glints mutually standing out in sharp relief with Hua Xiangyi's swaying pearls, masking the cold frost of the moon. Pearls strewn over Qi Zhuyin the moment she opened the door. Hua Xiangyi hastily held up the hair at her temple, which was already covered in a thin sheen of sweat amid her slightly urgent breathing.

"The Dancheng's granaries are empty. No matter how much surplus grains the Ministry of Revenue comes up with in their rechecks," Hua Xiangyi was still clutching her skirt as she looked at Qi Zhuyin, "... they are all a smokescreen."

Qi Zhuyin returned the hairpin she had caught to Hua Xiangyi and looked at Qi Wei.

Qi Wei immediately stepped back, turned around to hurry out of the courtyard, and sent someone to relay the information to Liang Cuishan.

At this time, it was nearing the third quarter of the hour of chou. At the second quarter of the hour of yin, the various imperial court officials had to be ready to wait outside the palace gates. They would then enter the palace for the morning court session at the hour of mao on the dot. Time was of pressing urgency, and no one dared to tarry.



Pan Lin fell completely silent after Xue Xiuzhuo said his piece. He was a man well-versed in the Confucian classics, and he could not bring himself to look directly into Xue Xiuzhuo's eyes. He gazed at the roof and saw the timeworn traces of years of disrepair on the beams. The parts that had not been covered by the new paint lay exposed outside, its exterior dotted with fine insect holes, rotten to the core.

It was in here Pan Lin sat, yet he felt the wind as he silently counted those small holes, killing himself with a blunt blade in that silence. He understood that Xue Xiuzhuo's expression might be just a disguise, and yet he also knew that what Xue Xiuzhuo had said was the truth. In all these days he had been in his cell, his silence had not been all about avoidance.

"Let me ask you." Pan Lin was slow to react as he turned his head around, finally willing to look Xue Xiuzhuo in the eyes. "Why do you want to kill Yuanzhuo?"

Xue Xiuzhuo leaned back in his chair and similarly looked at Pan Lin in the eyes too.

“You want to assist the Li clan, and so did the Secretariat Elder Hai. Both of you supported Emperor Tianchen and replaced Hua Siqian.” Pan Lin shifted his shackled hand onto the table. “But then, you killed Emperor Tianchen for the Heir Apparent... Xue Yanqing, you hide under the waves. I can’t tell if you are a loyal sage or a treacherous sycophant at all.”

Pan Lin needed an answer. With this question, Xue Xiuzhuo could clear up the unbecoming part of him that went against the principles of the virtuous gentlemen. He only needed to give Pan Lin a justifiable reason, and he would have won a landslide victory tonight.

But Xue Xiuzhuo said, “I want to kill Yao Yuanzhuo because he deserved to be killed.”

He no longer looked as prim and proper after having stayed up all night. In fact, he was even willing to loosen up his tightly fastened official robe as he sat across the table.

“The noble clans are always thinking that they still dominate this imperial court. However, they had already long lost control of this carriage towards the end of the reign of Yongyi. Look at your father. If the noble clans had been tough and fearsome enough, would he have needed to be in two minds under the pincer attacks of both the noble clans and those of humble origins? The Zhongbo’s military defeat during the reign of Xiande made me understand one thing.” Xue Xiuzhuo lifted a finger and pointed to the ground. “At the same time the noble clan is infiltrating Dazhou, they are also being infiltrated by others. Hua Siqian thought he could outplay Amu’er in the east, but in truth, he was just a jackal Amu’er trapped while spying on Dazhou. The most ludicrous thing was that even right up until his death, Hua Siqian thought he was the one holding the chain.”

“Secretariat Elder Hai and I watched the Prince of Libei rise to power. The Libei Armored Cavalry became a valiant army in the northeast, but they did not place themselves at the Li clan’s disposal; their surnames were Xiao. No matter how loyal Xiao Fangxu and Xiao Jiming were, the Libei Armored Cavalry no longer accepted commanding generals from Qudu. They call themselves a pack of wolves, and even term themselves an iron wall. That’s right, they are indeed an impenetrable fortress, but at the same time they block out the Biansha Cavalry, they also block Qudu. Had the Empress Dowager not undermined and corrupted state politics, Emperor Guangcheng would have long gotten the Libei Armored Cavalry to disperse during the later period of the reign of Yongyi. It was when they were still

called the Luoxia Cavalry that they were truly subordinated to the Li clan's army. Would Xiao Fangxu not understand that? Even so, he was still unwilling to hand over his military power. He believed in himself. He might not have been wrong, but he couldn't control the gradually solidifying armored cavalry."

"Many people denounced Qudu for being paranoid, but who could guarantee that such a large and powerful army would keep on having a clear-headed commander-in-chief for eternity? Even Xiao Fangxu himself knew it was impossible. What is needed to be sitting here is not verbal promises or personal trust, but a real balance and control of power. Xiao Fangxu had long understood that he would have to hand over a son to Qudu, and Secretariat Elder Hai looked for an appropriate opportunity for him to do so in consideration of Libei's friendship and dignity. But before he could act, Hua Siqian, in a bid to make up for the state treasury deficit, handed the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo over on a silver platter to Amu'er. As a result, the reason for Xiao Chiye's entry into the capital became Qudu and Libei's sore point."

"Do you understand now? There are Scorpions from the desert in these waters. Amu'er relied on them to stir up the situation and make Dazhou rot from within. Yet the noble clans feigned ignorance about it. Secretariat Elder Hai and I went through a lot of trouble to support Li Jianheng to ascend to the throne in the hope that Li Jianheng could clean up and sort out the imperial court, but he turned out to be a good-for-nothing through and through!"

"Yao Yuanzhuo's reputation has been built up to a terrifying level, but he would never put it to use for Qudu. If I don't kill him, he will inevitably be used by others. All of you kept Yuanzhuo alive for the sake of the so-called cardinal principles of righteousness. You can now see for yourself the surge of scholars with a literary reputation in the world flocking towards Zhongbo, where he is now giving counsel to Shen Zechuan."

Xue Xiuzhuo paused for a long time before he continued expressionlessly, "I'm neither a loyal sage nor a treacherous sycophant."

What exactly was he?

He did not know.

He received Mister Changzong's guidance during the early years of his education and thought he would be able to become a gentleman of virtue himself. In the past several years, he held Qi Huilian in high esteem and

even had exchanges with him before. He thought Qi Huilian could understand his aspirations, but the latter rejected him. He respected Hai Liangyi and was willing to put himself at the latter's beck and call. To this day, he still wanted to address Hai Liangyi as his teacher. However, Hai Liangyi staunchly believed that Li Jianheng could become emperor under his guidance, and Xue Xiuzhuo could wait no longer. He wanted to install on the throne a sovereign that could create a new world. If there was no such candidate, he could only press on and go all out.

He did not need compassion, nor did he need to justify himself. He was willing to pay an exponential price for all that he had done. He had only one life, and he gambled it on Dazhou's twilight years. Whether or not the dawn that broke after the night was the one that he sought, he was still willing to risk his life to pursue it with all his might.

This was Dazhou's last chance, as well as his own.

Pan Lin raised both his hands to cover his face before the table. After a long time, he spoke up. "I was already aware that Wei Huaigu was falsifying accounts when I served as the Vice Minister in the Ministry of Revenue. I also knew there was something wrong with the Dancheng field taxes." He revealed his eyes that were lined with fine wrinkles. "But my name is Pan Lin, and I can only..."

Pan Lin did not continue. He rubbed his face hard a few times.

Hurried footsteps rang out from outside the cell. Pan Lin and Xue Xiuzhuo sat in silence, listening as that noise pressed in towards them.

At the very last moment the door opened.

"Empty."

Pan Lin said wearily.

"The eight cities are all empty."

Xue Xiuzhuo sprang to his feet. Before the functionary opened his mouth, Xue Xiuzhuo made a clean sweep of his fatigue and fastened back his collar, then gave a slight nod at Pan Lin and said, "Thanks."

Shadows moved around outside the cell. Just as Xue Xiuzhuo was about to leave, Pan Lin suddenly piped up, "You subdued your selfish desires to such an uncompromising extent that you are already beyond what the average person can tolerate. As you said it yourself, what is needed here is checks and balances... and what do you have that could let the Heir Apparent hold you in check?"

Xue Xiuzhuo looked askance at him and did not answer.



Pan Lin seemed to have understood something. He watched Xue Xiuzhuo leave. The door to the cell closed with a creak, leaving only him sitting alone in there. Thin ray of morning light peeked through the small window at the side, but did not shine on Pan Lin.

Pan Lin had already done his best.



Pan Xiangjie rummaged through his chests and cupboards in a search of the account books. Those old account books that had accumulated at the bottom of the chests were all sharp weapons that could bring about his downfall! He had heard the news when he woke up, and he had to burn all the incriminating evidence before Xue Xiuzhuo made his way here.

The reign of Yongyi. The reign of Xiande. The reign of Tianchen!

Pan Xiangjie bundled up all of these accounts neatly. He knelt before the chests and untied the rope with his bare hands before throwing all the account books into the copper basin.

There were too many of them for him to burn it all on his own.

Pan Xiangjie's panic was giving him acid reflux. He could never have imagined the breach to be his own son. He had already been driven to a dead end—he could not leave the matter at that!

“The reign of Yongyi...” Pan Xiangjie traced the entries in the accounts with his finger and read them out. “The Hua clan... The Han clan...”

Everyone is in here.

Pan Xiangjie was wild with joy. As long as everyone was in here, his Pan clan would not perish. The sound of running military boots suddenly erupted from the courtyard. Pan Xiangjie clutched the account book tightly and rose to his feet using a chest as a support. Unsteadily, he made his way to the door.

But the one who came was Han Cheng.

Faking composure, Pan Xiangjie covered the book with his wide sleeves and said to Han Cheng, “Things have not come to a head yet, and already the Empress Dowager can't contain herself? Abandoning the pawn to protect the rook is absolutely not the wisest strategy! Xue Xiuzhuo and the noble clans are on antagonistic terms. Even if you cut off my Pan clan today, the others will not be able to escape unscathed either.”

Pan Xiangjie had spent a lifetime pretending to be a senile, old duffer who cowered behind Hua Siqian and Wei Huaigu and fell to his knees at

every turn to beg for mercy in the imperial court, yet here he stood today, speaking with lucidity and eloquence.

Han Cheng gripped the hilt of his blade. "Your execution now gives everyone some room to catch their breaths. Who would dare to disregard your kindness? I guarantee your legitimate line of descendants will not die. They will still have an opportunity to stage a comeback one day."

As Pan Xiangjie watched the glint of the blade pressed in towards him, he could not help but raise his voice, "Kill me today, and you'd be merely forcing Xue Xiuzhuo's hand! Once Dancheng is gone, how much longer can Chuancheng last?"

"Cut the crap!" Sweat had also broken out on Han Cheng's forehead. He waved a hand to give the order. "The Empress Dowager has long known that you would leave a way out for yourself. These accounts are in such a mess, and yet you can still remember them so clearly. Burn this courtyard down!"

Pan Xiangjie held onto the door and saw his family members wailing. In that bedlam, he hollered out. "I've long gotten Chengzhi to transcribe these accounts. Go ahead and burn them! Even if you kill me now, these accounts will still fall into Xue Xiuzhuo's hands!"

"Pan Lin's treason is already an established fact." Han Cheng drew his blade out, "Didn't he secretly let Yao Wenyu go? Yao Wenyu is now Shen Zechuan's strategist! The evidence proving your Pan clan's collusion with the rebels is conclusive. So how credible can his words be? He is the spy Shen Zechuan left in Qudu!"

Caught in the thick of the pushing and shoving, Pan Xiangjie fell to the ground. He shouted out, "You cast aside your pawns once they have served their purpose, and you eliminate them once they outlived their usefulness.... like cooking the hounds for food once the hares have been hunted and casting aside the bows once the birds have been shot down! I was a willing lackey for you people, yet this is how it ends today! Han Cheng, even if I die today, how much longer can you live?!"

Being on duty with his Eight Great Training Divisions authority token with him, Han Cheng could wait no longer. He walked towards Pan Xiangjie as the fire blazed and raised his blade for the kill. Unexpectedly, the Qi Wei behind him was even faster. Instead of going around the walkway, he leaped over the ridge of the roof and swooped down from

above to knock over Han Cheng, sending the latter tumbling along with him.

Pan Xiangjie took this opportunity to suddenly raise the account book and yell towards the courtyard entrance. "Commander-in-chief Qi, save me!"

In the thick of the scuffle, Han Cheng tossed out the Eight Great Training Divisions' authority token and shouted as well, "The capital troops hold the most authority at the foot where the Son of Heaven is! Qi Zhuyin's troops shall go no further than the outskirts of the city. How dare you obstruct my Eight Great Training Divisions from carrying out its duties?!"

"I asked Commander-in-chief Qi to arrest the criminal minister. I possess both the warrant of arrest from the Ministry of Justice and the deployment order from the Ministry of War. So why wouldn't I dare to?" Xue Xiuzhuo flicked aside the hem of his robe and barked in a stern voice, "Put out the fire and arrest him. Take Han Cheng in as well!"

Han Cheng said, "I am here on the Empress Dowager's decree. You dare to arrest me?!"

The Eight Great Training Divisions soldiers in the courtyard instantly drew their blades and took a threatening step towards Xue Xiuzhuo.

Qi Zhuyin pushed the blades aside with the sheath of her blade and said from the back, "Since the Eight Great Training Divisions are troops of the capital, they are the Son of Heaven's army. The Heir Apparent has asked me to assist in the case, yet you're electing to obey the Empress Dowager instead?"

Han Cheng had initially thought Pan Xiangjie was bluffing him. Who would have expected Qi Zhuyin to really show up?! The reason he dared to kill Pan Xiangjie before Xue Xiuzhuo showed up was that he had the Eight Great Training Divisions in his hands and could use it to strong-arm the Grand Secretariat. But with Qi Zhuyin's troops presently parked right outside the city, he would no doubt be on the losing end if a fight were to break out.

Han Cheng's arrogance deflated some, and he hissed through clenched teeth, "Of course, I shall do as the Heir Apparent says."

The Eight Great Training Divisions returned their blades to their sheaths and watched Qi Zhuyin's guards enter to detain Pan Xiangjie and Han Cheng. That fire did not burn for too long before it was easily

extinguished. Xue Xiuzhuo waved away the smoke and dust and picked up a few of the account books that had not been fully burned.



The Empress Dowager was taken aback by the unforeseen developments. On hearing that Xue Xiuzhuo had taken the account books away, she could not help but collapse onto the couch. A deep furrow materialized between her eyebrows as she spitefully lamented, “Pan Xiangjie, that scoundrel!”

In order to save his own life, Pan Xiangjie had dragged everyone down into hot water!

“Where is the Heir Apparent?” The Empress Dowager regained her composure. “Well, then. Xue Xiuzhuo certainly is capable. Since he wishes to fight me to the death, then let him find out for himself if the ‘Destined Son of Heaven’ in his hands is tough enough.”

As the Empress Dowager spoke, she jerked the prayer beads off her hand and chucked them into the burning copper basin, sending up countless splutters of soot.



After his capture, Han Cheng shut his eyes and went to sleep with his face to the wall. He ignored everyone else, sure that Xue Xiuzhuo would not dare to touch him yet. Pan Xiangjie reverted to his previous ways, clutching onto his sleeves as he sat sobbing on the other side of the table.

“Yes, yes... I’ll account for it all...” Pan Xiangjie wiped his tears, “but let me have a bite first. Yanqing, I’m starving.”

This cunning old fellow meant to stall for time by using the account books to blackmail the Empress Dowager and wait for her to rescue him.

Although Liang Cuishan was in charge of taxation, he had also seen such trials before and was aware that these old fellows were not easy to interrogate and put on trial. Having stayed up all night, he took two sips of the strong tea and said after receiving Xue Xiuzhuo’s implied consent, “It also takes time for a meal to be prepared. Your Venerable Excellency can take your time to speak.”

Pan Xiangjie glanced at Liang Cuishan, who did not appear to be angry. “Chongshen, you are on such good terms with Chengzhi, so you know me.” He stroked his belly and pulled a long face. “I’m unaccustomed to going hungry at home, so my mind is currently in a mess.”

“How would I dare to put Your Venerable Excellency to the trouble?” Liang Cuishan set his tea aside. “All you have to do is answer me. I audited the surplus grains in Dancheng yesterday and discovered that the granary was full. Tell me, did you purchase grains from elsewhere to pass them off as the surplus grains just before the Ministry of Revenue’s rechecks?”

“Look, I don’t manage the grains.” Pan Xiangjie innocently spread his hands apart. He seemed to be panicking. “I’m in charge of the Ministry of Works! For the details regarding these grains, you’ll have to ask the Tax Circuit Intendant of Dancheng, or Pan Yi.”

“I asked them long ago.” Liang Cuishan flipped open the account book and showed it to Pan Xiangjie. “They’ve all confessed. You people sold the grains to Yan Heru. Since Dancheng sold its stock, the other seven cities must have too, right?”

“I’m not even sure about the Dancheng accounts, so how would I know about the other seven cities?” Pan Xiangjie knew that this information was likely brought up by Liang Cuishan to trick him. “Since they’ve already confessed to it, Yanqing, go by the books! Report it to the Grand Secretariat and have the Senior Grand Secretary take a look too.”

Xue Xiuzhuo said, “Given that we have to discuss it during the morning court session, it was already reported before the hour of mao.”

For a moment, Pan Xiangjie could not tell whether Xue Xiuzhuo was telling the truth or not when he heard that it was already reported.

Liang Cuishan fished out the writ from his sleeve. “Otherwise, how could we have managed to request your presence here? We naturally followed the procedures in accordance with the constitution of the law; the Ministry of Justice has already given their authorization.”

Pan Xiangjie stared at the document for a long time.

Xue Xiuzhuo leaned in closer and looked at Pan Xiangjie as he said, “Your Excellency is in charge of the administration of the Ministry of Works. I noticed that the dams of Kailing River were well-repaired when the public ditches case happened during the reign of Xiande. This shows that Your Excellency is a practical man who does concrete work and is willing to share the burdens of the common people. My target this time isn’t Your Excellency. Chengzhi is fine. It has not come to the point where he needs to be executed. There’s only a little blip on the Pan clan’s accounts. You’ll still have some leeway left after we sort this out.”

These words were telling Pan Xiangjie that if he continued to remain indecisive, then even this bit of leeway would be gone.

Pan Xiangjie let out a few sobs, his beard drooping as he said to Xue Xiuzhuo, "I really am not sure."

Xue Xiuzhuo said, "Then it appears that Dancheng is the 'private city' of the Pan clan. You deceived the imperial court and colluded with Pan Lin from the Ministry of Revenue to appropriate the commoners' crop fields in Dancheng and falsely report the field taxes. You also resold public grains and conspired with the wealthy merchant Yan Heru of Hezhou, leading to the deaths of countless of citizens. Your Pan clan is solely culpable for all of this."

Listening to him filled Pan Xiangjie with fear and trepidation. Realizing that Xue Xiuzhuo was being serious, he hastened to call out, "Yanqing..."

"The account books and the confession statements have all been transcribed verbatim and submitted to the Grand Secretariat." Xue Xiuzhuo ignored Pan Xiangjie, "Corrupted men like you who pervert the course of justice deserved to have your family properties confiscated to make up for what you owe in taxes and your entire family executed!"

"The account books have not been straightened out yet!" Pan Xiangjie followed suit and stood up. Both his hands were trembling as he pleaded. "Yanqing, Yanqing! We can discuss this over. I haven't given my statement yet!"

Xue Xiuzhuo turned back.

Pan Xiangjie could only say, "These accounts—"

The prison door behind Xue Xiuzhuo suddenly opened, and the clerk, not knowing what had happened, stood up in response. Xue Xiuzhuo looked back and could not help but break out in a cold sweat when he saw that it was a eunuch from the palace.

This out-of-breath little eunuch did not dare to look an imperial court minister in the eyes as he knelt on the ground and hurriedly shuffled forth on his knees a few steps before saying in a fluster, "Your, Your Excellency! The Heir Apparent suddenly fainted before the court session was to start. The Senior Grand Secretary has urgently summoned the imperial physician over. At this moment..."

Just one step shy.

Xue Xiuzhuo's limbs were icy cold, and the hand in which he was clenching the book broke out in a cold sweat. Pan Xiangjie instantly shut

his mouth and sat back.

Strikes where it hurts.

The Empress Dowager was truly one tough nut!

Xue Xiuzhuo dropped the account book in his hands and squeezed the words out through clenched teeth, "Set off for the palace."

## CHAPTER 225: ADVERSARY



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### **Warning: Depiction of child abuse/rape**

Fengquan kneeled by the side of the couch and personally sampled the medicine that was about to be fed to Li Jianting.

Li Jianting's face was pale, and her temples were covered in a cold sweat as she lay trembling on the couch. She was covered with a quilt, yet she looked like she was being crushed beneath it. Faint whimpers and sobs escaped her throat alongside her urgent gasps for breath.

The imperial physician inside the palace did not dare to be careless with his diagnosis. He took Li Jianting's pulse again and again through the lowered bed-curtains and wiped his sweat from time to time as he repeated the prescription to the people beside him.

Kong Qiu had faced this kind of situation twice with Hai Liangyi, but this was the first time it had happened since he took charge. His hidden hands under his sleeves were slicked with sweat, and even when his sweat dripped into his eyes, he did not dare to blink.

If the Heir Apparent were to pass away.

Kong Qiu did not dare to think of the repercussions. He closed his eyes with some effort and thought back to that downpour during the public ditches incident. Just how much of a resolve did Hai Liangyi have to steel himself with to say those kinds of words.

Teacher.



Kong Qiu could not help but clench his teeth.

If only Teacher was still around.

Kong Qiu was at such a loss for words now that he was even overwhelmed by the intense sense of powerlessness as he listened to the Heir Apparent's breaking-up voice.

The medicinal decoction was poured down Li Jianting's throat. Her eyeballs were still swiveling. It was as if she was being bound in place by her nightmare. Fengquan kneeled for an entire day. During the interval of time when the palace maids at the sides retreated, he plucked up the courage to gently brush away Li Jianting's damp hair and watched as Li Jianting's expressions underwent a myriad of changes.

The casualties of this game extended far beyond to the innocent bystanders caught in the crossfire. Whether or not the Heir Apparent survived, the palace maids and eunuchs serving the Heir Apparent in her palace were already condemned to death.

Fengquan had to find a way out in this pressing emergency. He still had unfinished business; Li Jianting must not die.

"Your Highness..." Fengquan quietly called out to Li Jianting in a whisper. Due to the close proximity, he saw the tiny hole in Li Jianting's earlobe. He steeled himself and said, "Your Highness struggled to get out of the pleasure quarters and is merely just a step away from the imperial throne. If you lose heart now, you will fail at the last hurdle just when success is within reach... Your Highness!"

It was as if Li Jianting could not hear him. Her fingers clutched at the bedding tightly. She might have been lying in this exquisite splendor, but her mind was still trapped in the world's foulest brothel.

A whimper of a sob lingered in Li Jianting's throat—that was a plea for mercy she made when she was being beaten.

Heavens made a fool of her, giving her such an identity, but had her born a girl. The jingling of earring blended into the din of tables and chairs toppling over. She fell among them countless times, dragged by her hair before those repulsive men.

Xiangyun was a good procuress. She knew how to make the most out of her girls.



Ling Ting was a girl adopted by Xiangyun, but she was not special, for Xiangyun had adopted many a number of children. Xiangyun would lift

their heads by the chin to scrutinize them carefully, and from then on, the trajectory of their future paths was decided.

Ling Ting was a pretty one, but she was not likable. As Xiangyun looked her over, she found these eyes of hers surprisingly loathsome.

“You look quite pretty, but also much too fierce.” Xiangyun tapped her pipe. “Might as well blind these eyes. Only then will them cloudy eyes inspire pity in the various lords.”

Ling Ting was thin and small. Xiangyun fed her food and did not really blind her eyes, and for that, Ling Ting was very grateful to Xiangyun. Every day, she watched the men going in and out of Xiangyun Villa to please the courtesans in the brothel. She had no designated master. Instead, she spent all day running barefoot in the corridors serving tea and water for the courtesans, watching them as they applied rouge powder and perfume.

Girls really smell so nice.

Ling Ting kneeled by the door with her hands on the rug as she sneakily sniffed at the fragrance inside like a little puppy. She watched those ample, voluptuous bodies drape themselves with outfits of silk and satin, and watched as those long and slender fingers put on bracelets of gold and jade. She also listened as those courtesans spoke in their sweet, delicate voices, like the pleasant trills of orioles. They fascinated her, making her yearn for the world of women.

With a gorgeous, colorful shawl over her shoulders, Xiangyun stopped beside Ling Ting, looking much like a willow branch swaying in the wind. She had drunk wine, and there was a thin sheen of glow on her face as she chuckled dreamily and bent over to cup Ling Ting’s face. “Doggie... Here, I’ll put an earring on you.”

A pearl that was dangling from that golden thread slid down coldly along the contour of Ling Ting’s ear and fell onto the rug. Ling Ting stared at Xiangyun in a daze. Xiangyun, having already straightened up, laughed as she walked off.

“Madame has an important guest today.” A courtesan inside tossed a vermillion hairpin into the jewelry box. She looked like she could not hold her liquor as she continued, “The Second Young Master of the Prince of Libei.”

A chorus of giggles rang out from the inner room.

Ling Ting did not know who the Prince of Libei was, nor did she know who the Second Young Master was. She carefully picked up the pearl

earring and quietly grasped it in her hand.

Drinks were to be served in the brothel in the evening. Ling Ting followed the maidservants in and saw Prince Chu reclining on the couch. He was so drunk he was babbling nonsense. Several noble clans' young masters had been invited along as well, but Xiangyun ignored them all. She sat demurely beside a person's chair, so prim and proper was she that she resembled a fine lady from a distinguished family.

Xiao Chiye was wearing raven blue-colored regular wear, although this way of dressing could not put a muzzle to his frivolousness. He seemed to have drunk wine too, sitting with his arms put up on the chair as he played dice with the young master at the side.

Ling Ting stood in attendance by the side to pour wine for the distinguished guests, doing so for half a night until everyone at the table was drunk. Li Jianheng kept tugging at Xiangyun to keep pestering her to drink up, while Xiao Chiye seemed to have played to his heart's content, although he had never once touched the courtesans at the feast.

Reeking of wine, Li Jianheng pointed out Xiao Chiye to Xiangyun. "This is my... buddy! The son of the Prince... Prince of Libei... He's been on the battlefield..." He belched and giggled cheekily. "Ce'an is the real... deal."

Xiao Chiye burst out into hearty laughter. He lowered his long fingers to toss the dice into the wine vessel,<sup>39</sup> and said with a dismissive, laid-back attitude, "The battlefield stinks to high heavens. How could it be as comfortable as lying in the arms of beautiful women? This Second Young Master is going to drink himself into a drunken stupor here."

Li Jianheng pushed Xiangyun over. Xiao Chiye's hand slipped, and he moved to catch the falling golden vessel. Subsequently, Xiangyun fell into the arms of another. They drank until they puked, and when they finally retired for a rest, the room was a scene of total mayhem.

Under the sounds of the snores, Ling Ting remembered the earring she still held in her palm. She saw a corner of a mirror exposed in the inner room, so she stood on tiptoe and quietly held up the earring to her earlobe in the mirror.

The pearl swung among the fine strands of her hair, glowing resplendently.

So pretty.

Ling Ting was just thinking this when she suddenly heard the sound of wine being overturned, which startled her so much she hastily retracted her hand. As she peeped, she realized that the Second Young Master from Libei was still awake.

Xiao Chiye did not look at anyone. He was clearly right smack in the middle of all this dazzling opulence, and yet he also seemed distant from it all. He did not head into a room, nor did he ask for the courtesans to accompany him. His arm was still hanging over the chair as he gazed out of the opened window in the direction of Libei with a piercing expression and sober eyes.

Ling Ting retreated out of the door and wiped the sweat-stained earring clean. She kept it away, close to her body, and slept with it hidden under her clothes. Not long later, Xiangyun recalled the earring she had cast away.

She summoned Ling Ting to her. While doing her makeup in the mirror, she twisted around and suddenly smiled, "Already twelve years old now, I see."

Li Jianting vomited out all the medical decoction in her throat. The palace maids brought over clean hot water, and Fengquan rinsed the handkerchief in it to wipe down Li Jianting. The world before a semi-conscious Li Jianting was a blur. She felt the hot handkerchief wipe over her temples, the water droplets dripping down like tears.

The Heir Apparent did not wear earring, but Ling Ting did.

"Livestock..." An agonized voice escaped between Li Jianting's teeth. Livestock!

That pretty golden thread of the earring Ling Ting wore flowed among her tears. She struggled to break free, but she was dragged back again and again. She cried and shouted as her head was pressed down, the banging of which caused her forehead to bruise.

Let me go.

Ling Ting sobbed, her raised face wet with sweat and tears. She stared at the closed door, attempting to find a gleam of hope there.

"Madame..." Ling Ting shouted herself hoarse. "Spare me..."

Only the sound of a slap answered her.

Livestock!

Li Jianting's trembling fingers clenched the bedding until it creased. Her chest heaved violently. In those never-ending wails, she recognized herself for who she was.

She was livestock. From the very moment she was born, she was reduced to being nothing more than a sacrifice abandoned in the world's filthiest place, where she became trapped in this narrow and cramped room in the end. Through the crack, she realized everything she had seen in the past was but a mere illusion. Not one of those girls had escaped such a fate. They were all... livestock at the mercy of others.

Ling Ting raised her hand and dug into the crack with her broken nails. Why was she born a girl?

This body was so nauseating!

Ling Ting raked away at that crack like a madwoman and howled outside through those streaks of blood, "Madame..." she said with vehement hatred, "Kill me!"

If she survived this.

If she could live like a human being.

"I..." Ling Ting pressed against her forehead as she cried and laughed at the earring on the ground.

She would kill herself, peel away this layer of skin and flesh, and discard all that had to do with being a girl. She would fight, tear her foes apart with her fangs, and claim back what was rightfully hers!

If only she was given a chance.

"Your Highness!"

Fengquan could not help but raise his voice when he saw Li Jianting vomiting again.

The imperial physician in the outer room had already stood up. Kong Qiu's heart went cold, and he staggered a few hasty steps back. Cen Yu held him in support.

"If..." Kong Qiu could not bring himself to say it.

The hanging screen at the door lifted with a swish. Xue Xiuzhuo's breathing was still ragged. He heard the movement in the inner room and understood what Kong Qiu had left unsaid. However, he was not a physician who could perform miraculous recoveries; he was too powerless in this respect.

The atmosphere in the palace was so heavy and somber that the court officials did not even dare to breathe loudly. The palace maids went in and out carrying the medicine in their hands. Fengquan kept feeding Li Jianting medicine one bowl after another. Li Jianting mumbled to herself. Unable to

hear what she was saying, Fengquan could only kneel and lower his head close to Li Jianting's lips.

"Fail..." Li Jianting's lips quivered. "... last hurdle."

Sweat water saturated Fengquan's eyes under the dimness of the lowered bed-curtain. He covered his lips and said softly, "Your Highness is the true phoenix<sup>40</sup> of this world. As long as you can hang in there and survive through this, you will definitely be able to turn misfortunes into blessings!"

Li Jianting's urgent breathing hitched, as if she could finally hear what Fengquan was saying. The whimpers and sobs in her throat gradually subsided. The medicinal decoction was poured down her throat before she choked and coughed it out through her mouth and nose. The palace maids were in such a state of panic that they prostrated themselves on the ground and cried. Ignoring everyone else, Fengquan kept watch by the bed and fed the Heir Apparent her medicine again.



Liang Cuishan, who was still keeping watch on the prison cell, was burning with anxiety. He finished up an entire pot of tea and stood outside to wait for updates. The stars overhead shone bright and resplendent, although he was too preoccupied to admire the moonlight in the courtyard, for he had heard the storm of footsteps coming from outside the courtyard.

"What is this?!" Liang Cuishan could not help but take two steps when he saw the Eight Great Training Divisions enter.

The man at the head raised his authority token and said, "The warrant from the Ministry of Justice clearly states to arrest Pan Xiangjie, yet you people dared to abuse your public position for private interests. Our Viceroy Han is supervising the case on orders of the Empress Dowager, so release him now!"

Liang Cuishan knew this to be the critical moment. Release Han Cheng, and they would not be able to hold on to Pan Xiangjie and Pan Lin too, so he gritted his teeth, squared his shoulders, and raised his head. "I am here on the Heir Apparent and the Senior Grand Secretary's orders to investigate Han Cheng. Without a writ from the Heir Apparent and Senior Grand Secretary, I will not release him!"

The man pressed a few steps closer towards him. "Heir Apparent? The current ruler of the world is the Empress Dowager!"

Laing Cuishan looked at him in horror. Seeing the Eight Great Training Divisions bearing down on him menacingly, he stepped back. "What are you people planning to do..."

"Spies from Zhongbo have infiltrated Qudu. We have sealed the city gate." The man hung his authority token back at the side of his waist. "Naturally, we have to conduct a careful search. Search the compound!"

Everyone from the Eight Great Training Divisions came armed with their blades, so this "search" was obviously not as simple as it literally sounded. Liang Cuishan understood it in an instant. The Dancheng case was pushing the Empress Dowager into such a corner that she was driven to take desperate measures the way a cornered dog would jump over a wall; she could no longer tolerate and accommodate them.

"I am... an appointed official of the imperial court..." Liang Cuishan repeatedly retreated in the face of those sharp blades.

The three ministries' officials who were also in charge of hearing this case fell back too. They were all civil officials, so how could they hold their own against such intimidation? Their past experience at the Nanlin Hunting Grounds during the reign of Xiande returned to haunt the officials, who already had the premonition that a storm was brewing.

"Commander-in-chief Qi is still in Qudu, and yet you dare to be so lawless." Liang Cuishan, having already retreated to the entrance of the prison, bluffed. "Guards of Qidong, show yourselves now!"

The Eight Great Training Divisions men at the entrance promptly drew their blades and surveyed their surroundings with part anxiousness and part skepticism. Qi Zhuyin's guards were all battle-hardened, and there were also thousands of Qidong Garrison Troops standing guard outside the city. The Eight Great Training Divisions merely wanted to seize the opportunity while the Heir Apparent was critically ill to get a head start and kill off these court officials under the pretext of them being spies from Zhongbo. Once day broke, the Qidong Garrison Troops would be too powerless to save the situation even if they charged into the city.

Liang Cuishan took the chance to retreat into the prison and secured the chain around the door from inside. He spread his arms apart and pushed back the officials behind him, and everyone fled inward in a panic.

The Eight Great Training Divisions' blades twisted their way into the chain, pushing so hard against the door that it clattered noisily.

The man said with a malignant smile through the door, “Doggone official! Do you think you are safe just by locking the door? Light the fire!”

Pan Xiangjie, who was in the innermost part of the prison, exclaimed in a panic, “Stop! Don’t set fire! Commander Han is still in here. You can’t burn us all down!”

Liang Cuishan raised the oil lamp and continued, “Those two corrupted officials deserved to be burned to death! However, the flames will surely attract the attention of the garrison troops outside the city, and when the garrison troops fight their way in, it will be you rebels they kill!”

The man outside drew back his blade from the crack with a gloomy and uncertain expression on his face. The Empress Dowager did indeed give the order not to alert the Qidong Garrison Troops outside the city. The Heir Apparent’s life was hanging by a mere thread. He estimated the time and reckoned that since there was still no news from the palace after all this time, the Heir Apparent was likely already dead. Thus, he set his mind at ease, and his expression brightened up a little.

“Your Excellency Liang.” As he spoke, he raised a hand to motion for the squad behind to circle around. “You currently serve in the Ministry of Revenue, where you see shiny money rolling in and out all day, and yet you are still staying in a rundown courtyard. Why do this to yourself? You might as well take this opportunity to cross over to our side where the pastures are greener and your future is bright.”

Liang Cuishan’s heart pounded. Happy to stall for time, he said to the other man, “With that bit of salary I have, I’m content to live in a rundown courtyard.”

“It’s only when you have a great tree backing you that you can relax in the shade.” This man was Han Cheng’s trusted aide. Pacing, he said unhurriedly, “It’s a raging storm out there. How many more days of peace does Qudu still have left? Serve a good master as soon as you can. Only then can you continue to serve the imperial court in the future.”

“We don’t walk the same paths. The Son of Heaven is who we pledge our loyalty to. That is to say, Dazhou—the empire of the Li clan. If we were to switch to someone else, then wouldn’t that be a subversion of ethics and virtues?”<sup>41</sup> The oil lamp in Liang Cuishan’s hand was about to burn out. He continued, “I’d advise you to lay down your blade and repent. It’s not too late to see the errors of your ways now. When the Heir Apparent ascends to the throne, she will still remember this meritorious service of yours.”



The man “tsked” lightly. “In that case, you can see yourself to hell alongside the Heir Apparent.”

He had only just said that when Liang Cuishan heard the small metal window on the wall being broken open. The Eight Great Training Divisions threw a smoking bundle of straw inside. Smoke instantly filled the interior of the prison, choking the officials until they covered their mouths with their sleeves and coughed with tears in their eyes.

Pan Xiangjie was even more certain that the Empress Dowager wanted to kill him. With shackles on his hands, he held onto the bars and yelled under the sounds of coughing, “Chongshen, Chongshen, open, *coughs*, open the door!”

Han Cheng was startled awake too. He knocked over the teapot on the table and wetted his sleeves to cover his nose and mouth.

Liang Cuishan was choked to the point he could barely stand firm on his feet. The officials behind him knocked over the table and chairs. All of them stumbled into the prison, holding their breath for just a moment before stepping onto the table and chairs to hold on to the metal window in an attempt to breathe. The moment their heads popped into sight, the Eight Great Training Divisions soldiers waiting outside jabbed their blades in to stab them.

“You’re a low-level functionary from the public ditches case who later went on to be promoted,” the man said. “And Shen Zechuan was the Imperial Bodyguard who came down to work together with the Ministry of Revenue at that time, so it seems that you’re the greatest spy Zhongbo planted in Qudu. Vice Minister Pan had you investigate the case, and you colluded with Xue Yanqing to tamper with the accounts books on the sly to frame Vice Minister Pan and throw him into prison. You did so to muddy the waters in Qudu, am I right?!”

Liang Cuishan had indeed been promoted by Shen Zechuan, but he had no involvement whatsoever with Zhongbo. Regardless of his position in Juexi or Hezhou, he had gone by the book. Not once had he ever corresponded via letter with Shen Zechuan. So on hearing the other man putting it this way, he promptly rebuffed, “Slander!”

This smoke was really going to be the death of them. Pan Xiangjie had already started to smash the door, pleading as he coughed, “Chongsh-shen, open the door quick!”

It was not just Pan Xiangjie who could not stand it; even the officials beside Liang Cuishan could not stand it either. Everyone was forced into a dead-end, trapped between the devil and the deep blue sea here. If things did not take a turn for the better soon, they were going to suffocate to death.

Several wardens pulled at the chains. Unable to stop them in time, Liang Cuishan watched as the prison door opened wide and the men around them scrambled over themselves to flee their ways out. They bumped into him, causing him to stumble, but before he could shout, he heard the blood-curdling screams of the officials who had run out as the Eight Great Training Divisions men beheaded them on the spot.

“Mad...” Liang Cuishan supported himself against the wall and covered his face. “You people have gone mad!”

As he was saying so, he received a heavy blow on his back as someone behind him kicked him over to the ground.

Han Cheng spat at Liang Cuishan, covered up his nose and mouth again, and said in a muffled voice, “It’s you band of rebels who are being purged tonight!”

The branches that had begun to sprout in the courtyard rustled as the wind blew up the scattered pages of the account books on the ground and sent them flying all over. Han Cheng’s black boots broke the brush he stepped on. He kicked away the corpse at the side and patted away the dust and ashes on his robe under the stench of smoke and blood.

Liang Cuishan was hoisted out with blades pressing against his neck. His *wusha* hat<sup>42</sup> had long fallen off, and his hair was a disheveled mess. Gasping heavily, he said, “...Even if the Empress Dowager kills the Heir Apparent, this empire will not belong to her... You bunch of treacherous court officials, destroying the hundred year legacy of our Li clan’s empire...”

He was so overwhelmed with grief and sorrow that for a moment, he could not continue.

Liang Cuishan initially thought he would meet his maker today for sure, but the wind unexpectedly and suddenly brought with it a swift whistle. Then, sunlight broke through the horizon, and the golden glazed tiles of Qudu’s palace instantaneously started to glint. Qi Zhuyin spurred her horse on at full speed and with a raise of its hooves, broke open the

gates to the courtyard. As she reined in the horse, she raised her authority token.

“I’m here on the order of the Heir Apparent,” she stared down Han Cheng as her horse’s hooves landed on the ground, “to supervise the capital troops’ search of the city.”

Han Cheng did not believe her. He forced a smile and said, “The Heir Apparent’s life is in imminent peril. How would she have been able to give orders to you? I know you are anxious to save them, but you mustn’t falsify the orders of the Heir Apparent.”

Qi Zhuyin took out the deployment order from her sleeves and tossed it into Han Cheng’s arms. “The Heir Apparent’s writ. Do you recognize it?”

Han Cheng looked at the skewed writing in red ink on the document, which was clearly an order someone approved by holding onto the Heir Apparent’s hand. He fell silent for a moment, his mind parsing over the situation in Qudu. The city gate had already been sealed off, and the Eight Great Training Divisions still had 20,000 men. Qi Zhuyin had traveled light into the capital, and there were only 2,000 soldiers from the garrison troops accompanying her on the journey.

If he made a move right now, they would still have a chance of emerging victorious.

“Before I set off,” Qi Zhuyin bent over, and her *wuzhu* ornament swung smoothly in the air, “I specifically instructed my old father at home to send someone to pick me up if I didn’t return in half a month.”

Han Cheng clenched the deployment order between his fingertips and looked Qi Zhuyin in the eyes. “Commander-in-chief Qi once said the same thing at the Nanlin Hunting Grounds.”

“My head is not my own.” Qi Zhuyin smiled. “I have to be careful somehow.”

“Back then, the Empress Dowager stood her ground over the dissenting views to fulfill Commander-in-chief Qi’s wish.” Han Cheng put on a fake smile as he stuffed the deployment order into his sleeve. “How could she have thought it would end like this... Oh, well.”

Liang Cuishan fell to the ground. He picked up his *wusha* hat in his arms and bowed to Qi Zhuyin. “We have Commander-in-chief Qi’s foresight to thank for. Otherwise, it’d have been a bloodbath today!”

Qi Zhuyin said nothing as she watched Han Cheng retreat. It was only when the Eight Great Training Divisions withdrew as well that she moved

away the hand that had been pressing down on Zhujiu.

What foresight could she have? She was merely scaring Han Cheng.

Qi Zhuyin's heart sank slightly. A 20,000-strong capital troops were indeed a thorny issue. The Empress Dowager dared to act this way today only because she was sure that they would hold back from taking action lest the innocents were caught in the crossfire; she knew they would not dare to gamble on Li Jianting's life.



Li Jianting's breathing had already stabilized. All the eunuchs and maidservants in her palace had been rounded up and taken down to prison. The poisoning of the Heir Apparent was by no means a trivial matter. For all the safety precautions Xue Xiuzhuo had in place, he still did not manage to guard against the Empress Dowager. The inner palace was a place far beyond his reach.

Kong Qiu said outside the palace, "These eunuchs are all narrowed-minded and short-sighted. They would dare to claim the life of the Son of Heaven if they had suffered indignities before the master and had been instigated by others. This incident has to be rigorously investigated, and the perpetrators, severely punished once they have confessed it all."

Kong Qiu used to manage the Ministry of Justice, and he did not get along with Pan Rugui and the rest of the eunuchs. Influenced by Hai Liangyi, he abhorred the eunuchs to the core. He finished up the strong tea in his hand and said to Xue Xiuzhuo, "Since the thieves have been caught with the loots in the Dancheng's case, then once the fields have been re-surveyed, go by the books and weed out the Six Ministries. See exactly how many people are implicated in this!"

Xue Xiuzhuo's spirits lifted. He understood that Kong Qiu meant to settle the full score with the noble clans, so he nodded his head in acknowledgment.

Cen Yu, who was at the side, seemed as if he had something to say. But in the end, he did not voice it out.



The curtain had only just fallen on the battle in Qudu when Shen Zechuan, who was far away in Duanzhou, received the news.

The sun was shining bright high up in the sky today. Ding Tao and Li Xiong were sitting on the veranda having a match, throwing fruit pits that had been gnawed clean into water puddles. Fei Sheng was unable to free his

hands as he was holding on to a bowl of medicine. Qiao Tianya lifted them up directly by the back of their collars.

Ding Tao covered his head with his arms. "We'll pick them up right away!"

"I've been sitting here watching for half a day." Qiao Tianya flicked his forehead. "Aren't you already seventeen or eighteen of age, Tao-er? Why do you look to me like you still have yet to wean off milk?"

The fruit peel still in Ding Tao's mouth was so astringent that he frowned. He responded with the self-righteousness of one who was not in the wrong, "None of you would send me on assignments, so I can only sit here and munch on seeds."

"Munch on seeds." Li Xiong parroted.

Qiao Tianya gave each of them a kick and ordered them to hurry and pick up the pits. He stood under the eaves and watched. A guard at the side came closer to say a word, and he turned back to see Shen Zechuan drinking his medicine and Yao Wenyu in the midst of talking, so he nodded his head to the guard to give the go-ahead.

Not long later, Yan Heru joyfully entered. His daily attire was never of the same pattern, but they all had to be embroidered with ingots and copper coins that shone so brightly he resembled a peacock striding proudly with its head high when he passed through the courtyard.

"Greetings, Commander-in-chief Qiao. Congratulations on your promotion." Yan Heru wrapped his arms around his golden abacus before going up the steps. He craned his head to peer inside and whispered, "How has His Lordship been lately?"

Fei Sheng just happened to step out with the empty bowl in hand. He looked at Yan Heru with cool detachment and said, "Go on in and meet him and you'll know, won't you? Hurry up. His Lordship is waiting."

Yan Heru's dimples promptly materialized. As he went up the stairs, he said, "Of course I'll have to meet him. I'll miss him so much if I don't see him for a day." He smiled at Fei Sheng, squared his shoulders, and walked past Fei Sheng's side at a distance away before making his way inside with a "whoosh".

"Your Lordship!" Yan Heru called out warmly. "I've been looking forward—"

The expression in Shen Zechuan's eyes seemed to be a little frosty as he looked at Yan Heru from where he was before the window, forcing Yan

Heru to swallow back his words. Yan Heru quietly drew his feet back and asked in fright, "Greetings... Your Lordship?"

Sitting beside the table, Yao Wenyu drank his tea and did not look at him even when he heard him.

Shen Zechuan lifted his folding fan slightly and said, "Sit."

How would Yan Heru dare to sit? He was here today to apologize and admit the error of his ways. He immediately pulled up a chair and gestured ardently for Shen Zechuan to take his seat first.

It was presently midday. An unknown species of a bird perched among the branches chirped intermittently. It got a little dry when the temperature rose outside—just the time for sleep. Shen Zechuan ignored Yan Heru's ingratiating attempts and stood by the window, slightly back-lit by the light. The thin breeze brushed his cheeks, sending the agate earring swaying imperceptibly like the rippling waves under the glow of spring.

Yan Heru saw nothing beautiful about this scene; all he could see was the terrifying expression in the Prefectural Lord's eyes, so intimidating was it in his silence that Yan Heru could barely stand steady on his feet.

See, for a man like Shen Zechuan.

Yan Heru tried his best to let his mind wander and groused inwardly to himself.

Once the fear of him had taken root, one would find this beauty of his a blade. The more one looked at him, the more afraid one would be... It was absolutely baffling!

"I heard Qudu is currently investigating the fields in Dancheng." The pulps of Shen Zechuan's fingers rested against his folding fan. "Have you heard any news of it?"

Yan Heru had come prepared; he knew the Prefectural Lord was waiting for him to answer for his actions on his own. He immediately began. "Sure I do. How would I dare not know? Your Lordship, the granaries in those eight cities are all a bluff. They had me sell the grains inside to Mount Luo and Fanzhou. The bandits all love to purchase them." At this point, he paused meekly, as if clueless about the matter. "Didn't Cai Yu tell you about this?"

Of course Cai Yu had not said a thing. Cai Yu did all the manual work in Chazhou for Yan Heru, so how would he know where the grain he handled every year came from? Yan Heru did not reveal a word of this to him and merely fobbed him off by saying that they were grains from the

Hezhou's granary each time. All Cai Yu wanted was money, so he would not probe deeper into it at all.

At any rate, you can't go wrong laying the blame on the dead!

Yan Heru's eyes curved into a smile.

Even if Shen Zechuan was all-powerful, he could not bring Cai Yu back from the dead.

"This was also an oversight on my part. I forgot to notify Your Lordship of this." Yan Heru put on an act. "Punish me, Your Lordship. I didn't think this matter was of importance."

Now that he put it that way, it did indeed seem to be the case. In any case, they were doing business in the east and would not be reselling grains in the future, so the page on past matters ought to have been turned. But if one delved deeper, that would no longer make any sense. What Shen Zechuan had been forcing down in Zhongbo was the price of grains that Yan Heru had raised. Since the refugees from the eight cities had fled into Zhongbo, Shen Zechuan had to estimate the surplus stock of the eight cities before he could compete with them.

Shen Zechuan seemed to be considering something. He turned his head back to continue to look out of the window. "You shifted away and emptied out the grains in the eight cities' granaries. With the commoners' fields issue unable to be resolved by this year, the eight cities and Qudu can only requisition grains from Juexi, Hezhou, and Huaizhou. So it turns out you've been holding their lifeline in your hands all along."

To Yan Heru's ears, it sounded like Shen Zechuan was complimenting him, but he did not dare to answer rashly because Shen Zechuan was indeed a cunning one. Who knew if he was waiting for him to fall into a trap somewhere. Yan Heru responded, "I've turned over a new leaf after throwing in my lot with Your Lordship. I'm not into that business anymore, and they have long forgotten about me."

"You were able to obtain grains from Juexi in the past while hiding it from Jiang Qingshan. Unlike the situation in the eight cities, you counted on Xi Hongxuan." A bug landed on the edge of the window. Shen Zechuan watched as it dodged here and there under his folding fan and continued, "It only came to my mind recently. Xi Hongxuan was reselling public grains too. If both of you were to happen to run into each other in Juexi, how would he have been able to tolerate you?"

Xi Hongxuan was the lawful son of a noble clan. What's more, he had his money vaults as surety, so it was not unusual for him to be highly sought after in the official circles. It was too hard for Yan Heru to butt into the public grains trade in Juexi. He had to have an unconventional gambit before he would have a fighting chance. Shen Zechuan knew from reviewing that Dunzhou name list that the officials Yan Heru bribed were all crooked men who had resold public grains and copper ores with Xi Hongxuan before. With this leverage in hand, Yan Heru followed behind Xi Hongxuan, scavenging whatever he could, but it could not fill his stomach, and so he dipped his hands in the eight cities' granaries.

"It was a coincidence." Yan Heru grinned. "That fat slob Xi the Second had such a tight hold over Juexi all thanks to his own money vaults, so I could only seek an alternative way out."

The Eight Great Clans wanted to level the playing field among themselves, so naturally, they would not be willing to let Xi Hongxuan eat up this sum of windfall profits; the Xi clan was already rich enough from lining their pockets. The Yan clan of Hezhou was just the opposite. Yan Heru was young, and there was no one in his clan who served in the imperial court. It was simply a cinch for the noble clans to hold him under their thumb. But this lad was so crafty that he made a sizable fortune as an intermediary and threw the pittance of profit he did not give a hoot about to the noble clans. That way, the noble clans still thought that they had profited.

The interior of the hall fell silent after Yan Heru was done talking. Yan Heru seemed not to have noticed the murderous undercurrent of killing intent running beneath Shen Zechuan's silence as he continued with his hands behind his back. "At the end of the day, His Lordship is also happy to see it happen, yes? Xue Xiuzhuo is so vicious to want to re-survey the eight cities' crop fields. I don't even have to do any calculations to know that they will not be able to make up for the arrears in field taxes. It'll be a dog-eat-dog fight once they are pushed into the corner, and when the time comes, Your Lordship will be able to take down Qudu effortlessly."

Shen Zechuan turned slightly sideways to look at Yan Heru again. Softly, he said, "Oh, so I'm supposed to be thanking you, huh."

Yan Heru's hair stood on end. His dimples faded as he met Shen Zechuan's eyes and responded, "... I'm just saying."

"And that's the end of it?" Shen Zechuan asked.



Yan Heru almost wanted to laugh out loud, but he did not dare to. He knew it. Shen Zechuan wanted to seize the opportunity to fleece a sum of money out of him.

Damn it.

Yan Heru fumed inwardly to himself.

How much silver had Shen Zechuan successively allocated away from him after the seventh month last year? Sure, the trade route was valuable, but Yan Heru had his eyes set even farther. He knew he could clearly earn more. Leaving aside the grain business Shen Zechuan had pulled the plug on... the grains to be transported to Qidong this year were the real money drainer. Then there was the new port they were building right now in Juexi... Shen Zechuan was really going all out to rip him off!

But he, too, had a way to push back.

“I heard last year that the Second Master was looking for the Venerable Master Yideng. Coincidentally, my men picked him up in Hezhou last month. I rushed over without stopping this time precisely to inform the Second Master of this.” Yan Heru flicked the beads on his golden abacus. “Does Your Lordship want him or not?”

Shen Zechuan raised his head slightly to look at Yan Heru. Very softly, he started to chuckle.

## CHAPTER 226: MAGNANIMITY



The scorching sun blazed so hot that the Armored Cavalrymen on the military drill grounds were dripping with sweat all over.

A chill ran down everyone's spines at the twang of the Conqueror Bow being drawn. Following right after, three arrows struck the target one after another, their heavy, dull thuds reverberating through the military drill grounds. Xiao Chiye lowered his arm and reloaded an arrow.

"The new blades Master wanted have arrived." Chen Yang stood by the side, lifting the quiver for Xiao Chiye. "I have checked over the goods with Wu Ziyu this morning; they're all quality blades forged by the military craftsmen from Dajing."

Xiao Chiye raised his arm and stared at the target. The arrow struck the bullseye with a "thud".

Chen Yang handed over an arrow and waited for Xiao Chiye to empty out the quiver before passing him a towel. With the sun hanging over his head, Xiao Chiye wiped his sweat and asked, "Is he here?"

Chen Yang looked back towards the entrance of the camp. "Should be by now."

It was presently midday. Snow that had melted in the Sha'er Camp flowed into the ditches. It was so hot that waves of heat were visibly radiating off the ground. A boundless expanse of withered and yellow grassland stretched on infinitely outside the entrance of Sha'er camp. Propping himself against the camp wall, Gu Jin saw billowing waves of flying sand on the horizon.

“Open the camp gate.” A soldier stationed above shouted below.  
“General Guo is entering the campgrounds!”

Guo Weili had already led the Armored Cavalry before the camp while the gate was gradually being hoisted. He pulled the reins of his horse and removed his helmet, then ran a hand through his soaked hair as he waited for the bridge to fall over the ditch before the campground.

The falcons Guo Weili had brought over hovered before the camp, hesitant to advance ahead, while a commotion broke out in the falcon cage within the campground. Meng monopolized the very top of the watchtower, where it stared down the newly arrived falcons.

A change began to come over the atmosphere in the campground. The Imperial Army, who were initially squatting by the foot of the wall to relax in the shade, all rose to their feet to watch the camp gate open with a myriad of expressions. Gu Jin did not move as he locked eyes with Guo Weili, neither of them willing to give way.

It was common knowledge that Guo Weili and Xiao Chiye did not get along. Guo Weili's framing of Gu Jin at the Tudalong Banner was the thorn that stood between them both. In addition, he had repeatedly clashed with the Imperial Army at the Shasan Camp. Tension was stretched so taut between both mutually antagonistic parties that it was at a snapping point. Who could have expected Xiao Jiming to transfer Guo Weili over to Xiao Chiye's command with one deployment order?

Wu Ziyu came out of the tent and stood far away, not wishing to get caught in the crossfire.

Guo Weili's present commanding general was Xiao Chiye, and this meant that whether or not he would still be able to step onto the battlefield was now entirely at Xiao Chiye's discretion. Gu Jin was Xiao Chiye's guard, so it was impossible to simply turn the page on the framing incident and let bygones be bygones. No one knew if Xiao Chiye would make life difficult for Guo Weili or deploy him out of the main battle squad. No matter the decision, neither boded well for a Sha'er camp that had only just been rebuilt.

Once the bridge was fully lowered in place, Guo Weili steered his horse across and led his squad into Sha'er camp. Gu Jin walked down the steps and stood in the middle of the stairway to watch them enter.

Xiao Chiye did not turn back. He set the arrow he had retrieved onto the bowstring again and concentrated his attention on the target.

Thud!

Guo Weili heard the sound of the target being struck. He held his helmet in one arm and saw the Conqueror Bow glinting under the sunlight. After a moment, he turned and dismounted.

Chen Yang led his men over to receive him. Guo Weili handed over his token, and Chen Yang looked it over before raising his head to say to him, "The original squad can no longer be used and has to be disbanded on site. Head over to register in the tent at the east end. We will assign the members into open vacancies."

"Hasen came a few days ago," Guo Weili said. "The wall on the eastern side of Shasan Camp has completely collapsed. Find an opportunity to report it to Dajing. We need military craftsmen to repair that portion."

"Did Hasen bring along the stone catapults?" Chen Yang clamped the book under his arm. After Guo Weili nodded, he turned his head towards the Imperial Army on the other side and yelled, "Go get Meng Rui and tell him to bring the military craftsmen over." Chen Yang then looked at Guo Weili again. "I'll arrange for the military craftsmen to head down to Shasan Camp to repair the wall right away. You go on ahead and report to the Second Master."

Guo Weili pressed the tip of his tongue against his canine tooth that was missing half of it and turned around to face Xiao Chiye. Xiao Chiye paid him no attention. He seemed focused on the Conqueror Bow, almost piercing through that particular target with his shot.

The weather in Libei this year was abnormal. It was only the middle of the third month, and yet the battle zone was as hot as it was in the fourth or fifth months in previous years. Guo Weili did not take off his armor and simply stood there roasting in the scorching sun until he was perspiring profusely. His inner garment was so damp he could even wring water out of it. It stuck to his body, working hand in hand with the heatwaves to make him irascible.

Guo Weili wiped his face and suddenly shouted at the top of his voice, "Guo Weili of the Shasan Camp is here to report to Second Master!"

Xiao Chiye stayed his hand and did not fire the last arrow.

"Hasen launched a sudden assault on Shasan Camp four days ago. The right flank of the Armored Cavalry was wiped out, and the eastern side of Shasan Camp suffered heavy damage." Guo Weili stepped back. "The above are the military updates General Zuo wants me to relay."

Without even wanting Xiao Chiye's response after saying his piece, he turned around to leave.

Even if Xiao Chiye were really going to abuse his power and deliberately make things hard for Guo Weili, Guo Weili would also resign himself to his fate, blast it all. There was nothing for him to say. As long as he could—

Before Guo Weili got to finish his thought, an arrow hurtled past his ear with a "whoosh", bringing along with it a menacing sharpness that his ear could clearly sense. The arrow stabbed into a pillar a few steps away. Had Guo Weili been walking too fast earlier, this would have been his head.

Bloody hell!

Guo Weili instantly looked back with a livid expression. "If Second Master wants to kill me, just say it outright!"

Xiao Chiye's expression was scathingly frosty and grave as he held the Conqueror Bow in hand. "So you know I want to kill you too? Guo Weili, last year when Gu Jin escorted the military grains to the battlegrounds, he encountered an ambush near the Tudalong Banner. He traversed across the marshland to return to Changzhu Camp, where you shield the patrol squad under your command and indiscriminately had him bound to apply torture on him. You even stripped him of his military rank and framed him for colluding with the Biansha Cavalry—so tell me, based on all the above, should I or should I not kill you?"

Gu Jin accepted the arm guard handed to him and descended the steps.

Guo Weili had framed Gu Jin for Xiao Jiming's sake. Everyone was perfectly aware of this. But Xiao Chiye found him a reason that could be taken out into the open. By this, he meant to deal with him.

Guo Weili flung away his helmet. "That's right. I did it. Kill me if—"

Gu Jin approached him from behind and hauled Guo Weili by the back of his collar. At the same time Guo Weili looked back, Gu Jin threw a punch that knocked him to the ground.

This one punch was so violent that Guo Weili felt the remaining half of his canine tooth begin to shake. He spat out the blood froth in his mouth and cursed, "Fuck!"

Without waiting for Guo Weili to stand up, Gu Jin kicked him in the chest. Guo Weili went rolling, his entire face smeared full of yellow sand. He wiped hard at the sand on his face. Gu Jin yanked him up and elbowed him over to the ground once again.

Guo Weili felt as if his cheeks were going to split apart from the blows, but not once did he fight back as he let Gu Jin pummel him until the metallic taste of blood saturated his mouth.

“This is what you owe me.” Gu Jin waited until Guo Weili was bent over the ground, gasping heavily for breath before he removed the arm guard and tossed it at his side with a noisy clang. Recovering from his slightly ragged breathing, he continued, “And now you’ve repaid it all.”

Not only was Guo Weili stunned, but even Wu Ziyu, who was standing a distance away, was struck dumb too.

Guo Weili propped himself up with both arms, spat out all the blood in his mouth, and staggered to his feet. Chen Yang tossed his helmet to him. Guo Weili was still feeling flummoxed.

That’s it?

But he almost lashed Gu Jin to his death.

Gu Jin took a few steps back and said, “The personal grudge between you and me is written off as of today. If you have anything to say, lay it all out on the table. You’re Second Master’s soldier, and I’m Second Master’s guard. When we step out of Sha’er Camp hereafter, you and I are kin brothers who have each other’s back. The day we part ways will be the day this war ends.”

The scene everyone expected to play out did not materialize. Libei’s morale was low this year. As Xiao Chiye’s guard, Gu Jin was unwilling to let Xiao Chiye lose the hearts of Shasan Camp’s soldiers any further because of this matter. Xiao Chiye gave Gu Jin the authority to handle it as he deemed fit, and Gu Jin was willing to use such a method to resolve the issue because he was a real man who could not and would not play dirty.

Guo Weili initially thought that he would be injured if not dead today, but who knew Gu Jin would be this magnanimous? Even he felt small standing before Gu Jin. He rubbed at a bruise on his face, and despite feeling a little reluctant to concede defeat, he was also a little impressed.

He who can tolerate his shame and endure humiliations is a real man of character.

Guo Weili was usually a game drinker who drank to his heart’s content and a valiant fighter who fought like there was no tomorrow. He boasted of being a man among men, and so would not easily speak of the word “concede defeat” to another. Gu Jin suffered such great humiliation at the Tudalong Banner, and yet he could use such a method today to defuse the

awkwardness between both parties. He not only saved Guo Weili from punishment but also won over Shasan Camp's heart for Xiao Chiye. Gu Jin was representative of Xiao Chiye; his actions reflected upon the latter, and whether on a personal or professional level, Guo Weili truly had to hand it to him for de-escalating the conflict in this way.

Xiao Chiye raised an arm to let Meng perch. In the wind, he recalled the words his old man had said before he left. Gu Jin went to such lengths all to smooth the path ahead for Xiao Chiye. He was telling everyone in the battlegrounds:

Second Master was not an intolerant man who could not accommodate others.



When the sky darkened, Guo Weili sat by the campfire and roasted his field rations. His face was decorated with bruises all over. Wu Ziyu sat across from him with a rice bowl in hand. Guo Weili cast a glance at Wu Ziyu but said nothing.

"Meals are provided in the camp." Wu Ziyu snatched Guo Weili's field rations away. "Go over and ask for it. Why are you squatting here gnawing on field rations instead?"

Guo Weili covertly clenched his now empty hands and said testily, "Are you that much of a busybody? What the fuck has it got to do with you?"

"Don't tell me you're too embarrassed and awkward to do so?" Wu Ziyu stuffed two spoonfuls of rice into his mouth. "Gu Jin already said it's all water under the bridge now."

Guo Weili picked up a piece of firewood and poked the campfire.

The Imperial Army was having a whale of a time on the opposite side; this group of army ruffians was still the same as ever.

After a moment of silence, Guo Weili said, "Second Master attacked and killed the Duanzhou's Scorpions at the Chashi Sinkhole?"

"What's more, he defeated them while outnumbered." Wu Ziyu gestured with his fingers.

Guo Weili scoffed, "And the main force comprises the Imperial Army, right?"

"Bullocks. Just how many Imperial Army soldiers went?" Wu Ziyu did not share that much camaraderie with Guo Weili, and he had been rubbed the wrong way many times by Guo Weili before, so he said, "Be reasonable, will you? Which part of the Second Master doesn't cut it? Second Master

was the one who took back Shasan Camp, and the person he cut down that time was Huhelu, who was your nemesis for half a lifetime. And now, he's killed off the head Scorpion of Duanzhou. Second Master is still willing to use you after what happened with Gu Jin—this is what I call magnanimity. So cut it out with your ungrateful attitude!”

Guo Weili stabbed at the campfire until sparks spluttered all over. He lifted the smoking stick of firewood and pointed it at Wu Ziyu.

Wu Ziyu was not in the least bit afraid of Guo Weili. He used to be in the convoy squad in the past, so there was nothing he could do about being overshadowed. What's more, he had no opportunity to step onto the battlefield, and all that holding back had turned him into a good-for-nothing. But it was different now. He was the one who seized back Duanzhou. Although credits also went to Xiao Chiye's diversionary tactic in luring the enemies away from their base, he did indeed fight the battle to reclaim the city, regardless of the number of people he used.

“There have not been any victorious battles this year. You butted heads with Hasen before, and our Armored Cavalry isn't on par with the Bianjun Commandery Garrison Troops currently stationed at the Shayi Camp.” Wu Ziyu set down his chopsticks. “Can you beat the Scorpions in a fight? No, you can't. Can Zhao Hui? He can't do it either. So why not follow under Second Master's command?”

“Am I not doing just that now?” Guo Weili was a bad-tempered man who spoke in a very blunt tone. “How else do you want me to follow him? By shadowing him hot on his ass? Bloody hell, how did the Armored Cavalry dodge the iron hammers?”

“It was epic.” Wu Ziyu gave him a thumbs up. “You can bloody well go figure it out yourself.”

Guo Weili watched Wu Ziyu walk away. When Wu Ziyu was almost engulfed in the darkness of the night, Guo Weili suddenly jolted to his feet and cursed, “My rations!”

Wu Ziyu had long fled.



Xiao Chiye looked at the newly delivered blades under the candlelight. These longer and thinner blades required the Libei Armored Cavalry to adapt to them. He lined up a formation in Sha'er Camp, and repeatedly thought about what he had obtained from the Chashi Sinkhole.



On the other end, Chen Yang and Gu Jin entered the tent, and Xiao Chiye caught the aroma of milk.

“Master, there’s a letter from the Prefectural Lord delivered along with the supply wagons.” Chen Yang set the letter from Duanzhou on the small table at Xiao Chiye’s side. “The Mount Luo riding stables are beginning to take shape, and the repairs of the Zhongbo bridle paths are coming along so fast that access will be available by the end of the fourth month.”

Shen Zechuan was dumping hordes of money on it, so how could it not be fast?

At this thought, Xiao Chiye remembered Qudu. He kept the blade away in its sheath and tore open Shen Zechuan’s letter in between sips of his milk tea.

“The Venerable Master Yideng is in Hezhou...” Xiao Chiye hesitated for a moment before looking at Gu Jin. “Why is the Venerable Master Yideng in Hezhou?”

Gu Jin, who had a new robe hung over his arm, thought for a moment after hearing the question, then shook his head and answered, “Why would the Venerable Master Yideng go to Hezhou? Master, the Venerable Master left his home in Hezhou in his early years to become a monk. All these years, he has only been willing to roam around our Libei.”

“That’s really strange.” Xiao Chiye inexplicably felt displeased. “I dug to the center of the earth, and I couldn’t even find him. How could he have fallen into Yan Heru’s hands?”

Chen Yang collected the empty bowl and said, “That Yan Heru is a coward who is mortally afraid of death, and Zhongbo was in such mayhem last year, so he wanted to seek out the Venerable Master as an insurance to preserve his life...”

Chen Yang’s voice gradually trailed to a stop. Silence reigned in the tent for a long time.

Xiao Chiye was looking for the Venerable Master Yideng. There were already rumors of this spreading around since the sixth month last year. If Yan Heru already had the Venerable Master’s whereabouts a long time ago, then why did he not say a word instead of keeping it quiet until now?

“I’ll be at Sha’er Camp these few days.” Xiao Chiye folded the letter. “Gu Jin, spur your horse down south tonight to Duanzhou to keep watch over the Prefectural Lord. Come back if the Venerable Master arrives without a hitch. If not...”

Xiao Chiye's eyes were an abyss of darkness.



Yan Heru sneezed several times in a row. Clutching his handkerchief, he blew his nose and rubbed it until its tip was red. He sat on the chair with his head craned to watch Yao Wenyu writing. "This character of Mister Yuanzhuo can be likened to flying eagles and darting hares. Not only are the strokes strong and firm..."

Yan Heru launched into a series of flattery and smiled at Yao Wenyu again when he was done.

"Mister, wanna crack melon seeds? It's rather boring to be sitting here. When will His Lordship be done handling the cases? Is he this busy every day? In that case, he has to take care of his health. It'd be bad if he were to burn his body out. However, the Venerable Master Yideng is already on the way. Going by the schedule, I reckon he will more or less arrive in a few days. When the time comes, I'll get the Venerable Master to take a look at your legs. No doubt he will be able to make you stand up on your feet again."

Yao Wenyu's brushstroke skewed aside, although he showed no trace of anger on his face and merely looked at the paper regretfully.

Feeling out Yao Wenyu's expression, Yan Heru leaned over the edge of the table and said, "Do you hate Xue Yanqing for subjecting you to such a misfortune? He's really wicked, man. Why not you team up with me to set up a trap for him? We'll take advantage of the chaos to off him and hang his exposed corpse up in Qudu for several days to appease your hatred!"

With a slight frown on his face, Yao Wenyu set down the brush and said, "Such an act is too depraved."

Yan Heru revealed a look of understanding and said, "You're a scholar, and scholars are all sticklers for this, but not so for merchants like us. A fool is the one who does not avenge a vendetta. The more you double down on settling the score and making him pay for it, the more gratifying it is."

Yao Wenyu felt his words to be loaded with meaning. At the same time he rolled up his sleeves, he made to speak.

But Yan Heru raised an index finger and hushed him with a quiet "shh".

The interior of the room fell silent, making the sound of footsteps in the courtyard particularly clear. Shen Zechuan, who had been in the principal

hall, seemed to have stepped out and was now standing under the eaves listening to someone who had come to submit his report.

Qiao Tianya had originally been standing on the side, but upon hearing the report, his expression changed. He repeated, "Overturned?"

"Overturned!" The Imperial Bodyguard delivering the message said as he wiped his sweat. "Your Lordship, the horse carriage was stuck outside Fanzhou. Luo Mu did not even have the time to send men to receive the guests in it when the carriage overturned!"

Fei Sheng pressed in a step closer and asked with urgency, "Where's the Venerable Master?"

Inside the room, Yan Heru covered his mouth, and with his eyes darting around, said regretfully to Yao Wenyu, "Heaven be my witness. This has nothing to do with me at all. I've been right here in front of you and His Lordship."

His doe eyes were so harmless, but they sparkled with malice within.

"Heaven help us all now."

## CHAPTER 227: CHILD PRODIGY



“The horse carriage from Hezhou had already arrived when the men we sent to receive them reached Chazhou’s borders. They were being chased by the Hezhou *yamen* and did not dare to stop for a break on the way. The carriage overturned on the old bridle path outside the city of Chazhou and plunged into the stream.” The Imperial Bodyguard hesitated a little before continuing, “It broke to smithereens on impact... There were no survivors.”

The guards in the courtyard all fell as silent as the cicadas in winter. Only the sound of running water could be heard. The bamboo tube knocked against the rock, and newly replaced water from the pond washed over the rock’s surface, turning the remaining mosses black.

Fei Sheng’s heart sank. He instantly looked at Shen Zechuan.

Contrary to expectation, Shen Zechuan’s expression was calm. After standing under the eaves for a moment, he asked, “Why was the Hezhou *yamen* chasing after the horse carriage?”

“They exposed their whereabouts when passing through the checkpoint and lied that they were relatives of the Yan Clan,” The Imperial Bodyguard reported. “But who knew that Qudu had issued an imperial edict in recent days, and the entire Hezhou is on the hunt for Yan Heru. The moment the *yamen* heard they were relatives of the Yan clan, they thought they were absconding to flee punishment.”

It was so much of a coincidence that it seemed as if even Heaven was hampering the Venerable Master from arriving in Zhongbo.

Fei Sheng did not believe this coincidence, and neither did Qiao Tianya. The people assigned to receive the carriage were all elites. If they said the horse carriage overturned, then it really overturned and was not tampered with—at least, no tampering that was noticeable at a glance.

Interesting.

Shen Zechuan had already concluded that the Venerable Master Yideng had likely met with a mishap even before the Imperial Bodyguard answered. Otherwise, they could jolly well resolve it themselves instead of reporting it to Shen Zechuan. If Yan Heru had treated the Venerable Master as his trump card, then he had shown his card too eagerly this time, so much that Shen Zechuan found it hard to believe right from the start that he would really hand over the Venerable Master.

If that was the case, where did Yan Heru get the guts to do so?

Shen Zechuan put up his folding fan to stop Qiao Tianya from speaking. He glanced at the side hall and said, “It’s already so late now. Go and get ready.”

With a solemn expression on his face, Qiao Tianya retreated.



When Shen Zechuan lifted the hanging screen and entered, Yao Wenyu had already gone out. Yan Heru was shaking his leg as he fiddled with his golden abacus. He was not proficient at mental arithmetic, but pretty adept in doing calculations with the abacus, flicking away at the abacus beads noisily without even messing up the numbers in his mind.

“What happened to the Venerable Master Yideng?” Yan Heru flicked the last bead away. When Shen Zechuan sat down, he leaned over and said to him across the table, “I heard commotion.”

There was no one waiting in attendance inside this room, so Shen Zechuan poured himself a cup of hot tea. Amidst the willowy, spiraling steam of the scented tea, he succinctly answered, “The carriage overturned.”

Yan Heru let loose an exclamation of surprise. “How?! Is the Venerable Master alright? I’ve been reminding them to be careful, and I even specially sent my best men at home to tag along.”

Shen Zechuan did not drink the tea. Instead, he pulled over the empty porcelain saucer on the table and poured the tea in as if he was rinsing the cup. With a gentle shake of his head, he said, “They said the carriage plunged into a stream in its frantic escape from the pursuit of the Hezhou

yamen. Everyone in it was killed on the spot. What a pity. I was waiting for the Venerable Master to extend my lifespan this year.”

Yan Heru’s expression underwent a slight shift. “The Venerable Master is gone?”

Shen Zechuan pressed the scalded, empty cup between the pulps of his fingers and raised his eyes to look at Yan Heru. He repeated, “The Venerable Master is gone.”

There was originally no ripple of emotion in Yan Heru’s eyes, but with Shen Zechuan looking at him, uncertainty gradually washed over his expression. Tentatively, he pointed out, “... I’ve already handed him over.”

Shen Zechuan loosened his grip, and the empty cup fell onto the table, where it rolled several times and bumped against the edge of Yan Heru’s golden abacus. The lights in the room were all at the back, partially obstructed by the hanging bamboo blinds. Shen Zechuan did not speak for a long time. He scrutinized Yan Heru with interest, unable to find the slightest trace of concealment on this face. Just on this point alone, Yan Heru was better than Xi Hongxuan.

At this thought, Shen Zechuan smiled. He lowered his folding fan and propped it up on the tabletop. “This is an unexpected misfortune; how can I blame you for it?”

Contrarily, Yan Heru could not figure out what the Prefectural Lord was thinking when Shen Zechuan did not fly into a rage, but he had come to have some understanding of Shen Zechuan in this past six months, and he knew this was not the moment to get anxious and rush the matter. Shen Zechuan was best at psychological warfare and playing mind games. He only had to drop his guard a little, and the Prefectural Lord might do an about-face and turn hostile.

“Your Lordship is magnanimous. As expected of someone worthy of being an overlord,” Yan Heru said. “I’ve seen so-called heroes elsewhere, but none of them come close to being as astute as Your Lordship. What should we do now that the Venerable Master is of no more? I can see Mister Yuanzhuo’s illness worsening by the day. We have to get it treated, man.”

“A physician is easy to find, but not a highly-skilled one that can work miracles.” Shen Zechuan seemed to be curious. “How did you find the Venerable Master?”

“Hezhou, of course.” Yan Heru’s expression relaxed. “Your Lordship may not know it, but Hezhou was the Venerable Master’s home as a layman

before he became a monk. Ever since I found out Second Master was looking for the Venerable Master, I sent men to keep an eye on his former house. As luck would have it, the Venerable Master really went back. What a pity I didn't make it in time. Had I come a few days earlier, the Venerable Master would have been in Duanzhou by now."

"It wasn't meant to be," Shen Zechuan said. "That can't be helped."

"But I know of some elder imperial physicians in Juexi. They are all masters of their trade, and they used to treat Emperor Guangcheng in the past." Yan Heru picked up the empty cup. "Their reputations are on par with the Venerable Master, and they have also made quite a name in the thirteen cities. Many a number of high-ranking officials and noblemen are all seeking to receive medical treatments from them. If Your Lordship wishes to meet them, I can bring them along next time?"

Unexpectedly, Shen Zechuan picked up the teapot and poured tea for Yan Heru. "The medical fees cost a fortune, don't they?"

"It's not an issue at all if a few ten thousand silvers can make His Lordship happy." Seeing as the tea was about to overflow, Yan Heru raised a hand to stop him. "It makes me happy to spend money as a sign of respect to Your Lordship."

A gush of night breeze leaked its way in from somewhere, sending ripples across the surface of the tea, creasing it.

Holding this position, Yan Heru lowered his voice. "I heard Xi the Second set a trap in Qudu with the intent to surround and kill Your Lordship, but he ended up committing suicide right before Your Lordship's eyes. Tsk, tsk. His blood spilled all over the ground. How very tragic."

Shen Zechuan did not set down the teapot. With a smile, he said, "He who is unrighteous is doomed to bring about their own downfall. I can't stop him even if I wanted to."

"But as I see it," Yan Heru said. "Your Lordship is no man of honor either..." He drawled and chuckled. "I'm already on familiar terms with the Imperial Bodyguards in your residence. Your Lordship, why do you still ask them to surround me?"

The candle flames in the room flickered violently. It was quiet in the courtyard; the guards had all seemed to have disappeared.

Yan Heru retracted his hand. Unafraid, he said, "See, I have never learned martial arts, and I don't even know any fancy strokes for show. So why make a big hoo-ha if you want to kill me? Draw Yang Shan Xue out of

its sheath and slash me to get it all done and over with.” At this point, he smacked his thigh and said as though he had just remembered, “Oh, I forgot. Your Lordship can’t hold a blade now. No wonder Second Master is using every means possible to find Yideng, by hook or by crook. How anxiety-inducing it must have been for him.”

This little scumbag.

Fei Sheng, who was crouching in wait on the rooftop, spat soundlessly.

“How could I bear to kill you?” Shen Zechuan set down the teapot.

“Qidong is still counting on you to supply their military provisions after the fourth month, and the expenses for the Liuzhou port are also all borne by you. Without you, who is going to handle affairs on my behalf?”

“I didn’t think Your Lordship would bear to kill me either.” Yan Heru deftly tapped the handle of his chair with his fingers as he shook his leg. “But it can’t be helped, man. You were ripping me off so bad a while back, and now you are staking half of your assets on me. But let me say a word in all honesty, okay? I can’t bear to fall out with Your Lordship either. Where am I going to find such a good-looking and intelligent master like Your Lordship in the future? This whole saga about Yideng really came out of left field to me. If Your Lordship agrees, I’ll give Mister Yuanzhuo more than ten thousand silver as an apology. Would that work? Being happy is what matters most in life. Only then will there be meaning in living.”

Just as it seemed as if the atmosphere in this room was about to ease up, Shen Zechuan unexpectedly changed the topic. “The Venerable Master Yideng died a long time ago, am I right?”

Yan Heru looked abruptly at Shen Zechuan with a smile still on his face. “That can’t...”

“If he were still alive, how could you have been so willing to throw him to me this easily?” Shen Zechuan raised a finger to caress his folding fan and slowly said as he contemplated it over, “The eight cities’ granaries are nothing. Even if I were to take it seriously to heart, I wouldn’t kill you. But it’s hard to say when it comes to the Venerable Master.” Shen Zechuan’s expressive eyes were as dark as ink as he looked at Yan Heru. “Ce’an put in so much effort in an attempt to find the Venerable Master. If he were to really find traces of him only to find out that the Venerable Master had died in your hands, then even the heavenly emperor himself can’t save you even if he were to come and intercede on your behalf. So you have to get rid of this hot potato as soon as possible.”



Yan Heru's trip here this time was to apologize and admit the error of his ways. But what mistake did he have to apologize for? The eight cities' granaries. Qudu's investigation led it to the City of Dancheng, and Xue Yanqing emerged the victor for the time being in that game. Yan Heru had long known that he would definitely be wanted by the imperial court. Thus, he had to feign handing over the Venerable Master Yideng to give the Hezhou *yamen* an opportunity to chase after them in hot pursuit, so that the chain of events would logically lead to the overturning of the horse carriage.

This was a card Yan Heru had been reluctant to throw out, but he truly had no other better tactics to deploy. He had indeed found the Venerable Master in Hezhou and kept him prisoner in his residence since the beginning of the year. How was he to expect the Venerable Master to really die?! This leverage that could be used to threaten Shen Zechuan instantly turned into a scourge that meant certain death for Yan Heru. Once Xiao Chiye found a trail leading to the Venerable Master, Yan Heru would not even have the chance to deal with him. It was only by facing Shen Zechuan would he be able to use the lure of benefits to get a fighting chance at survival.

"You're so smart." Yan Heru had never been one to be stingy with praises. He clenched his abacus. "But since Your Lordship is willing to sit here and talk to me, that means you're willing to go easy on me and leave me a way out. I've done some calculations on the accounts earlier. The six prefectures of Zhongbo can't afford to supply military provisions to the northern and southern battlefields for an entire year. What's more, Your Lordship still wants to restore the people's livelihood in the six prefectures... I'm not the same as Xi Hongxuan. Your Lordship can't do without me every step of the way."

"You are indeed different from Xi Hongxuan, so why compare yourself to him?" Shen Zechuan found Yan Heru interesting. "You are excessively extravagant in the way you handle matters, and you are all decked out in gold and silver. Your robes have to be embroidered with copper coins and ingots, and your neck has to have a golden abacus hung around it. You can't wait to announce to the entire world that you love money, but do you really love money?"

Xi Hongxuan was also an ostentatious man given to showing off, but never to such an extreme extent. Compared to Yan Heru, Xi Hongxuan was

more like a study of a noble clan's descendant. Going by the deposits in both households' money coffers, Xi Hongxuan could even be considered a dutiful son who was frugal. But Yan Heru was just the opposite. All his business transactions required money to be invested first. Rather than say he wanted money, one might as well say he was obsessed with the process of earning money.

With a sudden windfall of profits from the Chazhou grains, the Yan Clan enjoyed a meteoric rise as well. Yan Heru expanded the small mutual trade market in Dunzhou and joined hands with the noble clans to resell public assets. He earned so much money he could not even spend them all in three lifetimes, and he never held back when it came to spending them. Throwing in with Shen Zechuan was an excellent opportunity for him to wash his hands off his former trade. His past deals were all clandestine transactions done under the table. To wash himself clean, he only had to behave himself and supply military provisions and salaries to the northern and southern battlefields, as well as pay his respects to the Prefectural Lord in person from time to time. Once the war was over and Shen Zechuan really made it to the top, no one would be able to lay a hand on him on account of his merit in supplying military grains alone. When the time came, he would metamorphose into an official who had rendered meritorious service.

But Yan Heru was not willing to.

It was precisely because of this restlessness in his bones that he could have the boldness of vision to come up with ideas like building a new port.

It wasn't that this lad was not smart. Like his reputation that preceded him, he was a child prodigy; he was too intelligent, so much so that he was an old hand at exploiting the various tricks in the book. Did he not play the Eight Great Clans for fools too? To date, they were still following behind his arse and picking up money after him. It did not matter if you were a minister in power or a man of ambitions. He was not afraid at all.

Carrying his golden abacus in his arms, Yan Heru curled up in his chair and laughed nonstop with his dimples showing. After he was done laughing, he sighed and said, "Your Lordship, why do you want to be an overlord? Come and do business, man. Then I won't be lonely anymore."

Shen Zechuan sighed too. "I wasn't born at a good time."

Yan Heru tilted his head and said innocently, "Same for me too. If I had been born twenty years earlier, there'd be no room for Xi Hongxuan now."

Fatso is so dumb that he played all the best cards of the Xi clan to ruins.” He raised his chin a little arrogantly. “I see they keep changing the emperor around. If the opportunity were to fall in my hand, I want to swap a few for fun too, man.”

Seeing that Shen Zechuan was not showing any murderous intent, Yan Heru took a sip of tea and continued after hydrating his throat. “Me, I admire Your Lordship so much that it borders on worship, but somehow we are always a little... different. You know my mother? She was a fisherwoman from Hezhou who never had enough to eat at home and still had to raise her good-for-nothing brothers for her parents. Fed up with getting beaten up and scolded, my mother jumped into the water in a fit of pique and ran away. She disguised as a man on a boat for over ten years, going where it went, before moving on to expand her initial tea business in Hezhou with her sworn brothers. Everyone had no family, and so after a discussion, they all decided to simply take on the surname Yan. How nice, right? With money in hand, you can be doing whatever your heart desires.” He laughed again. “The other households took women in as concubines, while my mother went around picking a husband. She loved all the good-looking men in Hezhou, and my father was the most handsome one. But my mother died young, and my father became Master Yan. He did business too, but he was always cowering and was afraid of everything. Heck, he did not even dare to raise his head when he saw the shopkeeper of the Xi clan.”

Yan Heru was literate, and he had also read the books of sages, but the talk of benevolence, righteousness, morals, and virtues in it was but mere rhetoric that had nothing to do with him. Didn’t all those who spoke of benevolence and righteousness die young? In the days to come later, he became more and more certain of one thing, and that was, it did not matter how long he lived, as long as he lived to his heart’s content.

He looked like he was afraid of everyone. Level a blade before him, and he would shiver, yet the businesses he conducted were all deals that those who held blades for real in their hands would not necessarily dare to do.

What kind of money was Zhongbo making? Yan Heru knew it all too well. He saw refugees strewn all over the lands when his horse carriage passed through the territory. How pitiful. But what did all of this have to do with him? He was merely having fun in these turbulent times. If someone

really starved to death, it couldn't be pinned on his head; there were many other people standing before him to take the blame.

Where was his fault in this?

Yan Heru leaned over the edge of the table and repeated the question to Shen Zechuan. "Where does my blame lie in this? The military defeat of Zhongbo has nothing to do with me, man. That was all Shen Wei's fault. As for reselling grains... Well, if I don't do it, others will do it. Rather than let other people waste all these silvers, I might as well use it to build a mutual trade market. The money has to be in circulation, see. It's most meaningless to hide them away in the coffers, as the Xi clan did in their money vault."

Shen Zechuan wanted to kill him, so he had the Venerable Master Yideng hidden away. Was he wrong to do so? It just so happened that the Venerable Master did not survive through it.

Yan Heru said, "Given the Venerable Master's lot in life, he will still die once old age catches up with him even if I don't take him in. What's more, he'd die in the middle of nowhere."

Yan Heru was too young. He was, in certain aspects, just as naïve as he looked. It wasn't that he had no one to teach him, but that the people who taught him were all not as intelligent as he was. He called Cai Yu "grandpa". Cai Yu was a bandit in Chazhou, but in his early years, he had also been a righteous man who gave generously to the old and weak, women and children in the territory. In the end, he still did those unconscionable deals against his conscience with Yan Heru.

"The people in this world all like to preach about morality and righteousness, but it's all just talk." Yan Heru jumped off the chair, still hugging his abacus. "Profits come and go. Money is meant to be spent. Spend it, and you have everything. It's true that I don't give a hoot about this, because I earn much, much more. There's no business that I can't have my fun with."

The room was a little quiet. Yan Heru found Shen Zechuan too silent. He deliberated it over and said to Shen Zechuan, "Regarding what happened to the Venerable Master Yideng... since Your Lordship wants to settle the score, then it can't be helped. I made a bad move, so naturally, I'm willing to make up for it. Just go ahead and let me know what medicinal herbs the residence needs. I'll continue to deliver Qidong's military provisions this year, so can we just turn the page on this matter?"

Shen Zechuan looked at him. "You should go back."

Yan Heru remained fixed in place for a moment. As if wanting to explain himself and make it clear to Shen Zechuan, he said again, “The port of Liuzhou is at a critical juncture. Your Lordship, I’ll come to call on you again the day after tomorrow and show you the bylaws.”

Shen Zechuan did not utter a word.

The candle flame in the room was dark and gloomy. Yan Heru unwarrantedly felt a little afraid. This was different from the fear he had felt in the past—it was cool icy fear that seeped deep into his bones. He knew the kind of man Shen Zechuan was. Shen Zechuan would not kill him, because intelligent people would not do so. What he had was confidence.

Yan Heru took a few steps back. When he reached the door, he flashed a smile at Shen Zechuan and turned around to lift the hanging screen before stepping out. A maidservant was waiting under the eaves with a lantern in hand. Yan Heru looked at that deathly white lantern, and his hair stood on end.<sup>43</sup>

The candle flame in the room went out, and it was so quiet in the courtyard that not a sound could be heard.

Yan Heru did not let the maidservant see him out. He grabbed over the lantern and walked down the walkway with increasing speed until he eventually broke into a mad run, as if something was chasing him. Gasping for breath, he ran desperately for all he was worth. At this moment, he had to admit that he was still afraid of death after all!

“I, I have... Qidong’s 800,000 silver...” Yan Heru heard the sound of feet landing on the ground behind him. He looked back in a panic and saw nothing, but still, he cried, like a child who had broken a vase and felt aggrieved at the inconsequential mistake. He yelled, “SHEN ZECHUAN —!”

Shen Zechuan sat in his chair and poured away Yan Heru’s unfinished tea, just like the cup he poured for Xi Hongxuan back then.<sup>44</sup>

The tea leaves lay on the rug, drying up in no time.

## CHAPTER 228: IN THE FUTURE



Fei Sheng was quite meticulous in dealing with the aftermath. The guards washed all traces of blood away from the hallway the fastest they could, and the entire affair was over in merely the time it took to finish a cup of tea.<sup>45</sup> When Fei Sheng lifted the hanging screen, he saw the Prefectural Lord dozing off with his eyes closed. He lowered his voice. “Master, it’s been handled.”

Shen Zechuan seemed to be semi-conscious as his half-lidded eyes stared at the candle flame that was about to burn out, giving off an unapproachable aura as he sat there. After a long while, he asked, “Where is Gu Jin?”

Fei Sheng answered, “He should have arrived at Mount Luo by tonight.”

Looking as if he was now awake, Shen Zechuan breathed out a nasal acknowledgment and said, “Tell him to go back.”

Fei Sheng half-kneeled by the entrance with his upper body partially bending over. He paused for a moment, not daring to overdo his words lest it appeared too woeful, so he said, “He has Second Master’s letter with him. Master, Mount Luo is not that far away from Duanzhou. It won’t take much time.”

Shen Zechuan was not in a good mood this night and did not respond. Fei Sheng promptly shut his mouth and wisely took his leave. In the time that it took to burn through two sticks of incense, Qiao Tianya arrived, pushing Yao Wenyu in his wheelchair.

The bamboo blinds opened and closed. Shen Zechuan said, “Why hasn’t Yuanzhuo retired for a rest? It’s already so late.”

Yao Wenyu released his grip on the book he was holding and covered himself properly with the thin blanket. “Without Yan Heru, the shops in Hezhou are going to be thrown into chaos. Since Your Lordship is here alone tonight ruminating over countermeasures to deal with this situation, why not hear out my humble opinion?”

As someone who used to excel at philosophical discourses,<sup>46</sup> Yuanzhuo’s voice was like the murmuring of spring waters—suitably soothing, and extremely pleasant to listen to.

Shen Zechuan inclined his head. “Light the lamps and prepare the tea.”

A maidservant entered the room to remove the tea-stained rug and replaced the lamps, finally brightening up the room’s interior a little. Fei Sheng made a special point of getting the maidservant to brew stronger tea so as to perk up the Prefectural Lord and his advisor.

“Kill Yan Heru, and the shops in Hezhou will be thrown into chaos for a time. Let Yan Heru live, and all the businesses under the sky will be in turmoil for a lifetime.” Shen Zechuan did not drink the tea, instead forcing himself to stay focused. “Moreover, Yan Heru was so certain that I wouldn’t take his life. If I accede to his wishes, there will be no end of trouble in the future.”

Shen Zechuan had no patience for naughty kids. A long time back when Yan Heru brought up the Venerable Master Yideng, Shen Zechuan had already decided his fate. Shen Zechuan could be made a fool of, but he could not be coerced. The truth was that Yan Heru did not understand Shen Zechuan or Xiao Chiye at all. He had not the slightest clue which one of the pair was actually the sheath of the blade.

In addition to this, Xiao Chiye was so anxious to find the Venerable Yideng because he had just been through a parting by death. Shen Zechuan only had to think about how Xiao Chiye would feel after learning of the news, and he had no intent to let Yan Heru live for another second longer.

Yao Wenyu waited for the maidservant to leave before speaking up. “Yan Heru did not bring an entourage along with him this time and left his trusted aides behind in Hezhou, all to inspire fear and misgivings in Your Lordship.”

It was as Yan Heru had said. He did not even know any fancy martial arts strokes for show. He dared to take it a step further and strut into the

inner chamber to threaten Shen Zechuan because he was confident of success. He left his trusted aides in Hezhou. If he did not make it back home as scheduled, the Yan clan would choke off the bottom end of the trade route between Huaizhou, Cizhou, and Chazhou and refuse access to the merchants of Zhongbo. This would force Shen Zechuan into having no choice but to go past Huaizhou, take a detour over to the vicinity of Dicheng, and pass through the Port of Yongyi to finally make it deep into Juexi. This route was not only a toll on time and energy; they also had to go to painstaking efforts to deal with the checkpoints along the way. Even the slightest slip-up could set them up for failure.

“All the merchants in the world are in it for profit,” Shen Zechuan said. “Zhongbo is the key transit point for both Libei and Qidong. What the Yan Clan choked off will not be just my trade route, but also that of the merchants who have already invested in it. These people have all now tasted the finer delicacies. Tell them to return to consuming edible wild herbs and vegetables, and no matter how it tastes, their unsatiated stomachs will not agree.”

Shen Zechuan was unlike the bandits Yan Heru had encountered. He had legitimate power in hand in the east, and it was something that neither Cai Yu, Lei Jingzhe, and the likes could hold a candle to. He could finalize the tariffs in both regions in the east, and he held a vice grip on the three strategic points of Luoxia pass, the mutual trade market, as well as Dengzhou. Even if Yan Heru wanted to rely solely on business to coerce him, it also depended on whether or not Shen Zechuan was willing to play along.

The Zhongbo garrison troops were in severe need of large amounts of military armament this year, and it was impossible for Shen Zechuan to produce them himself. The copper mines were all in the west. Those merchants who had been stealthily scalping copper meant for governmental use still had last-year stock in hand, and they were now all burning with anxiety and desperation to hop onto the ship that was Zhongbo. There was no need for the Prefectural Lord to go knocking on their doors. As long as His Lordship said the word, these people would be willing to make the long journey over to sell their stocks. It had to be known that Liang Cuishan and Jiang Qingshan were currently conducting strict checks on the goods passing through. If the copper for governmental use still being hidden in these merchant's warehouses were to be exposed, they would be as good as



dead. The only person in the world who could swallow up this volume of stocks in one go was Shen Zechuan.

As for the Qidong's military provisions, Shen Zechuan was not worried either.

Initially, when Shen Zechuan took over the Xi clan's shops, he had gone to quite the effort, counting on Xi Dan and Ge Qingqing. As the Xi clan was a noble clan that was particular about the bequest of its inheritance only to those of their surname, he spared the life of the Eldest Madam Xi. But this was not the case for the Yan clan, who had established themselves through the tea trade and consisted of a den of sworn brothers from the martial arts fraternity. There might have been sentimental ties during Yan Heru's mother's generation, but when it came to Yan Heru's time, it was the capable ones who ruled the roost. Without Yan Heru in the picture, the brothers at sixes and sevens beneath him would all be willing to negotiate with the Prefectural Lord. Shen Zechuan did not even need to say a word about the Qidong military provisions, and he would still have people to provide the supplies for him.

Yan Heru was important, but he was nowhere near as significant as he thought himself out to be.

"The port in Liuzhou is under the sole charge of Yan Heru," Yao Wenyu said, "the details of which we are indeed unclear about. However, there's still Xi Dan in Juexi to manage the businesses on Your Lordship's behalf. Get him to assign a few men over to take charge. There's no need to be too overly concerned. What is of utmost urgency at present is the substantial amount of silver required for the construction of the port. I'm afraid it will prove difficult to proceed if the cost is solely borne by Zhongbo."

Shen Zechuan asked in response, "What Yuanzhuo means is...?"

"Your Lordship has to return to Qudu eventually. By then, all the merchants in the world will still be Your Lordship's merchant." Yao Wenyu took a moment to catch a breather, continuing only after his cough subsided. "The business deals that will be conducted upon the completion of the port will profit everyone. So why not Your Lordship let the merchants fork out this sum of money to finance the port—let them have the honor of doing the favor and claim a stake in it at the same time? Your Lordship only needs to open up Liuzhou in the future and adjust the tariffs accordingly, and these people will be the treasury of the new dynasty, as well as the coffer of Your Lordship."

And that was not all. Yan Heru's idea of building a new port in Liuzhou was a brilliant one. The bay could accommodate a sizable number of ships, and the revival of Liuzhou and the towns in its vicinity was right on the horizon; this was a fertile field that was on the point of being reclaimed and put under the plow. As long as these merchants were not muddleheaded fools, they would be unequivocally happy to throw in with Shen Zechuan and get a share of the pie here.

Yao Wenyu could even imagine that when that day came, the malady that was the noble clan would have been eradicated, and the nation would begin its recuperation and rehabilitation. Liuzhou would become Shen Zechuan's largest port linking up the southeast, and even the first major port to connect to the rest of the world. That would be the day...

Yao Wenyu suddenly covered his mouth and started to cough violently. In his haste, he knocked over the teacup, and piping hot tea sloshed and splashed onto his thin blanket, soaking both of his legs.

Shen Zechuan had already risen to his feet. He caught the teacup and bent over to call out, "Yuanzhuo..."

Yao Wenyu did not finish his sentence. He had so many words left unspoken in his chest, but they were all choked off by his coughs. As he covered his mouth and nose, he raised a hand to signal that he was fine.

"Fei Sheng!" Shen Zechuan saw blood seeping through Yao Wenyu's sleeve and immediately barked, "Summon the physician!"

Outside, Fei Sheng acknowledged his order and turned around to shout for someone. The instant Qiao Tianya heard the crash, he felt an ill sense of foreboding. Without even waiting for Shen Zechuan to call for him, he lifted the hanging screen and entered.

## CHAPTER 229: PAN LIN



Gu Jin received the letter from Duanzhou when he was at Mount Luo. At that time, he was just about to get on his horse to continue on his way. With a complicated expression after reading the letter, he turned to look at Huo Lingyun, who was on his way to transfer horses, “Is this the letter His Lordship wrote just before you set off?”

Pulling his own horse, Huo Lingyun gave a nod of his head and unscrewed the water canteen to take a swig. “It was written just last night.”

Gu Jin kept the letter away in his bosom and took out another one to hand to Huo Lingyun. “This is from Second Master to His Lordship... What exactly did the Imperial Bodyguard who went to examine the horse carriage say?”

“That the Hezhou *yamen* was in such hot pursuit that it forced the carriage driver into a desperate corner, and as he drove along the bridle path that had fallen into disrepair, it plunged into the stream.” Huo Lingyun hung the water canteen back and carefully kept away Xiao Chiye’s letter in his bosom. “A few men went down to the stream and checked for four hours. No survivors.”

Gi Jin’s expression gradually darkened. He had come over on orders to watch over the Venerable Master Yideng on Xiao Chiye’s behalf, but he did not expect the Venerable Master to be gone just like that. Gu Jin stood rooted in place, feeling perplexed as he muttered to himself, “What is the Venerable Master doing in Hezhou?”

“Isn’t that where his home was as a layman?” Having ridden for an entire night, Huo Lingyun was now reeking of sweat all over. “Going by what Yan Heru said, the Venerable Master died of illness. If he did not expect to live long, he would have returned home to see his family.”

“The Venerable Master cut ties with the secular world when he left home to become a monk, and the ones still left in his family are all collateral relatives, not his kin brothers.” At this point, Gu Jin thought of Dajing. He continued, “Besides, the Venerable Master agreed to return to Dajing this year. If he didn’t expect to live long, he would have fulfilled his promise first.”

Huo Lingyun never had any interactions with the Venerable Master Yideng before. Seeing the sun rising, he said, “I’ve rested enough. It’s time for me to hit the road.”

Gu Jin led his horse aside a little to give way. After turning his horse around, Huo Lingyun said to Gu Jin, “When you reach the battle zone, remember to tell Second Master that Tantai Hu wants to try out his new blades too.”

Gu Jin did not answer him, but said, “Tell Laohu to write a letter to Second Master himself. I’m not returning.” He scuffed the mud off the soles of his boots, flipped onto his horse, and pointed in the other direction with his horsewhip. “I’m going to make a trip to Hezhou.”



Physicians crowded under the eaves, silent as cicadas in winter, not daring to make a racket. Seeing as this was not the place for discussion, Fei Sheng hurriedly arranged for the physicians to head over next door.

Kong Ling did not enter to disturb Yuanzhuo’s rest, but followed behind Fei Sheng and asked, “What did the physicians say?”

Fei Sheng cast a glance at the still bamboo blinds, and lifted an arm to guide Kong Ling to the side. He whispered, “They are all afraid. Their prescriptions can’t be compared to the ones our Imperial Bodyguards prescribed. None of them dare to go too heavy on the potency and dosage of the medicine.”

Kong Ling might have been widely read, but he indeed was not well-versed in the art of medicine. He remained still for a moment with a slightly stunned expression. “Then...”

Fei Sheng could not say for sure either. Before, everyone had their hopes pinned on the Venerable Master Yideng, and this one move of Yan

Heru caught all of them off guard. He avoided the newly sprouted branches and merely said, "His Lordship wrote a letter to Ge Qingqing last night to get them to search for physicians in the thirteen cities of Juexi. They will be able to arrive in Duanzhou after the sixth month."

But how were they to survive through these three months?

Fei Sheng did not dare to speak irresponsibly. He was on tenterhooks too, seeing the physicians coming and going last night. Yao Wenyu typically pushed himself to hang in there. Earlier in Cizhou, he had drained his energy to placate the scholars who had come to throw in with Shen Zechuan. At the same time, he also held discussions with Kong Ling and the rest for nights on end to settle arrangements for the six prefectures' *yamen*. Then he traveled from Cizhou to Duanzhou. In fact, his illness had never taken a turn for the better since his arrival in Duanzhou.

Kong Ling stood for a moment before saying gravely, "Wait for a moment. I'll update His Lordship. His Lordship has not slept for a night, and he's still waiting in the hall for news."

"Then you have to persuade my master too." Fei Sheng was shaken by the sight of Yao Wenyu coughing up blood. He chased a few steps after Kong Ling. "I heard yesterday that the Venerable Master is gone. Master seems to be in rather low spirits, on top of his worries of Advisor Yuanzhuo. Mind that he doesn't fall sick. There's Qiao Tianya and I to keep watch here; nothing serious will happen."

Kong Ling hurriedly answered in the affirmative and lifted the hem of his robe to leave the courtyard. When he arrived at Shen Zechuan's courtyard, he saw the Prefectural Lord standing under the eaves listening to Ding Tao.

On seeing Kong Ling, Shen Zechuan gestured to Ding Tao with a nod of his head to stop for a moment. Ever since that incident in Dunzhou, Ding Tao had been very well-behaved. He promptly shut up and retreated to the side to make way for Kong Ling.

Kong Ling deliberated over his words. "He has just fallen asleep, and they are now decocting the medicine in his courtyard. Qiao Tianya is keeping watch at the side, so there's no need for Your Lordship to be too worried."

It was peaceful and quiet in the courtyard. Shen Zechuan came down the steps and asked, "None of the physicians gave a definite answer?"

Kong Ling noted Shen Zechuan's displeased expression and followed at his side. "These physicians are all from the countryside. They have never seen a figure like Yuanzhuo, so naturally, they do not dare to fool us with common prescriptions. They are also very cautious in their speech, but they are all willing to do their best. No one dares to be sloppy."

Being the astute man he was, Shen Zechuan knew on hearing Kong Ling's words that no one among this group of physicians could treat and cure Yuanzhuo. All they dared to do was to nurse him with rest and nourishment, and try their best to avoid risks.

"Send another urgent letter to Yu Xiaozai." Shen Zechuan stopped in his tracks. "Tell him to keep an eye out for the physicians in the various prefectures when he's on his inspection rounds. Send all the ones he can find to Duanzhou. Take the physicians' fees from my private coffer. Give whatever is needed."

Kong Ling stopped too. He saw the guard on the other end come over to hand over the letter and made no further sound to disrupt Shen Zechuan from reading his letter.

Shen Zechuan turned over the letter and saw Ge Qingqing's personal seal on it. He opened it to read, after which he handed it to Kong Ling and said, "The war in Qudu is over."

Kong Ling read it at the side for a moment. "At present, Commander-in-chief Qi does not lack military provisions. What she lacks is a noble rank and title. The Empress Dowager clearly realizes this, yet she still wants to stubbornly persist in coercing her. She ends up giving Xue Yanqing a helping hand instead."

"She who rides a tiger finds it difficult to dismount—she has no other way to back down," Shen Zechuan said. "Deep down, she wants to use Qi Zhuyin, but she indeed has no more bargaining chips to take out. If they were really to come to blows, no one could beat Han Cheng's 20,000 capital troops."

What Shen Zechuan had spoken of at the beginning of "befriending a distant state while attacking one nearby"<sup>47</sup> had long taken an about-turn. Qudu's fatigue was evident. To the east where they faced Zhongbo and Libei, they only had the Eight Great Training Division to send reinforcements in an emergency, and with the issue of the commoners' fields in the City of Dancheng blown up to such proportions, they had no

military defenses to speak of. Qi Zhuyin herself was the last straw Qudu had to clutch at.

Kong Ling slightly sucked in a breath when he reached the end of the letter. "Pan Xiangjie and Pan Lin are dead."

"The Empress Dowager's current adversary is Xue Xiuzhuo." Shen Zechuan looked at the overcast firmament of heaven, which looked like it was about to rain. "So how could she escape unscathed?"



Rain was falling in Qudu; this was the beginning of the rainy season.

The Grand Secretariat wanted to hold Han Cheng accountable. Han Cheng kept to his narrative that the officials the Eight Great Training Divisions killed in the prisons were all spies from Zhongbo. Both sides launched into a war of words on the imperial court, and it was at this time news of Pan Xiangjie's death was reported.

It was then Liang Cuishan recalled no one paid Pan Xiangjie any heed when he cried for help that day while locked up in the innermost part of the prison. Everyone had been at daggers drawn with one another at that time, and Pan Xiangjie had suffocated to death from the smoke in his cell. It was only when the wardens were cleaning up the cells that his death was discovered.

"Pan Lin was the one who spilled the beans on the granaries." Xue Xiuzhuo spoke up in Mingli Hall. "He was also the one who turned over the Ministry of Revenue's current detailed accounts. This man's crime is not so heinous as to deserve death."

Cen Yu found what happened to Pan Lin regrettable; thus, he nodded. "That's not to say he should be exonerated. Justice cannot be tampered with, but can be tempered with mercy. He still has to be punished, for the law cannot be violated, but discretion can be exercised in light of the circumstances."

Kong Qiu pondered it over for a moment and looked over the confession statement presented by the Ministry of Justice. "Although Pan Lin confessed, it was only after the imperial court began pursuing the matter. He was already an accessory to crime since the day issues started cropping up in the accounts a long time back. He can be spared the death penalty, but not punishment."

In the end, the Grand Secretariat decided to dismiss Pan Lin from his position, demote his status, and exile him to Huaizhou. But as the Dancheng

case was temporarily still unresolved, Pan Lin had to remain at the relay station and wait to be summoned.

Unlike the descendants from Pan Xiangjie's generation, Pan Lin studied to be an official and saw himself as a scholar. He was a little arrogant, so he did not get along with Xue the Eldest and the others. But now, he was reduced from being the young master of a noble clan to a commoner guilty of a crime, and he had also lost his father to death. This abrupt change in his family circumstances compounded his plight in the relay station, where he was given the cold shoulder treatment and handed only cold leftovers for his meals.

Xue the Eldest once had a verbal dispute with Pan Lin during the banquet celebrating Xiao Chiye's conferment, but in the spirit of visiting, he made a special point of bringing along delicacies to see Pan Lin, hoping to bury the hatchet with the latter before they parted.

The errand-runner at the relay station led Xue the Eldest in. Seeing the narrow and cramped room, he asked the errand-runner, "Is this where Pan Chengzhi is staying? He's the legitimate young master of the Pan clan and the Vice Minister of the Ministry of Revenue... How can you people let him live here?"

The errand-runner opened the door with the key and slickly said, "Wasn't the properties of the Pan clan seized and confiscated? He's a criminal, and this is the arrangement made by the imperial court, so how would us small potatoes dare to defy?" He pushed the door open and instructed, "My lord, please don't stay for too long. We will be held accountable if the Ministry of Justice were to get wind of this!"

Xue the Eldest's skinny and wizened body hunched over as he craned his neck to look in from the side of the door. He saw Pan Lin sitting by the window. This room was extremely dark, and it was leaking rain everywhere; even the floor was soaked through.

Pan Lin's robe was damp, as were his boots. He was still wearing the same clothes as he did in prison, and he had some stubble on his face. He looked much too haggard.

Xue the Eldest strode through the door carrying the food container<sup>48</sup> in hand and called out in a soft voice, "Chengzhi... I'm here to see you."

Pan Lin turned his eyes and looked at him for a long while before he said, "Have a seat."



Xue the Eldest set the food container on the table and sat near the chair. He surveyed the surroundings. "At the very least, you are... I'll go and talk to them later. Even a change to another room is fine too."

Pan Lin's eyes reddened. He cut a forlorn sight as he sat all drenched under the rain that was leaking in.

Xue the Eldest fidgeted and shifted a little. Before things got too awkward, he took the initiative and said, "I'm not here today to... to mock you. You're going to Huaizhou, and it's so far away. Once we part... we won't see each other again in the future. I wanted to see you off..."

Pan Lin remained unmoved.

For some reason, Xue the Eldest was gripped by a feeling of sadness. He was of legitimate birth, as was Pan Lin. But how could lawful sons of legitimate birth like them end up in such a state? With tears in his eyes, he hesitated for a long time before continuing, "Chengzhi... About what happened during the Marquis' banquet last year to celebrate his conferment... I'm sorry. I heard you let Yuanzhuo go, and I... I'm very impressed. You have talents, but your family brought this all on you. The Senior Grand Secretary is willing to exempt you from the death penalty because he treasures talents. Once you arrive in Huaizhou, you'll still have the chance to show your mettle again..."

But even Xue Xiuyi himself did not believe these words of his. They were all men who depended on their clans for survival. With this big of a mess the field taxes had created, Pan Lin would be reviled by all and used as a doormat once he arrived in Huaizhou.

After a moment of silence, Pan Lin spoke up, "Pingjing."

Xue Xiuyi's courtesy name was Pingjing. Like Xue Xiuzhuo's Yanqing, they were all given by Old Master Xue. He hurriedly responded with an "ay".

"Back then, when I assumed the post as the Vice Minister of the Ministry of Revenue and had the account books in hand, I hesitated for a long time, but in the end, I did not hand them over to Secretariat Elder Hai. I played jackal to the tiger and abetted the villains, bringing untold sufferings onto the common folks of the eight cities. My death is not to be regretted, and there's nothing for me to explain to vindicate myself. The storm in Qudu has been ongoing for many years, and now that there is Xue Yanqing," Pan Lin looked at Xue Xiuyi, as if he was looking at his own self

who still had a chance many years ago, “the glory of the Eight Cities has come to an end.”

Xue the Eldest heard a deafening crash of thunderbolt that lit up Qudu for an instant. He thought Pan Lin would give him some heartfelt advice, but Pan Lin eventually said, “I think you should go.”

Xue Pingjing pushed the food container over to Pan Lin. “I brought you some food...” He fell silent too and sat here until the rain gradually grew heavier and the errand-runner outside came a few times to hurry him up.

When Xue Pingjing rose to his feet, his robe was wet too. He bowed in farewell to Pan Lin. Pan Lin stood up, straightened his clothes, and returned the bow.

Xue Pingjing did not dare to look any further and turned around to leave. In that corridor, he could not tell which way was out.

Pan Lin listened to the receding sound of footsteps and sat back down at the table. Through it all, he never touched the food container Xue Pingjing brought. He took up his brush and neatly wrote the words “Statement of Guilt”.

This letter was not for the imperial court, but for Pan Xiangjie. It was the bidding of farewell between father and son. Pan Lin wrote a very long letter, as if he did not know how to face his father. He wept when he put his brush down, and then he cleaned himself up and lay down on the tattered mat with his clothes in order.

He never opened his eyes again.

## CHAPTER 230: SPRING



Qiao Tianya leaned back into the rattan chair, biting down on a red thread between his lips as he deftly braided it with his fingers. Moonlight – thin during the hour of chou – streaked across the side of the bridge of his nose, making his lidded eyes appear rather lonely.

The seven-stringed zither rested on the table, covered with silk. It had not been touched in days.

Yao Wenyu did not make a sound when he woke up. He turned his head aside to look at Qiao Tianya.

Qiao Tianya was like the solitary, lonesome moon that had come to a standstill between the deep valley after a sudden rainstorm—limpid and faraway. That unbridled wind turned into an old dream of last night, leaving a ghost of a shadow on him. Yao Wenyu still kept that colored silk ball of that day, but he had long come to understand that he could never walk over to his side.

This was the first march of spring, one that came to nothing in its passing.

Qiao Tianya took off the red thread and finished up the tail end beautifully. He reached out for Yao Wenyu's hand and put the braided red thread on Yao Wenyu's wrist.

Hidden behind the lowered drapes, Yuanzhuo peeked through the gap at this person who was well within his reach. Soundlessly, he started to laugh, but gradually, the side of his pillow grew damp.

Qiao Tianya did not lift the hanging drapes open. They relied on merely their fingers to convey the warmth between them, as though this was the

closest they could ever get to intimacy; any closer, and it would all vanish.

Throughout it all, Yao Wenyu never spoke a word. It was as if he had never woken up at all.



When Shen Zechuan came the next day, Yao Wenyu was already up. He bent slightly towards Shen Zechuan in what could be considered a bow.

“My illness flared suddenly yesterday and held up official business.” Yao Wenyu lowered his fingers to pick up the cluttered mess of chess pieces. “So I should finish saying my piece while I’m still feeling up to it today.”

Shen Zechuan took his seat. “Your illness is only starting to show improvement. It’s fine for you to rest for half a month first before discussing it.”

“Idling while sick is still idling; I have nothing to do anyway.” Yao Wenyu contemplated it for a few moments. “The port of Liuzhou is, in fact, a matter of priority. Having this place may be likened to having a place in Juexi to talk.”

What Yao Wenyu was thinking about was different from Kong Ling and the rest. He was much more far-sighted, and in this current mutually antagonistic situation, he was more inclined to take in virtuous talents for Shen Zechuan than to kill off every single one of Dazhou officials.

“You think you lack generals, but in my view, it’s just the opposite.” Yao Wenyu put the chess pieces in place. “Valiant generals are just what the three lands in the east won’t lack most in the future. Be it Wu Ziyu or Tantai Hu; they are all capable of assuming sole responsibility and taking complete charge. Your Lordship has nothing to worry about over the territories in the east with them stationed at the frontiers once the war subsides. What Your Lordship lacks are capable ministers and officials. Although Chengfeng is decent, he isn’t willing to leave Zhongbo, and while Zhou Gui is loyal, he isn’t up to taking on great responsibilities. On the other hand, Juexi has gone through several years without falling into the noble clans’ hands, and that is precisely because this place has a capable minister—Jiang Qingshan.”

“The real reason Xue Yanqing could stir up a storm in the imperial court is because of the people from the practical doers’ faction who support him; the Heir Apparent is only an opportunity. These people are not of high ranks, but they are the key that decides whether the reforms can be pushed

through. They work for the good of the people in Juexi, wanting to revitalize the Li clan's empire and bring about the resurgence during the reign of Yongyi again. They are scholars with far more boldness of vision than the officials in the capital, and they are also the last worthy officials of Dazhou."

Being enthroned as the supreme ruler was no easy feat. A change of dynasty and government meant that innumerable scholars had to sever their dreams of the past. The state of affairs in the imperial court had already degenerated to such an extent, but Hai Liangyi and Xue Xiuzhuo had never once harbored the idea of replacing the Li clan. This was because doing so was comparable to the crime of patricide. Under the principles of social order constituting the cardinal relationships between the ruler and his subjects and the father and his sons,<sup>49</sup> the Li clan was and had been the Son of Heaven for centuries. This not only represented the need to shout "long live your majesty" as per the code of ethics, but also symbolized generations of people following a legitimate lineage of descendants.

If Shen Zechuan set foot into Qudu again, then what the "Prefectural Lord" would be defeating was the legitimate Son of Heaven that towered tall and majestic over them all. He had to obtain the Heaven-bestowed right to kill the sovereign before he could strip himself of the "treacherous traitor" label. Yet, this was far from enough. He must employ a suitable way to make the surviving officials of the Li clan put themselves at his disposal willingly. Otherwise, even if he won over the empire, he would not be able to achieve the flourishing era of prosperity that Qi Huilian had once spoken of.

"Xue Yanqing's cleaning up of the eight cities' field taxes was originally a good thing, but he was too hasty in going about it. A significant portion of Qudu's taxes now is all tied up in the eight cities' field taxes. Now that he has decisively removed the Pan clan of Dancheng, he has two routes to take. The first one is to push on and continue to investigate the remaining seven cities and resurvey the lands as fast as he can, and the second one is to slow down and give the remaining seven cities a chance to pay the overdue taxes. In the former option, the fields have to be returned to the commoners, but the commoners of the eight cities have long left their homes to make the long journey to Zhongbo. If he re-records the households in the census registers, he will hold up the plowing this year. When that happens, the issue of keeping the common folk fed in three lands

of Dazhou after autumn will fall to Juexi and Hezhou to resolve. In the latter option, the field tax deficits will be apportioned between the eight cities, and the eight cities will naturally continue to split the amount between the commoners. A cruel regime that oppresses and exploits its people causes more distress and pangs than tigers with their ferocious claws and fangs. So it's really no different from before."

"By the time Juexi gets tired of the requisitions, the commoners of the thirteen cities would have barely enough to fill their stomachs. If Your Lordship uses the port of Liuzhou as an opportunity to build an east-west waterway and link up to the north-south bridle path, Hezhou and Zhongbo would be able to alleviate Juexi's burden."

By the time Yao Wenyu spoke to this point, the area under the eaves was already bathed in sunlight. Holding a chess piece between his fingers, he took a breather before continuing, "Your Lordship presumably has a plan in mind long before you killed and removed Yan Heru from the equation."

"Hezhou is close to Qidong." Shen Zechuan set down a chess piece after Yao Wenyu. "If I can't get my hands on this land, I won't be able to sleep at night."

All Yan Heru thought about was business, but Shen Zechuan had far more than business on his mind. Qi Zhuyin joined forces with Xue Xiuzhuo in the Dancheng case, which meant that the Heir Apparent would be bestowing a noble title upon her. In that case, she would be a marquis of Dazhou in the future. The Garrison Troops of the Five Commanderies of Qidong were right to the south of Zhongbo. Shen Zechuan must choke off the key supply route of Qidong to the west, of which Hezhou was a necessary route they had to pass through.

Shen Zechuan was blunt with his words. If Qi Zhuyin were to go all out to protect the Li clan, then Dengzhou of Zhongbo would be Shen Zechuan's weakest link. He had to seize control of Hezhou, which was even more important to Qidong. Only then would he be able to sit at the same table and on equal footing with Qi Zhuyin at all times.

"Qi Shiyu is already advanced in age, and Qi Zhuyin is a far more suitable candidate than anyone else to be the Commander-in-chief." Shen Zechuan continued. "Lu Guangbai remains in Libei because he no longer wants to be a general of Dazhou, and Qi Zhuyin has to mend the gap left in Qidong by the Bianjun Commandery herself. Qudu wants her to become a

soldier who protects the emperor, but even so, she has to be able to run over.”

Perhaps Qi Zhuyin could really run her way over. That was why Shen Zechuan choked off the roads too.

“Commander-in-chief Qi has been in a predicament over money in recent years. Her willingness to mobilize troops against the Qingshu Tribe was because she was assessing the situation too.” Yao Wenyu started to cough softly.

Shen Zechuan thus stopped bringing up official affairs and merely said, “Qiao Tianya now has to govern the Imperial Cavalry, and he’s at the military drill grounds during the day, so negligence on his part is inevitable. I’ll write a letter to *shifu* and ask him to come over to Duanzhou to take care of you.”

Yao Wenyu did not refuse. He wiped his mouth with his handkerchief and said, “It’s so far away. I shall have to impose on *shifu* to make the trip over.”

Shen Zechuan saw the red thread on Yuanzhuo’s wrist, which was concealed by his sleeve when he raised his hand. He did not ask about it and saw Hunu, which had just woken up, brushing against the door as it made its way over.

“Qudu is your old home,” Shen Zechuan said. “I heard Xi Hongxuan say before that you always return to the capital in spring every year. Next year... or perhaps a few years later, you will be able to take a good look at the springtime scenery.”

Yao Wenyu knew Shen Zechuan was comforting him. He flashed a slight smile and did not answer him, but said, “Since the case of Dancheng is coming to a close, where is Pan Lin going to be exiled to?”

Shen Zechuan lowered his folding fan to block Hunu. “Kong Qiu meant to exile him to Huaizhou, but he went on a hunger strike at the Qudu relay station and starved himself to death.”

Yao Wenyu sat in silence for a long time.

Pan Lin achieved success young, and his career as an official was smooth-sailing. The remarks he made to Xue Xiuyi back then during the feast to celebrate Xiao Chiye’s conferment turned out to be prophetic after all, and he ended up dying of starvation. Encumbered by his lineage, he was now finally free.

Qudu was his former home.

Yao Wenyu shifted his eyes to look at the courtyard.  
But there were no longer any sights worth going back for.



## CHAPTER 231: FEIGNS



At the time Pan Lin died, Li Jianting pulled through. The maids and eunuchs serving in her palace barely had time to weep for joy when they were taken into prison. The Heir Apparent was poisoned, so the Condiment Service<sup>50</sup> was promptly sealed off, while all the eunuchs on duty were imprisoned. Fuman, given his experience during the reign of Emperor Tianchen, took charge of this case and put them through heavy torture.

“Zuzong!” The junior eunuch could not stand the severe beating and cried out as he sprawled over the bench. “Please have mercy!”

Dressed in a python-patterned *yisan* robe<sup>51</sup> and *yandun* hat<sup>52</sup>, Fuman stood with his hands on his back while he scrutinized the calligraphy on the wall.

The eunuchs with the flogging paddles were all leftover members from the Eastern Depot. Skilled in the art of torture, they flogged the palace eunuch until he almost fainted.

“Please spare my life...” This junior eunuch choked with sobs.

Fuman turned his head back. “The Heir Apparent was poisoned while you people were serving her. If you want to live, you have to give me a clear account of what happened.”

These inner palace eunuchs entered the palace after Emperor Tianchen. To date, they still did not know what the Heir Apparent was poisoned with, so there was nothing at all they could account for.

Fuman patiently said, “Think about what the Heir Apparent ate or wore that day. There are so many people in the Condiment Service, so perhaps a

couple with ulterior motives sneaked their way in. All of you have close contacts with them, so why can't you think of any now?"

The eunuch caught the hint in his words, but he dared not be so presumptuous as to speculate, so he hemmed and hawed without saying a word still.

Fuman flung his sleeve, as if exasperated with the eunuch for failing to come through, and had the old eunuch with the paddle continue with his flogging. The beating was so brutal that blood saturated the eunuch's mouth. Digging his fingers into the bench, he whimpered and sobbed, "Stop, stop it! I'll tell you!"

Fuman paid no attention to him.

The eunuch gulped down the blood froth. "That Condiment Service... and that Garden Service<sup>53</sup>... all had new faces I don't recognize..."

Only then did Fuman turn to the side and coax him softly, "You have contacts with them?"

The eunuch shook his head hard, not daring to answer this question. He raised his eyes tentatively to get a feel of Fuman's expression and sobbed in a small voice, "I don't recognize them."

"If you don't recognize them, how do you know which services they belong to?" Fuman intentionally guided him. "Someone must have told you, and that was how you knew."

The eunuch answered, "The one who, who stands guard at the door to the palace..."

"Tch," Fuman bent down. "Can someone who stands guard at the door get close to the Heir Apparent? Whoever serves the Heir Apparent is usually the one who knows it best."

The eunuch did not dare to breathe heavily as he followed along and answered, "Fengquan is usually the one serving her..."

Fuman clapped his hands lightly at him and said, "There you go. Easy, isn't it."



With the case in Fuman's hands, the chances of identifying the real culprit were zero. He had planted his men in Li Jianting's palace at Han Cheng's instigation. The poison had nothing to do with the Condiments Service. The problem lay in the chopsticks Li Jianting used for her meal that day. Chaos had broken out in the palace when the Heir Apparent

collapsed, and Fuman had long gotten someone to steal and replace the original chopsticks to clean up the traces.

Fuman stepped out of the hall, but before he could walk out of the courtyard, he saw several sedan-bearers standing outside under the Chinese scholar tree waiting for him. The supervising officials from the Ministry of Justice had just left, so Fuman was on guard as he lifted the hem of his robe and strode out with a smiling face. “Who is this distinguished person looking for me? You just need to send me a message; there’s no need to go to the extent of coming over to invite me! Coincidentally, I have a case to attend to now and can’t get away...”

The curtain opened, and Han Cheng sneered. “It has been a few days since I last saw you, and you son of a bitch has started to put on airs in imitation of your ‘grandfather’. What? I’m not worthy enough to invite you now?!”

This motherfucker again!

Fuman obediently bent at the waist. “This humble slave thought it was those old fogeys from the Grand Secretariat who keep sticking to me like glue<sup>54</sup> while I’m investigating the case. I was just feeling vexed over it and never expected it to be you. Look at what you are saying. When this humble slave sees you, it’s like, what do you call it? Oh, a baby sparrow seeking refuge in the woods!”<sup>55</sup>

He played dumb, knowing Han Cheng was a sucker for this.

Sure enough, Han Cheng’s expression brightened a little. Not dwelling any further on the matter, he threw down the curtain and commanded, “Follow.”

For the entire journey, Fuman cursed as he walked, keeping it all pent up in his heart. When he arrived at the place and saw that it was Han Cheng’s private residence, he knew the latter was certain to ask him about the Heir Apparent’s case. He stepped through the door, but before he could start toadying up to Han Cheng, he saw the gleaming blades inside. He immediately forgot what he was going to say and fell to his knees with a “thud”.

“Look at how cowardly you are,” Han Cheng lifted the teapot to pour tea without telling Fuman to get up, “and you still want to imitate Pan Rugui? Are you even worthy?!”

“No, definitely not worthy!” Bracing himself against the ground, Fuman forced an apologetic smile. “This humble slave is just a lowly slave.

How could I be compared to the *lao-zuzong*? I wouldn't dare to harbor such intent."

Han Cheng set the teapot back. "I told you to poison Li Jianting. What poison did you give her?"

Fuman's back was drenched in a cold sweat. He must not hesitate, so he recited what he had rehearsed to himself countless of times, "This slave did as Commander Han said and gave her 'deathchase'."

"That's strange." Han Cheng said mockingly. "This drug can poison several strong men to death, yet it can't kill one woman?"

Fuman felt the chill at the back of his neck. Those were real blades, and they were already pressing in close to him. The muscles on his face twitched, and he suddenly lifted a hand to slap himself. With a change in expression, he cried, "You're hurting my feelings with those words! How would I dare to plot with outsiders to harm my own 'father'? Besides, Xue Yanqing, Kong Qiu, and the few of them detest eunuchs and order me around like I'm livestock. This slave really did put in 'deathchase'. I still have the chopsticks. I wouldn't dare to be sloppy."

Midway through crying, Fuman wiped his tears.

"I'm puzzled too. It's really mind-boggling. That was 'deathchase', but the Heir Apparent unexpectedly got better after puking a few times. If that's not absurd, I don't know what is!"

Han Cheng was livid. Li Jianting's fate – whether she lived or died – determined the direction in which the situation would develop. He even brought out the Eight Great Training Divisions on the gamble that the Heir Apparent would die, but who would have expected Li Jianting to be fine. The fact that the Dancheng case still had yet to reach a conclusion meant that they intended to continue with the investigation. Without the Pan clan, the next one to be targeted would be the Marquis of Helian's Fei clan. Everyone from the seven cities was at risk.

"Have you mentioned the poisoning to anyone else?"

Fuman hurriedly answered, "How would this slave dare?!"

"You'd better not!" Han Cheng suddenly flung away the teacup in his hand. "You're the one who botched this, so you have to clean it up now! All those people in her palace can't be kept alive. Take this opportunity to kill them all."

If Li Jianting was poisoned with "deathchase", she would die for certain. So either someone had swapped out the poison midway, or Fuman

did not poison her with “deathchase” at all. No matter what, those people serving her in her bedchamber could not be kept around any longer. It was very possible some other people had slipped their way in.

The eunuchs were a crafty lot. These despicable castrated bunches were best at trimming their sails and going where the winds blew. Fuman was no one decent either. Now that the noble clans had taken a hit and suffered damage, there was no guarantee that Fuman would not get any funny ideas. Keeping him around any further would be trouble.

Han Cheng was suspicious by nature, and he was now like a tightly wound bird startled by the mere twang of a bow. He got up and looked at Fuman as he pressed in a few steps closer towards the latter, his killing intent already ignited.

Seeing as he was about to be decapitated soon, Fuman shouted out in desperation. “The Senior Grand Secretary—ordered me to investigate the case, so there’s still a chance to turn things around! The commander need not worry. I’ll surely clean it up. Those supervising officials from the Ministry of Justice are all my acquaintances. If anything goes awry again, I myself will bring my own head over to see you!”

Han Cheng could not kill him for real at this point in time, either. Seeing his ghastly pale face and how he looked so useless, he said, “Mess this up again, and the Empress Dowager will not keep you alive even if I want to. You want to be the top eunuch, but you also need to have the capability to!”

Fuman repeatedly concurred, his heart still in his mouth.



While it was overcast and rainy for days on end in Qudu, it was still sunny in the battle zone. The commanding generals of the three camps took turns rotating around the camps. Today, it was Xiao Chiye’s turn to head over to the Shayi Camp. Lu Guangbai stepped out of the military tent to receive him, and Xiao Chiye removed his helmet to greet him.

Lu Guangbai jumped to catch Xiao Chiye’s helmet and in doing so, saw the dent on it. “Hasen is much better than us at playing with the catapults.”

Xiao Chiye handed the reins to Chen Yang and remained standing in place to remove his arm guard. “The watchtower of Sha’er Camp collapsed after being smashed yesterday. Send a verbal message to *shifu* post-haste and have him get the military craftsmen to rush over to Sha’er Camp.”

“Jiming dispatched a new batch of military craftsmen this way. If you can’t wait, I’ll send the military craftsmen from the Bianbo Camp over to fill in.” Lu Guangbai returned the helmet to Chen Yang. “The wall of Shasan Camp was repaired, only to collapse again. Qianqiu-*shifu* can’t spare you any extra manpower on his end.”

Xiao Chiye had gotten a lot more tanned during this period of time. He watched Meng hovering over the camp. “The Biansha Cavalry numbers are increasing.”

After the Duanzhou Scorpions were encircled and annihilated, Hasen started to intensify his attacks on them. It was most glaringly obvious in the third month. Xiao Chiye realized Hasen was frenetically assembling men in the east, and the Biansha Cavalry numbers were skyrocketing. Last year, they could only launch an attack with their main forces while relying on their remaining soldiers to carry out sneak attacks, but now, Hasen was able to split up his forces to attack both camps at the same time.

“Amu’er put Hasen in the north, but did not head down south himself,” Lu Guangbai said. “That’s because he wanted to expand his territory deep into the desert and get the remaining six tribes to submit and pledge allegiance to him as soon as possible. It’s likely due to Amu’er’s newly-acquired helping hands that gives Hasen the cavalry to launch simultaneous attacks now.”

Xiao Chiye wiped the dust on his cheeks with a pensive expression.

Lu Guangbai continued, “But Hasen’s fighting of the battles has been very unstable of late.”

Xiao Chiye was the one who killed Achi. Hasen thought that Xiao Chiye would lead the new Armored Cavalry out into the world when he returned to the battle zone, but Xiao Chiye did not do so. That meant Hasen had no way of coming face to face with the new Armored Cavalry; it was as if they had swapped places. What was unknown to him was danger that could not be forestalled. Xiao Chiye was taking away Hasen’s initiative, one that would allow him to call the shots.

“The battles Hasen fought in the northern and southern battlefields are all battles that he was assured of victory.” Xiao Chiye turned his thumb ring. “Part of his victories stemmed from his familiarity with the commanding generals.”

That particular battle Qi Zhuyin fought in the battle zone was proof of this. Xiao Jiming realized this, and that was why he disrupted the order of

the battle zone. It was when Hasen met with the Libei Armored Cavalry again that he realized what Xiao Jiming was doing.

Xiao Jiming was the kind of commander-in-chief Hasen disliked the most, because Xiao Jiming would not get flustered if he could not keep up with the pace. He always seemed to be able to maintain his composure. This was both Xiao Jiming's character and Xiao Jiming's style. He understood he could not beat Hasen, so he never thought of pitting himself against Hasen on the battlefield to emerge victorious—or not. What he had been doing these few months was to relax Libei's rhythm. The Armored Cavalry was in the process of recovery. Even if they could not win, they would not be led by the nose by Hasen as they had before.

"Hasen will get anxious too when he's standing so close to the goal," Xiao Chiye said in a deep, quiet voice. "After all, he also just wants to win."

Xiao Jiming wanted to leave the opportunity to Xiao Chiye.

Lu Guangbai looked at Xiao Chiye. "Amu'er has invested all his efforts in him. His win has a decisive bearing on Amu'er's dignity in the face of the Twelve Tribes. If he can't win this battle, he cannot become the future great ruler of the Twelve Tribes."

Xiao Chiye did not care why Hasen wanted to win at all; he only wanted Hasen's head.

As if understanding this point, Lu Guangbai did not continue, but said, "The source of Hasen's anxiety and apprehension comes from the south too. With Commander-in-chief Qi fighting the Qingshu Tribe, they have to face pressure from both sides."

But was Hasen really restless with anxiety over the north-south battlefield?

Xiao Chiye felt that there was another significance to Hasen's onslaughts of attack during this period of time. Perhaps Hasen wanted to use such a diversionary tactic to hide his target. Rather than fight wars of attrition with Libei and Qidong again, Zhongbo was actually the best place to attack.

Hasen was a master at feigns.

Like a wolf creeping in the darkness, Xiao Chiye stared fixedly at every move Hasen made. His understanding of Hasen had already far exceeded Hasen's understanding of him.





## CHAPTER 232: SPRING FRESHET



“If I were Hasen,” Xiao Chiye squatted down and drew a simple map on the sand, “I’d attack Duanzhou.”

Shen Zechuan severed Amu’er’s supply route in Duanzhou, and Hasen’s military provision could only be apportioned to the six tribes in the desert. Amu’er allowed Hasen to marry Duo’erlan at the beginning of this year precisely because he needed the Hulu Tribe to supply food to the frontlines. Ever since the sixth month last year, the Biansha Cavalry never got the opportunity to cross into Dazhou to loot. This was the source of Hasen’s anxiety.

“In that case, you have to think about it carefully.” Lu Guangbai squatted down too and picked up a stone to press down on Xiao Chiye’s “Duanzhou”. “As long as you launch a surprise attack on Duanzhou, Shen Zechuan will mobilize Tantai Hu, who is on standby behind him to engage in a fierce battle with you in Duanzhou. Then Shen Zechuan will issue a deployment order to the Bianjun Commandery and Shasan Camp, and the reinforcements from both sides will trap you in Duanzhou, never to return.”

“I can run.” Xiao Chiye’s index finger circled around the stone. “I have the fastest cavalry. The goal is not to seize back Duanzhou but to loot Duanzhou’s granaries. I can even mount a surprise attack on the newly-built riding stables in Mount Luo on the way back. The reinforcements on both sides won’t be able to catch up.”

“You forgot Commander-in-chief Qi,” Lu Guangbai said. “When you leave the battle zone, Commander-in-chief Qi will move upstream and take

a detour to Gedale to kick your ass.”

“That’s just what I want.” Xiao Chiye moved the stone to the Bianjun Commandery. “If the Commander-in-chief Qi takes a detour to Gedale, then I’ll give Qingshu Tribe’s territory to the Youxiong Tribe and let the Youxiong Tribe cut off Commander-in-chief Qi’s retreat route to trap her in Gedale before crushing her in one fell swoop.”

Lu Guangbai blocked the stone with the back of his hand and said, “Since Commander-in-chief Qi dares to penetrate deep into the enemy’s territory with an isolated force, she must have reinforcements. She can transfer the Cangjun Commandery Garrison Troops to the Bianjun Commandery and get the Cangjun Commandery Garrison Troops to fight back when the Youxiong Tribe mobilizes their troops to obstruct their path. Besides, the Youxiong Tribe has yet to pledge allegiance to Amu’er. They might not necessarily be willing to do it if you ask them to step out as shields to block the spears.”

“They definitely will,” Xiao Chiye said. “Youxiong Tribe’s initial refusal to submit to Amu’er was because they had the Qingshu Tribe to serve as a wall before them to obstruct the Qidong Garrison Troops. But the Qingshu Tribe has now been wiped out by Commander-in-chief Qi, and the Youxiong Tribe can’t hold their own against Commander-in-chief Qi’s next round of attacks. It’s only by pledging allegiance that they can get reinforcements from Amu’er.”

Lu Guangbai hesitated for a moment and put the stone back at Duanzhou. “Okay, if Commander-in-chief Qi doesn’t move, then I’ll guard Mount Luo beforehand.”

“I will destroy the bridle path leading from Mount Luo to Duanzhou during the surprise attack,” Xiao Chiye said. “Without the path, you will have to run in circles on Mount Luo and watch as my cavalry leaves.”

Lu Guangbai pushed the stone and said, “You have to cross the river on your return journey. I will lie in ambush at the banks of the Chashi River.”

“Even if you whittle down my military strength at the banks of the Chashi River,” Xiao Chiye raised his eyes, “my purpose has already been achieved.”

Lu Guangbai touched the bridge of his nose with the pulp of his finger and said with a bitter laugh, “...How ruthless.”

The Gobi desert and the wilderness lay along the banks of the Chashi River, and the ambushes Lu Guangbai excelled in relied on the use of the

terrains. He had no advantage at the Chashi River. The “war chariot” battle formation could withstand the attacks of the cavalry, but it could not pursue an advancing cavalry. Lu Guangbai would not be able to catch up to them.

If Xiao Chiye’s speculation was right, then Hasen would not only be able to obtain supplies in this round of surprise attacks, but also set up a new obstruction for Qi Zhuyin in the south, thereby relieving him of the pressure in the north.

Xiao Chiye stretched out his five fingers and covered the map with it. “Hasen still has eyes in Qudu. He can see the whole picture.”

Twilight closed in on all sides, and smoke from the kitchen rose in the campground. Lu Guangbai sat on the ground and held that piece of stone in his palm as he watched a hue of orange wash over the camp walls. Under what remained of the sunset glow, he said to Xiao Chiye, “You can’t leave.”

With Hasen launching an onslaught of violent attacks at the battle zone, they were all tied down here with no spare time to be in two places attending to different matters at once.

“That means he’s starting to run out of food.” Xiao Chiye stared at the map between his fingers. “If he can’t contain us, he will lose a portion of his elites in Duanzhou.”

Hasen was suppressing the main forces of the three battle zone camps. Only by wearing down the three camps’ main forces to the point of exhaustion would he be able to let his elite forces mount a surprise attack on Duanzhou. By then, Libei would be too exhausted to respond to the attack, and the threat posed by the reinforcements would fall. That would be the most optimal opportunity for him.

Lu Guangbai tossed the stone to Xiao Chiye and said, “This is an opportunity we can manipulate.”

This bout of surprise attack was no longer terrifying as long as they could see through Hasen’s motives. Hasen could make a feign, but so could the Libei Armored Cavalry. Fighting wars of attrition was detrimental to both parties, but Xiao Chiye was more confident of success—he had Shen Zechuan’s supply of military provisions.

To date, the only person who could really threaten Amu’er in the war was Shen Zechuan. His supply route was just like a cobweb that held the three territories in the east secured and unassailable.

“Drag it out till the end of the sixth month.” Xiao Chiye caught the stone and placed it on the messily drawn map. “I’ll lead the elites of Sha’er Camp to Bianjun Commandery. You and *shifu* can put on a show of fatigue under Hasen’s attacks. The weakening of his attacks will be the precursor to a sudden assault on Duanzhou, at which time I’ll be waiting for him in Duanzhou.”

Three months was just right. When Hasen dispatched his troops to launch a surprise attack, it would be the season when the granaries were in abundance. He would not miss this timing.

The sky had already darkened by the time both men spoke to this point. Xiao Chiye stood up and whistled at the sky, and Meng flapped its wings and circled before landing back on Xiao Chiye’s shoulder a short while later. Lu Guangbai patted the dust off his robe and walked side by side with Xiao Chiye towards the military tent.

Chen Yang, who was waiting at the entrance, lifted the flap of the tent for them. As Xiao Chiye entered the tent, he whispered, “Master, the letters from His Lordship and Gu Jin have both arrived.”

Xiao Chiye took the letters and stood at the entrance to read them.

Lu Guangbai drank half a bowl of milk tea, and when he heard no movement from Xiao Chiye after a while, he looked back to see Xiao Chiye with a gloomy expression.



A few days later, Fuman arrived at the courtyard of the Grand Secretariat office as summoned. Before entering, he changed out of his damp covering and bundled up his robe to stride in and pay his obeisances to Kong Qiu.

Kong Qiu sat by the window and merely uttered a sound of acknowledgment as he gestured for Fuman to get up. Fuman straightened up in a restrained manner and stood waiting in attendance at the far end. His eyes swept around the black boots at the sides, more or less recognizing the court officials present.

“...The spring plowing has just ended. Huaizhou bought a batch of grains from Baimazhou, and Jiang Qingshan sold it to him based on the conversion of grain price in Juexi.” Liang Cuishan finished his report.

A few of Kong Qiu’s hairs had turned white during this period of time, although they were not obvious to the eyes concealed under his *wusha* hat. He said, “Qidong is fighting a war now, so Qidong naturally has priority for

the military funds. The Eight Great Training Divisions' military expenses can be reduced as needed."

*Here it comes*, Fuman thought. If the Grand Secretariat wanted to continue investigating the accounts as they wanted, then they had to first pare down Han Cheng's power.

"That's what the Ministry of War intends." The Minister of War, Chen Zhen, tapped his smoking pipe twice. "But Han Cheng refuses. He wants the writ from the Grand Secretariat."

"What he wants is approval, doesn't he?" Cen Yu said. "The Dancheng case has yet to conclude, and to avoid casting aspersions on herself, the Empress Dowager can't approve it. Since the Grand Secretariat has brought it up with him, it means that everyone is in agreement with it. But look at him, refusing to do it so brazenly."

The Empress Dowager could barely fend for herself, so where would she still have her earlier authority to make approvals? The Hua clan of Dicheng was on tenterhooks now. What was the Heir Apparent poisoned with? Everyone present knew it all too well. It was to preserve the last bit of the Empress Dowager's dignity that Kong Qiu tossed the Heir Apparent's case to Fuman and let the inner court investigate.

Han Cheng was still holding the post of the Imperial Bodyguards' Commander. He meant to take the path Hua Siqian once took, by relying on the Eight Great Training Divisions to challenge the Grand Secretariat.

Fuman had been buttering his bread on both sides, waiting for just this moment. He could no longer remain on the noble clan's boat, but he could still jump onto the Grand Secretariat's ship. He had shown his face before Hai Liangyi, and he had spent the longest time in the Grand Secretariat's office compound. The junior eunuch's address of "*zuzong*" was not casually given, but because he really carried this weight among them. He kept such a tight grip on the Heir Apparent's case because he wanted to extricate himself clean and to make Fengquan the scapegoat.

Emperor Tiancheng favored Mu Ru, and he incurred the displeasure of the Grand Secretariat when he made an exception to promote Fengquan. Even the Chief Surveillance Bureau censured him. Later, when Emperor Tianchen died in Mu Ru's hands, it was only through Xue Xiuzhuo's grace that Fengquan could continue to drag out an ignoble existence.

Fuman did not dare to incur the wrath of Xue Xiuzhuo, but he had come to discern that the Heir Apparent was the future master of Dazhou. He

had to kick out Fengquan before he could get a spot for himself beside the Heir Apparent. He was counting on the Heir Apparent for his future decades of wealth and glory to come.

As for Han Cheng and Kong Qiu, Fuman did not make much of them. Think about Pan Rugui. Pan Rugui could assemble the Pan Faction and sit on equal footing with Hua Siqian exactly because he had the trust of Emperor Guangcheng at that time. It was no easy feat being a eunuch, having to be commanded around like a dog, but find the right master, and you would be a dog that lorded it over the masses—a dog that everyone had to deferentially address as “*zuzong*” on sight.

Fuman was just thinking about this when he suddenly sensed Kong Qiu looking at him. He immediately stepped forward to bow, a complete about-face from his attitude in front of Han Cheng as he spoke with deference. “This humble slave has traced what the Grand Secretary has told me to investigate. The seasonal vegetables consumed by the Heir Apparent that day all came from our Garden Service.”

“Isn’t that specially meant for the palace?” Kong Qiu asked, “Who is the eunuch-in-charge?”

“It’s someone called Yinzhu.” Fuman continued, “This humble slave has carefully interrogated all the people serving in the Heir Apparent’s palace. None of them have anything to do with the Garden Service. The rules in the palace are strict, and they do not normally cross paths.”

“Something was wrong with the seasonal vegetables of the Garden Service, and yet it could pass through so many hands to be served before the Heir Apparent. This would not have been possible if the perpetrator wasn’t capable.” Kong Qiu was in charge of the Ministry of Justice, and his train of thought was clear and organized. “Moreover, it is impossible to have such a clear grasp on the Heir Apparent’s preferences without at least half a year of effort.”

Fuman repeatedly made sounds of agreement and said, “This humble slave did in fact find such a person.”

Kong Qiu locked eyes with Cen Yu. “Who?”

Fuman looked hesitant as he wavered for a moment before answering. “It’s Fengquan.”

Fengquan had once held the position of the Seal-holding Director in the Directorate of Ceremonial, and the Garden Service was under the jurisdiction of the Seal-holding Director; it also had ties to the Directorate

for Palace Delicacies. He was not only the Heir Apparent's attendant, but also the person the Empress Dowager wanted to protect back then. As compared to a universal flatterer like Fuman, who fawned on everyone he came across, Fengquan could not be erased of suspicion at all.

Kong Qiu furrowed his brows. "Isn't this person already dead?"

"That's right," Fuman answered softly, "but he stayed by the Heir Apparent side for over half a year. He looked different, so much that this humble slave did not recognize him when he was serving in attendance in Mingli Hall."

Kong Qiu did not respond immediately. All of them had only just gone silent when they heard the announcement of Xue Xiuzhuo's arrival from the entrance. Liang Cuishan was well aware of the art of preserving his life; the matters of the inner court concerned the Heir Apparent and were not affairs he could meddle in, so he took the opportunity to get to his feet and retreated out just as Xue Xiuzhuo entered.

Xue Xiuzhuo's *wusha* hat<sup>56</sup> was slightly damp from the rain. Even when he saw Fuman standing in attendance at the side upon his entrance into the hall, he did not ask about it and bowed to Kong Qiu. Kong Qiu did not bring up Fengquan and told Xue Xiuzhuo to take his seat for discussions.



Chashi River thawed, and the warmth of spring in Duanzhou abruptly disappeared. Drizzle fell for several consecutive days, pelting the peach blossoms in the courtyard until they had all fallen to cover the ground in a wet blanket of red. Shen Zechuan had to discuss affairs with the advisors in the hall, and a sitting typically took several hours, so Fei Sheng added a charcoal brazier in the hall to dispel the cold.

"Yan Heru has not shown up for so long, and the businesses in Hezhou are now in a mess. The merchants are making such a ruckus for fear that the deals they agreed on at the start of the year will fall through. They came to Chazhou in the hope of discussing it over with Your Lordship." Yu Xiaozai sat to the right of Kong Ling, near the charcoal brazier. He continued, "There's also a need to make contact with the local *yamen* where the port is. We have to send someone there as soon as possible."

Yao Wenyu seemed fine today. He said, "The spring plowing has just ended, so the *yamen* in the various lands are all able to transfer manpower over. Then there's still Wang Xian, who is familiar with taxation, in Chazhou. There's no reason for Your Lordship to meet them in person."

“Stick to however the business was conducted in the past.” Shen Zechuan held the hand warmer<sup>57</sup> between his palms. “A Wang Xian will suffice.”

Wang Xian used to be the Secretary of the Ministry of Revenue who had contended with the various ministries before. Even Xiao Chiye had hit a brick wall when it came to him. There was no one more suitable than him to discuss with the merchants.

“The Yan clan was the one greasing the Prefectural Prefect of Liuzhou’s wheels. Ask them if they can find Yan Heru or not. If not,” Shen Zechuan turned over the document and continued, “hurry up and push out someone capable of taking on the matter.”

Qi Zhuyin had yet to return to Qidong. The Yan clan had to complete delivery of the remaining military provisions in the fourth month. No doubt anyone could ever find Yan Heru again. At present, they were fighting through the roof at home. Shen Zechuan dropped them a reminder to hand over the grains first before they split up the properties and break up the family.

The matters today were more or less finished being discussed. Seeing that Qiao Tianya had still yet to return from the military drill grounds, he said, “Youjing spoke about the details of the various prefectures *yamen*, the situations of which are extremely complicated and cannot be lumped together in the same breath. Go back and ready a book for submission. Do it like how Shenwei does it; keep it brief and concise. Also, *shifu* is in my courtyard, so Yuanzhuo shall have his meal together with me today.”

The advisors all stood up one after another and bowed to the Prefectural Lord before taking their leave.

Ji Gang was under the eaves, watching Ding Tao train. Seeing the advisors coming out, he sent Ding Tao to instruct the kitchen to prepare the dishes. Remembering Fei Sheng’s instruction, Ding Tao left Li Xiong in the courtyard to protect the Prefectural Lord, while he himself leaped down the steps and dashed off to deliver the message.

Originally, Qiao Tianya was the one pushing Yao Wenyu in his wheelchair, but these days, Ji Gang had taken over the job. By the time Qiao Tianya returned, it was already dark.

Ding Tao and Li Xiong stood guard at each side like a pair of door deities.<sup>58</sup> He folded his arm and said with cool detachment to Qiao Tianya, “If His Lordship hasn’t summoned you, you can’t enter—”



Qiao Tianya pressed down Ding Tao's head and lifted the hanging screen to cast a glance into the main room.

"He already left!" Ding Tao broke free. "After the meal, His Lordship asked Grandpa to push him back."

"You should have said so earlier." Qiao Tianya then asked, "Where's the Prefectural Lord?"

"It's time for His Lordship to take a break," Ding Tao answered. "He's in the bath now."

"You didn't even get someone to close the windows in the hall. The wind is strong and cold at night." Qiao Tianya scared Ding Tao. "Freeze the Prefectural Lord, and Old Fei the Tenth is going to nag at you all night when he returns later."

Ding Tao had indeed forgotten about this, but he said, "I remembered. I was just about to close them!"

Having said that, he turned and made his way into the hall to close the windows one at a time. As he withdrew out of the room, the back of his head bumped into something hard. He reacted quickly and covered his head, thinking Fei Sheng was back. He looked back and was just about to speak when he shrank his neck back and shut up.

Xiao Chiye set down Langli Blade, which was blocking Ding Tao, and inclined his head slightly to look for Shen Zechuan. His face was damp, both from the rain and his sweat, and the heavy armor on him had yet to be removed. His boots were all dirty too.

This was him riding all the way back in a rush after getting off the battlefield.



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#### Footnotes

1. 入赘 of a man marrying into the wife's household, thereby taking on the wife's surname and becoming an member of the wife's clan.
2. 军屯 military troops stationed in the border regions who carry out garrison duties as well as farm crops to supply the border garrisons and themselves with grains.



- 3.
4. 折子 zhezi, is a booklet in accordion form with a slipcase, used for keeping accounts, etc.
5. 黃冊 *Huangce* or yellow registers/yellow book served during the Ming Dynasty to provide basic data for taxation and recruitment based on the household's classification according to their occupation. It was mainly divided into three categories: civilian, military, and craftsman.
6. 海纳百川，有容乃大(；壁立千仞，无欲则刚。) A couplet written by Lin Zexu (林则徐).  
i.e. the greatness of a man lies in his tolerance of others, just like the vast sea can accommodate a hundred rivers.
7. Refer to [chapter 163](#) for recap.
8. The Art of Rulership/Governance of the Sovereign: The technique of checks and balances was one of the most common political tools used by the emperors in ancient China to govern their officials.
9. 及冠 or 弱冠, a man's 20th birthday, i.e., coming of age at 20 for a male.
10. Note: to clarify, the term used here specifically refers to "Crown Prince" or in Li Jianting's case, a "crown princess" or heir apparent/successor to the throne. Using the latter since it sounds more "neutral" :V
11. For those who forgot, Xiaowu was an Imperial Bodyguard who appeared in early chapters.
12. The term 爷 (sir, lord, master) is a form of address for an official or wealthy person in former times. Ge Qingqing called him lord (or old master; 老爷) as a form of respect for his official position, while the functionary called him master (爷) in reference to his wealthy-merchant-pay-huge-tax/bribe status (i.e., bowing to money).

13. 冰敬 Literally, 'Ice Respect' (or paying respect with 'ice' during summer) is one of the objectionable practices of 'Three Respects' during the Qing Dynasty, along with 'Coal Respect' and 'Departure Respect'. 'Ice Respect' refers to the bribe money officials outside the capital used to bribe the officials in the capital during summertime.



14.

15. 劲装 *Jin Zhuang* is a more body-fitting outfit (compared to the usual loose, flowing robes) with the sleeves secured to make movements easier and less restrictive. It's usually worn by martial arts practitioners to facilitate combat.

16. 清流 renowned and unsullied scholars who were concerned with politics but held themselves aloof from those in power

17. 殿试 palace examination, the final and highest imperial examination, presided over by the emperor himself.

18. 老十哥 Old (Fei the) Tenth-ge

19. 六婶 sixth auntie

20. 锦衣骑 is based on 锦衣卫, or the Imperial Bodyguards also more literally known as the Embroidered Uniform Guards or the Brocade Guards. So in the same vein, 锦衣骑 could also be considered the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry or Brocade Cavalry.

21. 天妒英才 literally Heaven is jealous of the talented (so it makes them undergo great sufferings in life and erm, stuff).



- 22.
23. 蹴鞠 *cuju*, ancient Chinese ball game with similarities to soccer.



- 24.
25. Specifically 鲤鱼打挺 *carp kip-up*, a martial arts move where one leaps from a supine position into a standing position.
26. 黃冊 *Huangce* or yellow registers/yellow book served during the Ming Dynasty to provide basic data for taxation and recruitment based on the household's classification according to their occupation. It was mainly divided into three categories: civilian, military, and craftsman.
27. 家生子 Children of domestic servants or slaves. These children were also born in the household and also served as servants and slaves in the same household.



28.

29. 包袱, a cloth bundle. In the old days, people traveled around with their clothes and possessions bundled up with a piece of cloth. The bundle was then worn across the shoulders and carried around.

30. 白泽 *baize*, an auspicious, white-colored mythical creature in Chinese mythology.



31.

32. 补子 rank badges or mandarin squares, was a large embroidered badge sewn onto the surcoat of an official to indicate the rank of the official wearing it. E.g., the use of squares depicting birds for civil officials and animals for military officials; there were even “seasonal” squares like the gourd.



- 33.
34. 五珠 *wuzhu*, literally five pearls
35. 铎针 *duozhen*, an ornament on the official hat of Ming Dynasty.
36. 汗马 literally sweating horse, refers to distinguished military service.
37. 老祖宗 literally old ancestor or forefather; sometimes the top eunuch in the Ming Dynasty are privately addressed as such. This refers to Pan Rugui in earlier chapters.
38. 经筵 classics colloquium, a gathering of the Emperor with eminent civil officials of the general administrative agencies in the capital, of the Hanlin Academy, of the Directorate of Education, etc., for the reading and discussion of classical and historical texts.
39. 军屯 military troops (mostly in border regions) who carry out garrison duties and farm crops to supply the border garrisons with grains.



40.



41.

42. 汤婆子 *tangpozi*, a small portable hand warmer that looks like a little pot.



43.

44. 斂衽 This pose, if a bow or curtsy was made as well, was actually a form of obeisance made by women as a sign of respect





45.

46. 花钿 known as *huadian*, these are flower embellishments affixed or painted onto the forehead for cosmetic purposes. Flowers are common patterns, although there may be others.



47.

48. 太师椅 *Taishi* Chair or Grand Preceptor Chair, is a classical style of a wooden armchair in ancient China.



49.

50. Phoenix refers to the empress, just like the dragon refers to the emperor.

51. 纲常 i.e. the three cardinal ethical relationships of social order (including the relationship between the ruler and his subject) and the five constant virtues in Confucianism.

52. 乌纱帽 *wusha* hat, or black gauze hat, is the headwear of Ming dynasty officials, comprising a black hat with two wing-like flaps of thin, oval-shaped boards on each side.

53. White is also associated with death and mourning, and white paper lanterns were often used in funerals and to indicate death in the family.

54. Recap: [Chapter 83](#). In Chinese customs, rice wine or tea is poured onto the ground (usually in front of an altar or tombstone) as an offering to the deities or in honor of the deceased.

55. 一盏茶 literally a cup of tea worth of time, roughly about 15 minutes.

56. 清谈 *Qingtán* is a Chinese philosophical movement and social practice among political and intellectual elites where the literati engaged in highly sophisticated intellectual and philosophical discussions on lofty and non-mundane matters.

57. 远交近攻 “Befriend a distant state; attack one nearby” from the Thirty-Six Stratagems (三十六计). This was first seen in [chapter 50](#).



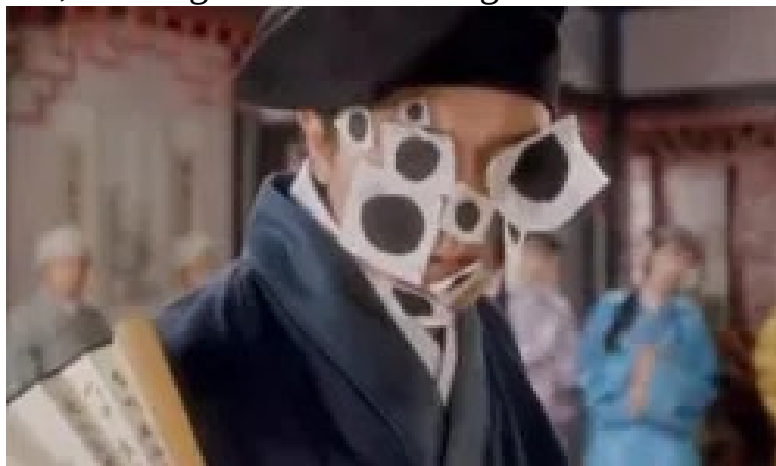
58.

59. 纲常 i.e., the three cardinal ethical relationships of social order (including the relationship between the ruler and his subject, father and son, husband and wife) and the five constant virtues in Confucianism.

60. 酒醋面局 One of the twenty-four yamen of the palace eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty. In charge of condiments such as vinegar, sauces, and so on.



- 61.
- 62. 蟒纹曳撒 yisan or also read as yesa
- 63. 烟墩帽 a hat worn by eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty.
- 64. 司苑局 One of the eight eunuch services under the Twenty-Four Yamen, in charge of fruits and vegetables.



- 65.
- 66. 狗皮膏药 specifically dogskin plaster (the white and black plaster on his face), a medicinal plaster in Traditional Chinese Medicine used for treating rheumatism, strain, contusion, etc which is pasted to the skin.

67. i.e., of someone seeking help and protection from someone more powerful.

68. 乌纱帽 *wusha* hat, or black gauze hat, is the headwear of Ming dynasty officials, comprising a black hat with two wing-like flaps of thin, oval-shaped boards on each side.

69. 汤婆 a small portable hand warmer that looks like a little pot.  
Also known as *tangpo*.



70.

71. 门神 a door god or divine guardians whose main duties were to protect a building, threshold, or household against evil influences or to encourage the entrance of positive ones. Usually, stickers or papers of these deities are pasted on the door to signify their protection.



## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 233 : TO LOVE AND TO FEAR



The rain was still falling when Shen Zechuan returned to his room. Wearing a wide-sleeved robe, but without his wooden clogs, he walked on the corridor leading to the bedchamber and heard a few crashes of muffled thunder. Damp wind pounced on his face through the newly cut window screen, while the staccato sound of rain dispelled the stifling sensation Shen Zechuan was feeling from having sat for too long.

Candlesticks stood by the sides of the corridor, making it brighter than the bedchamber itself. Shen Zechuan stood there without moving, as if wanting to get some air. Shadows peeped through the bamboo blinds to lay exposed on the rug in the bedchamber, while the orange candlelight gave his silhouette a glow and rendered the skin slightly to the side of his neck a shade of vivid red.

The fourth month was the season when crop seedlings sprouted and grew. If this bout of spring rain persisted, the Duanzhou fields near the Chashi River might end up inundated by the spring flood. Shen Zechuan gave Kong Ling instructions regarding the Duanzhou dams last month, but he forgot to ask about it today. Reckoning that Fei Sheng should be back by now, Shen Zechuan lifted the bamboo blinds and searched the bedchamber for the wooden clogs he had kicked off in preparation of summoning Fei Sheng over to question him.

Xiao Chiye, having long removed his armor, was lying sleepily on the bed with his head pillowed on both arms. On hearing movements, he turned over, and at the same time Lanzhou picked up his wooden clogs, he pushed the lowered drapes aside and poked his head out.

Caught off guard, Shen Zechuan got a fright and dropped the wooden clogs.

With his hands gripping the drapes, Xiao Chiye asked, “Is what happened to the Venerable Master true?”

Shen Zechuan schooled his expression slightly and nodded.

Seeing Shen Zechuan’s nod, Xiao Chiye’s heart, which had been on tenterhooks the entire way, plummeted completely into the ditch. He fell

back onto the bedding and spread out his arms, looking as if he was about to die soon.

Supporting himself against the edge of the bed, Shen Zechuan looked at Xiao Chiye and tentatively probed, “Did you run all the way back for this?”

In order to find Yideng, Xiao Chiye had scoured the entire Libei and watched on as Xiao Jiming wrote more than a dozen letters to the Venerable Master. But he did not even get to see him, and the man was now gone. After a long silence, he asked, “Where’s Yan Heru?”

Shen Zechuan made a brutal, slitting gesture along his neck.

Xiao Chiye fell silent for a moment with a frosty and grave expression. He suddenly turned over and buried his face into the pillow, refusing to show his face to Shen Zechuan. If he had a tail, it would be drooping on the ground right now.

“We’ll head over to Juexi to look for physicians.” Xiao Chiye paused for a moment before continuing. “And there’s still the Imperial Academy of Medicine in Qudu.”

Shen Zechuan did not say a word. His icy cold hand covered the side of Xiao Chiye’s neck and slid up to stroke his cheek. Xiao Chiye grabbed hold of this hand and grasped it in his palm. The rain doused his wrath, extinguishing it, leaving only disappointment and panic in its wake. He attempted to soothe his emotions, but this feeling was too complicated.

“Ce’an,” Shen Zechuan called out to him.

Xiao Chiye said, “There are innumerable highly skilled physicians in the world living in seclusion or retirement. We’ll find as many as there are available. As long as it’s a physician...”

Shen Zechuan suddenly pulled his hand out. The moment Xiao Chiye’s palm turned up empty, Xiao Chiye made to sit up, but Shen Zechuan pressed him back into place by his back.

“A-Ye.” Shen Zechuan propped himself up with his arms and lowered his head to say with a rare unyielding toughness, “You heard Qianqiu-*shifu*’s words before. Even with the Venerable Master, the illness may not necessarily be eradicated at its roots. But this body is still not in that terrible of a state.” He slowed and relaxed his voice. “I’ve been taking my medicines on time, and not once have I fallen sick this year.”

Xiao Chiye’s sprawled back tensed.



Shen Zechuan bumped his head against the back of Xiao Chiye's shoulder and said in a soft voice, "I won't leave you."

The rain outside the room pitter-pattered down with finely-woven beats. Xiao Chiye's chest cavity was all but a damp, clammy expanse. Shen Zechuan stuck the side of his face to Xiao Chiye's tattoo through the fabric, where a scar lay.

"You're lying to me." Xiao Chiye answered in the same soft voice.

Xiao Chiye once thought that Xiao Fangxu would not leave him, but separation came in such haste that he did not even get to bid his old man farewell. There existed a hidden boundary line between man and man. Stride over that line, and that goes what one called parting by death. It was a whole other world no one could ever catch up with.

"You gave this life to the Grand Mentor." Xiao Chiye's voice sounded oppressively heavy in the darkness. "You made a vow to him to kill his mortal enemies, and you stood alone before the noble clans without fear. You wanted me to leave back in Qudu, and you hurt yourself in Chazhou and Dunzhou."

These were ticking time bombs left behind by those two incidents. They lay hidden in Xiao Chiye's heart, ballooning to unbearable proportions after Xiao Fangxu left. Xiao Chiye only had to think about it to feel the fear after the fact. The source of his panic was not just Shen Zechuan's health, but also Shen Zechuan himself.

Xiao Chiye continued, "Lanzhou, you only have to harden your heart, and you'd be able to leave me behind."





## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 234 : NOBODY



Raindrops drummed against the door eaves, like an extension of Shen Zechuan's mood. He could openly put on a hundred displays of indulging in desires before Xiao Chiye, but he found it hard to extend this frankness verbally to Xiao Chiye. He was the most eloquent orator in this world, and also the most inarticulate one.

"I once gave this life to Teacher, because there was no home to call mine in this world. A-Ye, when I first stood before the halls of Qudu, what I saw was the door to this life of mine. Stride inside, and Duanzhou would no longer be my hometown. I knew my elder brother would vanish among my dreams, and I knew that no one in this world would ever forgive me."

Shen Zechuan had never gone into battle to fight against the enemies, nor had he sat in the imperial court a far distance away. He was an ordinary man who came face to face with the scimitars, and it was precisely because he was an ordinary man that the wails of the six prefectures lingered in his ears every night and the bloodbath in the sinkhole haunted his mind all the time. He kneeled in the snowstorm raging at the sinkhole and experienced a separation by death. Overnight, he became the enemy of the entire world.

He had done nothing.

But he was guilty, and his sin went by the name Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan watched the Biansha Cavalry massacre Duanzhou. Forty thousand men pressed down on his back, pinning him, and because he survived, he was forever held captive here. His struggles were insignificant.

Those anguished cries of his were worth nothing before forty thousand corpses.

Shen Zechuan could not live on.

He was, in that game of chess, a nobody. His pain was merely the puff of dust stirred up by its players' coughs. The moment he understood this, he lost what it meant to "live". Ji Gang told him to keep living, but the heroes and the sycophants were still mutually tearing into each other. Keep living, and he would still be reduced to being a pawn someday. He would be dragging on his miserable existence merely to wait for death to claim him so that he could enter the next cycle of reincarnation.

Back at the derelict Zhaozui Temple, Qi Huilian raised his arms like a madman and shouted out for the crown prince, but in this world, there was no longer a crown prince. Were the legitimate bloodlines of the noble clans the only ones who could become the hands that hold the world in its control? Were the distinguished, noble-born prides of heaven the only ones worthy of possessing the power to stir up a storm? If that were the case, then all the innumerable ordinary folks in the world were the bones of the dead at the foot of the stairs! They were the subjugated ones meant to be trampled on, the dehumanized ones who suffered no pain, and the silenced ones who would not moan in anguish. They were nobodies!

"What did we do wrong?"

Qi Huilian cried out this phrase with inconsolable grief.

What exactly did we do wrong?!

Shen Zechuan once lifted Xiao Chiye by the collar in a filthy alley, ripping open his mask of forbearance to question the same words with his voice breaking.

You and I, what did we do wrong?

If living was a sin, that meant Heaven was holding him down by his head intending for him to kneel in the dust and continue being a nobody. But Shen Zechuan met Qi Huilian. He watched as the Grand Mentor acted all demented, and listened as the lone crow let loose a plaintive wail. He was forced to the edge of the precipice. If he could not take out the courage to burn his bridges and fight to the death, then he would have to venture down this path Heaven preordained for him and kill himself once more.

"I am Qi Huilian of Yuzhou. I taught the Crown Prince. And I'll now teach you everything I have learned in my life—alright?"

What Shen Zechuan saw was a way to live. That was not only a path where he could kneel and gasp for breath, but also one where he could stand on his feet. Was victory assured just because one was born the descendant of a noble clan? The moment in which Qi Huilian went on his knees was when the paradigm shifted. He had torn down that wall much earlier than anyone else, even Shen Zechuan.

Qi Huilian was the teacher of the emperor; he would only teach someone heading into that position. He reached out to Shen Zechuan not only because he was forced into a dead end but also because this was the most insane of the Grand Mentor's schemes.

"If Teacher imparts the classics to me, I'll kill your enemy for you."

Shen Zechuan's hatred was scattered all over in Qudu, those faint, blurry lights of untold numbers. It was Qi Huilian who converged them together with the words "enmity".

Unruffled is the orchid that grows on stone steps. Boundless is the horizon of the boat that crosses the sea of misery.

Qi Huilian molded Shen Lanzhou into being, and he pushed a sharp Shen Zechuan back into his sheath with the aim of obliterating all the self-resentments that sustained Shen Zechuan and kept him hanging onto life. He wanted to set Shen Zechuan's path right, so that Shen Zechuan could see himself for who he truly was.

Xue Xiuzhuo did not make the wrong move; he had simply been a tad too late. Qi Huilian had long already possessed his own Heir Apparent.

Rainwater washed over the eaves. Shen Zechuan fell silent after he had said those words. He buried his face into Xiao Chiye's back, just like how Xiao Chiye had buried his face into the pillow.

Shen Zechuan did not value his life; death was not at all scary. The hooves of all those vying for supremacy would not skirt around anyone. The promised lands of the world were all built upon the sharpest blades. If he died, then that only went to prove that Shen Zechuan failed in his quest to win the throne.

He did not care.

Would a hand that had been cut hurt?

To Shen Zechuan, that was for him to find out, but he had to be cut first before he would know the answer.

Qi Huilian did not manage to tether him. He was a blade without a hilt, one that would spill blood when held. No one else in the world other than

himself could wield it. He strode away from everything else, all to achieve his aim of “freedom”.

He was free when he killed Ji Lei.

That made Qi Huilian realize for the first time that he had honed Shen Zechuan, but did not keep him fully sheathed. All Shen Zechuan learned was to deal a fatal blow without making so much a sound. At that time, Shen Zechuan had his first taste of carnal pleasure, when the battered, scarred host experienced the mirth of this body; that was the joy of being “alive”. He did not even realize it to be the prelude to the blade’s return to its sheath.

This squall from Libei swept away Shen Zechuan’s nightmares. Xiao Chiye aggressively invaded Shen Zechuan’s heart, dominating it. His strong, powerful arms blocked out all the din. In the deepest recesses of that quagmire, he gate-crashed his way in to catch a sniff of the fragrance of this gem.

Avaricious wolf.

“Teacher returned this life to me, A-Ye.” Shen Zechuan melted under this familiar scent and nuzzled his cheek against Xiao Chiye’s back like a young cub that had come searching by following the scent. “A-Ye...”

Xiao Chiye raised his hand to hold down Shen Zechuan and partially looked back to look him in the eye.

Shen Zechuan opened his eyes, but there was no hint of joking in those orbs. He moved Xiao Chiye’s face closer and said, “I am yours, even in death. And you are mine too.” He finally revealed the part of him that was sharp and ruthless. “I will kill whoever wants to take you away from my side.”

Not even the King of Hell can do so.

At first, Shen Zechuan thought what he cherished was not life but Xiao Chiye. Gradually, he came to learn that a cut finger would hurt; however, that finger was not the one in pain, but Xiao Chiye. Living was tough, but in the process of living, he found even more reasons to live. He was the continuation of Ji Mu’s life, of Qi Huilian’s, of Zhongbo’s, and of all the nobodies’ in this volatile, tempestuous storm—they all existed and lived through him.

“I want to live to a ripe old age with you.” Shen Zechuan planted a light kiss on Xiao Chiye’s temple. “In a place no one can reach.”

Xiao Chiye grabbed back Shen Zechuan's hand and turned around to take him into his arms. Then, cupping Shen Zechuan's cheeks, he closed in for a look.

"Tired from the journey?" Shen Zechuan asked in an undertone.

"Nope." Xiao Chiye caressed Shen Zechuan's cheeks. "I get through the days by thinking of you."



## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 235 : SCOUNDREL



Xiao Chiye claimed not to be tired, but he still fell asleep under the murmurs and whispers. He had been rather pressed for time to rest after being swapped over to Sha'er Camp. It was only because Mount Luo was close to Duanzhou and the bridle path ran smooth and unobstructed that he was able to rush back to sleep by Lanzhou's side.

The rain intensified following several claps of spring thunder in the distance in the latter half of the night. As Xiao Chiye had something weighing on his mind, he woke up at the hour of yin. Shen Zechuan nuzzled against his temple, his breathing smooth and even as he slept soundly. Xiao Chiye listened to the sound of Lanzhou's breathing for a moment and felt inexplicably unable to simply resign himself to it.

Half-awake, Shen Zechuan uttered a "hm". He liked to drag out his nasal sounds, making it hard to say if he was in pain or feeling good each time. Xiao Chiye bit him, making him rock a little under his slightly urgent gasps.

"Don't bite." Shen Zechuan's still half-asleep voice was slightly hoarse. He did not even open his eyes as he muttered indistinctly, "It's all red now."

It was indeed red.

Shen Zechuan sobered up a little. Xiao Chiye was pinning down on him, leaving him with nowhere to hide. It was as if he was being assaulted



by the rain in the face of this force. There was no distance between them. Sweat spread to their chests, soaking the bedding until it was all damp.

Xiao Chiye lowered his head and pressed his ear to Lanzhou's lips.

Shen Zechuan was on the verge of breaking. He knew what Xiao Chiye wanted to hear in this clammy atmosphere. He spoke and breathed of love, his expressive eyes misted over as he shivered intermittently under the pounding of the waves.

The downside about being in such synchronous tune with one another was that even a momentary separation would stir up a storm of passion that made them crave to be sated and to use sensual pleasure to make up for the gap in which they were apart.

Xiao Chiye desired.

And still desired more.

"Hn—"

Shen Zechuan could not help himself and tilted his soaked neck back—this was a vulnerability that reared its head when he took Xiao Chiye in.

Under the clamor of the rain beneath the eaves, a person in a straw rain cape approached. When a knock sounded from the door, Shen Zechuan raised a hand and made to clutch the hanging drapes of the bed, but Xiao Chiye grabbed his wrist in midair, holding it up as his strong, tanned arms secured Shen Zechuan in place.

The person outside waited for a moment, then knocked on the door again.

Shen Zechuan kept his voice down, "Not... not Fei..."

Xiao Chiye did not give a damn about who was at the door. His desire was raging. He wanted to dominate. Only he could see, bite, and exert himself so hard that Lanzhou begged for mercy.

Their breaths intermingled.

"Chuan-er? It's already the second quarter of the hour of mao! Chengfeng is heading down to the fields for a look. Are you going? If so, I'll prepare your overcoat for you. Drink some soup before you go over." Ji Gang had woken up early and even trained for a few rounds, after which he had come over with a bowl of soup in hand.

Xiao Chiye hissed in chagrin and shoved everything that was superfluous away to confine Lanzhou.

In too deep.

Shen Zechuan soundlessly mouthed.

A-Ye, too—

He turned his head to the side and buried his gasps in the bedding, hiding them deep under the roar of the rain.

Xiao Chiye was panting too. Under those heavy gasps for breath, he let loose a dangerous laugh and admired the flush at the sides of Lanzhou's neck, all without so much a pause.

This is going to be the death of me.

Xiao Chiye thought diabolically.

Possessing Shen Zechuan in such a way gave him a climactic high.



Not hearing any movements, Ji Gang turned to ask Fei Sheng, "What time did the Prefectural Lord retire to bed last night?"

*That's hard for me to say, man,* Fei Sheng inwardly thought to himself. Holding an umbrella over Ji Gang's birdcage, he answered, "Quite late... Now that Mister Yu has returned, he has to report on matters regarding the six prefectures' *yamen* to the Prefectural Lord these few days."

"Didn't he take his leave early yesterday?" Ji Gang was worried that Shen Zechuan would fall ill during this spring rain. "Youjing has to stay until the rain stops this time. There is no rush to complete his assignments now."

"Exactly." Fei Sheng concurred. "*Shifu*, you understand it best."

Fei Sheng only wanted to send *shifu* out of the courtyard as soon as possible. Second Master was still inside, and if they were to cross paths later, wouldn't the game be over?! He lifted Ji Gang's birdcage and said, "*Shifu*, this bird looks so listless. Could it have gotten frozen from the cold?!"

"It gets sleepy after a meal. This bird is just the same as Ding Tao's sparrow." Ji Gang grew increasingly worried after not hearing an answer from Shen Zechuan for so long. "There's no one inside to attend to him either."

"How about I send you to the side hall for a seat? We'll drink a few cups of hot tea. Master should be awake in a while."

Ji Gang lifted the birdcage back. As Fei Sheng took over the soup, Ji Gang placed a hand behind his back and said, "I can't sit still, so I'll go over to Yuanzhuo for a look. The medicine is still being decocted. When Chuan-er wakes up later, ask him if he's going out. It's raining so hard. I'll have to tag along."

Fei Sheng voiced his acknowledgment of the request and bowed to send Ji Gang to the walkway. Seeing Ji Gang finally head out, he rushed back while lifting the hem of his robe and whispered close to the door, “Second Master, it’s already the third quarter of the hour of mao. The advisors should arrive later during the hour of chen. Our Lordship—”

The door swooshed open to both sides to reveal Xiao Chiye with a loose robe draped over him. His neck was still flushed and glistening with sweat.

How would Fei Sheng dare to look directly at him? He instantly stepped back and bowed. “Greetings to Second Master.”

In one smooth move, Xiao Chiye took the hot handkerchief on standby at the side and said as he wiped the sweat from his neck. “It’s only the hour of mao and you’re already here, prompting. Your master usually sleeps late, and he’s a light sleeper. How can he withstand you tormenting him like this?”

Fei Sheng responded, “Second Master indeed thinks of everything!”

Xiao Chiye tossed the handkerchief back into the tray. He was just about to say something when he saw Ji Gang, who had just left, return the same way. Ji Gang was already standing at the end of the walkway glaring over at them.

Fei Sheng looked back and inwardly exclaimed, *good heavens!*

Ji Gang took long strides over. On seeing Ji Gang’s livid expression, Fei Sheng wanted to retreat, *but Second Master is watching!* So he plucked up his courage and stepped forward bravely to stop Ji Gang. With an apologetic smile, he said, “Did *shifu* leave something behind? Just send someone over. Why make a special point of walking all the way back? It’s raining so heavily!”

Unable to get around Fei Sheng, Ji Gang grabbed Fei Sheng by the front of his clothes and forcibly lifted Fei Sheng, who was a head taller than him, over to the side.

Xiao Chiye called out, “*Shifu...*”

“I’m not your *shifu*!” Ji Gang hollered. Both his hands were trembling. Seeing Xiao Chiye all so wantonly dressed, he hastily took half a step back and pointed at him, sputtering, “How, how dare you. How dare, you!”

He had already sensed something amiss the last time Xiao Chiye asked to be whipped as punishment, but he did not dare to think of Shen Zechuan

along those lines, so he tried every means possible to comfort himself. He never expected he would still get slapped with the truth right in the face.

That was Shen Zechuan!

Ji Gang, his back all drenched from the rain, found it preposterous and felt incensed at the same time. His ears buzzed, as if he had really been slapped in the face. Unable to remain steady on his feet, he stood another step back. Fei Sheng reached out to support Ji Gang, but Ji Gang flung his hand away and bellowed, “You know? Were you in the know about it?!”

Fei Sheng forced a smile. “Uh...”

Ji Gang hurled the birdcage down on the ground, and the bird flapped around in alarm as its cage took a few tumbles and rolled to the bottom of the steps.<sup>1</sup> His hands were shaking badly. He still had his strength about him, and a strong wind pounced as he threw out the fist and struck Xiao Chiye with such force that the taste of blood saturated Xiao Chiye’s mouth. Fei Sheng had already lunged over to grab hold of Ji Gang’s arm. “*Shifu*, please be appeased!”

The rain pitter-pattered down in torrents. Xiao Chiye pressed the tip of his tongue against the taste of blood and said, “I’m willing to take the blows if *shifu* wants to hit me, and I’m willing to kneel too if *shifu* wants me to do so. But if *shifu* is still thinking of finding a marriage match for Lanzhou, then it’s a no-go.”

Ji Gang had been dropping hints this year, not daring to push Shen Zechuan too much, but he had been on tenterhooks, so he had scouted out several maidens in Cizhou and mentioned it to Shen Zechuan in his letters. Shen Zechuan did not agree to any of them and merely said that he had someone to care for him by his side. But Ji Gang had never seen this person ever since he arrived in Duanzhou, and he had been wondering if Shen Zechuan had been merely coaxing him. How could he have expected there to be such a person!

“You scoundrel...” Ji Gang broke his arm free and bellowed agitatedly, “I’m going to beat you scoundrel to death!”



#### Footnotes

1. Please do not do this at home. No animal abuse :V



## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 236 : TWIN JADES



In all the time Ji Gang watched Shen Zechuan grow up, he had never expected Shen Zechuan to become a noble or minister. All he hoped for was for Shen Zechuan to be safe and sound, for things to go smoothly for him, and to have an abundance of children in the future. Anyone could forget that one kick from Xiao Chiye in Qudu, but not Ji Gang, for Shen Zechuan was his one and only remaining son.

It was now Ji Gang recalled those words Xiao Chiye said back in Cizhou. It seemed as if it was all premeditated. This jerk had long planned to show his hand to him. How ludicrous that everyone could see that, and yet there he was, deceiving himself and believing his own lies. He even defended and made excuses for this asshole in every way possible!

Brotherhood? My foot!

Ji Gang threw a few punches at him, but unable to assuage his wrath, he grabbed the horsewhip that had been set at the side and said, “I invited a wolf into the house<sup>1</sup> and believed your lies! You have had designs on Chuan-er a long time back since Cizhou!” His fury grew the more he spoke, and he was, at present, totally oblivious to everything that was good about Xiao Chiye; all he remembered were the old debts. He lashed out with the whip and seethed. “I’ll beat you to death!”

“*Shifu, shifu!*” How would Fei Sheng dare to let Ji Gang continue striking out at Xiao Chiye? He attempted to persuade, “Second Master’s willingness to accept a beating from *shifu* means he genuinely intends to tell

*shifu*. This matter doesn't involve outsiders. Let's all sit down in our courtyard and have a proper talk. His Lordship is still waiting for you!"

"Get lost!" Ji Gang bellowed., "All of you are a bunch of scoundrels too!"

The Imperial Bodyguards in this courtyard had all received pointers from Ji Gang before, and they could be considered to be Ji Gang's disciples. So which of them would dare to stop Ji Gang on seeing how fierce he was? What's more, this horsewhip belonged to Xiao Chiye, and it was much heavier than the one in Cizhou. One lash alone felt like an explosion of searing hot pain that seemed to rip one apart.

Ji Gang was really enraged now. It was different from that time in Cizhou. Xiao Chiye's wide-sleeved robe could not block the blows, and every lash drew streaks of blood. Ji Gang whipped with such ferocity that Xiao Chiye sucked in a few gasps of the chilly air.

Seeing Xiao Chiye stubbornly refuse to admit his fault, he hatefully spat, "Whether it goes through or not when I find a marriage match for him is none of your business!"

"No." Xiao Chiye refused to concede when it came to this. He was not willing to speak a single word of falsehood. "There are plenty of decent men in the world. Shen Lanzhou is the one and only one I will not give away to anyone!"

Ji Gang was so incensed he felt dizzy. Pointing the horsewhip at him, he said, "You wanted to kill my son, and now you even want to cut off his bloodline! If you are not going to marry a wife and bear children, why don't you cut yourself off first?!"

The *cut-sleeves*<sup>2</sup> in Qudu were no secret. Ji Gang had seen his fair share of them when he served as the vice commander of the Imperial Bodyguard. They were inseparable now, deeply attached to each other like glue, but after several years, they all had to marry and have children. Furthermore, Xiao Chiye was Xiao Fangxu's son of legitimate birth. If Xiao Jiming did not take up the mantle on the battlefield, then it would fall upon Xiao Chiye to assume responsibility for it. Once he became the alpha wolf of Libei in the future, whether or not he took a wife would no longer be his own personal affair, but that of the entire Libei Armored Cavalry.

The Xiao clan possessed a 120,000-strong Armored Cavalry. Should the Xiao and Ji households form a marriage alliance between them, it would secure and stabilize the friendship between Zhongbo and Libei. Thus, Ji

Gang ought to give the nod in both public and private interests, but this was provided that Xiao Chiye was a maiden. Had that been the case, then even if he was an outwardly brash one who ran hot and cold, Ji Gang would have been willing to accept him, as long as Shen Zechuan wanted him.

“If *shifu* is willing to agree to it, I’ll get my eldest sister-in-law to come over to propose marriage. If not, I can also marry into the family.” Having been at the receiving end of Xiao Fangxu’s beatings, Xiao Chiye was not in the least bit afraid of these few lashes from Ji Gang. Since Ji Gang wanted to settle the score today, then no matter what he said today, he had to get Ji Gang’s nod.

Ji Gang was so choked speechless that he tilted over backward. Fei Sheng hurriedly supported him. Ji Gang felt that Xiao Chiye was not proposing marriage, but forcing marriage. He had never seen such a self-righteous villain!

With hands on both knees, Xiao Chiye pressed home his attack. “Lanzhou accepted my eldest sister-in-law’s bracelets. He has long been mine, Xiao Ce’an’s! How can *shifu* find another woman for him? If he really goes to meet her, then he’d be a heartless cad. *Shifu* wants children, and Ding Tao and Li Xiong are both young; they can relieve your boredom by staying with you. I couldn’t care less if it pleases *shifu* to raise them until the age of twenty-seven or twenty-eight before marrying them off.”

Ji Gang noted how Xiao Chiye was spouting nonsense in all seriousness. How were Ding Tao and Li Xiong still children? They were already eighteen or nineteen of age. It was considered late now to even throw them out of the house to attend to official duties—*this isn’t what it’s about at all!*

“*Shifu*, please give your assent.” Xiao Chiye propped himself with both hands on the floor and kowtowed. “If *shifu* doesn’t give the nod, I’ll call you father.”

Ji Gang could hold such prestige in the Imperial Bodyguards because he was a reasonable man. For Shen Zechuan, he had put a lot of thought into this matter. Were Xiao Chiye to sit down to reason with Ji Gang, there would be no way he could convince the latter. Shen Zechuan had a bearing on the Libei military grains, so Ji Gang was bound to worry if Libei’s consent now was because of the military grains or the situation.

How in the world would Ji Gang expect Xiao Chiye to be so shameless and thick-skinned to force him into a quandary right outside the door? It



would prove hard for him to walk away if he did not give the nod today. Ji Gang squeezed the words through clenched teeth. "Stop trying to dupe me with your sweet words. Even if your eldest sis-in-law really comes, I won't meet her."

"Even so, you have to meet Lanzhou." Xiao Chiye said without raising his head. "Father, Lanzhou is clueless about all these etiquettes. Without you by his side to watch over him, he will be tricked by my eldest sister-in-law back to Libei to be..." Xiao Chiye was momentarily stumped for words, but very quickly, he continued, "... her younger brother-in-law!<sup>3</sup> If you wish to fulfill my wish this way, I'd be happy too."

Ji Gang flung the horsewhip to the ground, driven beyond the limits of his forbearance. "Shut up!" He had to refute Xiao Chiye, so he gritted his teeth and said, "Don't you ever think of marrying into the family!"

Xiao Chiye's robe was slightly opened, and the flush on his neck had faded. Ji Gang refused to let Xiao Chiye enter, and Xiao Chiye did not dispute Ji Gang either. The rain poured in urgent torrents, and it was chilly under the eaves. Ji Gang's fury did not diminish, but the overwhelming rush to his head earlier was gone.

With a solemn expression and a serious countenance, Xiao Chiye said, "All that *shifu* worries about has crossed my mind too. My eldest brother and sister-in-law have a harmonious relationship. They have Xun-er now, and they will still go on to have children in the future. Libei doesn't need me to beget another child, and I do not have the intention to either. *Shifu* watched Lanzhou grow up and hopes for him to have a blissful family. I know that, and I wish the same too. Isn't my loving him, respecting him, and living to a ripe old age with him bliss too? *Shifu* can't trust me and fears that Lanzhou will suffer an aggrievement in the future, so you want to find Lanzhou a woman. It's indeed not my place to interfere, but I've already given him this life of mine. His wanting of another person is akin to killing me."

Xiao Chiye was no ordinary man. He had both the courage and means. They might now be a pair of twin jades who seemed to get along swimmingly, but what would happen when the war was over? If he had a change of heart, he had plenty of ways to end this relationship. What Ji Gang feared the most was Shen Zechuan being all alone by his lonesome self after his passing. Everyone addressed Shen Zechuan with the honorific

address of the Prefectural Lord right now. It was only to Ji Gang that Shen Zechuan was Chuan-er; there was still much for him to worry about.

Ji Gang did not dare to make this wager. He could not trust Xiao Chiye.

For a long time, Xiao Chiye did not get an answer. He heard the approaching sound of wooden clogs behind him and slightly turned his head sideways to see a properly attired Shen Zechuan with his fan in hand sneaking a glance at him.

“No.” Ji Gang seemed to answer Xiao Chiye, although he was looking at Shen Zechuan, his aged face weathered and worn as he decisively concluded, “It’s not going to happen.”



Yao Wenyu was in the midst of lighting incense in the courtyard next door. He clutched the incense stick between his fingers, its fumes so intense that Hunu was unwilling to get close to him. Once the rain these two days came to a stop, mosquitos ought to be making their presence known. Yao Wenyu could not stand this scent either. He was just scrutinizing the incense when it was taken away from him.

Qiao Tianya brought the incense to his nose for a sniff. He wrinkled his nose and said, “This smell is too strong. Where is it from? Send it back to the sender for their own use.”

“It’s from the merchants.” Yao Wenyu turned his wheelchair to face the courtyard. “The Tathagata incense from the City of Liuzhou sells for an exorbitant amount in Juexi.”

Qiao Tianya pinched the incense to extinguish it. “Reeks of stinky tofu.”

“The folks of Liuzhou have a taste for stinky tofu.” Yao Wenyu lifted a hand to wave away the smell. “Remind Fei Sheng later not to light up this incense in His Lordship’s room.”

Feeling as if Yao Wenyu was avoiding him, Qiao Tianya jammed a wheelchair wheel with his foot and said. “You couldn’t have seen him more than a few times, so how are you on familiar terms with him now?”

“We all attend to official duties for His Lordship.” Yao Wenyu paused for a moment and turned his head aside to look at Qiao Tianya. “There’s no unfamiliarity to speak of.”

Qiao Tianya was originally in good spirits, but his smile gradually dimmed under the exchange of gazes between him and Yao Wenyu. Yao

Wenyu had never been willing to look Qiao Tianya in the eyes before. He would dodge him out of shame, as if his embarrassing predicament at night was always at the forefront of his mind. But now, he was frank and open, as if he was still that piece of unpolished jade that had never been tainted by the slightest hint of desire.

No unfamiliarity to speak of.

Qiao Tianya was no different from Fei Sheng, Kong Ling, and everyone else whom Yao Wenyu had met. He was no longer that secret and special one. With a flick of his sleeves, Yao Wenyu could revert to being a banished immortal.<sup>4</sup>

"It's raining heavily today. If you are not in a hurry, take your meal first before you step out. Chengfeng and Youjing are coming in the afternoon, and it's also time to report on the matter of the Imperial Cavalry. See if you want to discuss it with them before heading out." As Yao Wenyu spoke, he looked at the wheel of the wheelchair before looking at Qiao Tianya again. "You're blocking it."

His smile was thin, as if resigned but at the same time, self-deprecating.

"Being a cripple who can still skirt around obstacles is not something I can do. Don't make fun of me."

The wind struck against the wind chimes, and a few drops of rain splattered on the thin blanket. Qiao Tianya shifted his leg away. He had always handled himself with ease, and yet he cut a sorry figure under Yao Wenyu's gaze.

Yao Wenyu turned his wheelchair and entered the room. The wheels thumped against the floor, emitting a string of even noise. He pushed the wheelchair, exposing his wrist amid his movements. It still had Qiao Tianya's red thread around it. As he moved, his wide sleeve bunched up, and the thread, thus covered, vanished among the cloud of white.



Ji Gang was resting his head on an arm with his face to the wall, looking as if he was asleep.

Shen Zechuan set his folding fan at the edge of the bed and asked, "Is *shifu* asleep?"

Ji Gang opened his eyes. "You know *shifu* is already asleep, and yet you ask."

Just like the time he was young, Shen Zechuan pulled the chair closer and said, “After I left Zhaozui Temple, I’ve never have had an all-night chat with shifu.”

“You came tonight for a man.” Ji Gang paused, unable to vent that fury on Shen Zechuan. It dissipated in his chest, replaced by another kind of self-reproach and sorrow. “What’s so good about him? Your teacher and I both won’t agree.”

“Teacher praised him before.” Shen Zechuan spoke softly. “A ‘natural-born talent’ is exactly what Teacher said to me.”

“Can a prodigious talent bring domestic peace to his family?” Ji Gang sat up and looked at Shen Zechuan. “A prodigious talent has to have the empire in his sights. Are you willing to sit in the same seat as him in the future?”

Shen Zechuan’s expression was docile as he lowered his eyes and said, “That’s not for me to say.”

Ji Gang heaved a long sigh under the candlelight. After a long time, he bitterly said, “When the Grand Mentor asked you how you are going to exercise self-restraint when you have the Imperial Bodyguards in your grasp, I ought to have realized that it was not a question for a student. Who in the world can hold the Imperial Bodyguards in their control? The Grand Mentor hid it from everyone and taught you too much. You are such a good learner, so do you not understand? The twin jades that form a pair today will be the two tigers that fight for power in the future.”

It was not that Xiao Chiye was mediocre, but that he was too outstanding, so much that Ji Gang could not set his mind at ease.

“If I were a man of use,” the expression in Ji Gang’s eyes was complicated as he gazed at Shen Zechuan, “and if your brother were still alive, then there’s no harm in staking your bets on him, but I am old and useless. After my passing, you will have to face everyone in this world alone. It will be just you, so how can I feel reassured?”



#### Footnotes

1. 引狼入室 literally invited a wolf into the house, i.e., open the door to a dangerous foe, bring disaster upon oneself.
2. 断袖 i.e., homosexual

3. Specifically, the husband of her younger brother.
4. 谪仙 literally, an immortal who has been banished from heaven to live on earth; an epithet for exceptional individuals such as the Tang poet Li Bai (who also wrote the poem, Qiang Jin Jiu). i.e., a wayward genius

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 237: HEIR



The rain in the courtyard came to a halt. Moonlight was late to come, and so it was dim in the room.

Shen Zechuan's slightly lowered eyes lay concealed in the darkness. He looked like a moored travel-weary traveler riding out the long, endless tide of the night. When he looked at Ji Gang again, it was with a gaze he had never shown before, as if he had stripped off the skin named Prefectural Lord, leaving behind only a stretch of moonlight.

"Without *shifu* and Ce'an, I am still me. Only that it won't be me who fears everyone in the world, but everyone who fears me. Shen Wei's blood runs in me. I have no need for heirs."

Ji Gang's heart ached so much he nearly shed tears. "You are my son," he said.

"I'm *shifu*'s son, but my name is Shen Zechuan. Teacher imparted the classics to me, yet I'm not an emperor."

Emperor.

The most supreme being of this world who stood at the very top and overlooked the world – if not a royal crown or official headgear bearer – was the emperor. The emperor must not only be versed in the political art of checks and balances, but also possess the broad-mindedness to accommodate the common people. Emperors in the flourishing eras that had the support of their people were all unparalleled men of benevolence. Shen Zechuan had in his eyes a storm that was building up. He was the sudden downpour that swept through the mountains and rivers of the country, and the sharp blade that shredded heaven and earth to pieces, but he was not an emperor who ushered in a golden era of prosperity.

“Libei has a 120,000-strong Armored Cavalry; it’s a cinch for their horses to set foot into Zhongbo, but Ce’an gave me his lifeblood. I have his horses, and his elder brother’s grains. He’s willing to leave the fields of Libei and ride his horse in my Duanzhou. *Shifu*, he’s not afraid of my Garrison Troops, and I am not afraid of his Armored Cavalry. One day, I will hold captive the ‘deer’ the Li clan cast away,<sup>1</sup> and Ce’an will hold me captive. The sun and the moon have coexisted in Heaven and Earth for tens of thousands of years without going at each other’s throats. This is the stability the world looks forward to. We are the equilibrium.”

The blazing sun and the luminous moon!

The cessation of the war heralded the beginning of another battle. No sovereign could tolerate their co-existence in the east. It was only when Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan were together that Libei and Zhongbo would be able to get the opportunity to rest and rebuild.

Shen Zechuan gave his tacit consent when Xiao Jiming built a riding stable on Mount Luo. This was his concession to Libei, and also the opportunity he gave to Libei. The bridle paths that Zhongbo was building would break the boundary between both lands, and when they merged into one, they would become a behemoth entrenched in the northeast.

Ji Gang sat cross-legged in silence. “He’s well-trained in the Ji Clan’s Boxing Fist, and comes and goes freely. What’s there to fear? Even so, you and he have no heirs. As long as this matter is left hanging in the air, Libei and Zhongbo can’t last for long.”



Xiao Chiye put on his armor and waited in the room for Shen Zechuan to return. The sound of wheels rose from under the eaves. Fei Sheng lifted the hanging screen for Yao Wenyu and said, “His Lordship is not yet back.”

The thin blanket on Yao Wenyu’s knees was a little damp. Propping himself up on his wheelchair, he said, “I’m looking for Second Master.”

Fei Sheng felt a little put on the spot. Xiao Chiye announced from within, “I’m here.”

Yao Wenyu graciously declined Fei Sheng’s offer of help and turned his wheelchair around to enter himself. Xiao Chiye retracted his legs, sat up straight at the table, and set the military book aside next to his hand. “What can I do for you, Yuanzhuo?”

“Rarely do I get the chance to see Second Master. There are some things that aren’t convenient to bring up in letters, so I can only discuss

them face to face.” Yao Wenyu took out his handkerchief and wiped the sweat on his hands. “Is Second Master free?”

Xiao Chiye leaned back. “What matter is there that you have to bypass Lanzhou to discuss with me?”

Yao Wenyu wiped his hands clean and folded the handkerchief before putting it back into place in his sleeves. He was in no hurry. Under the incessant sound of rain, he said, “It concerns Libei. Naturally, it’s more appropriate for me to discuss it with Second Master. Now that the Empress Dowager has suffered a setback in Qudu, Xue Yanqing’s next move will be to remove Han Cheng’s military power. When the time comes for the Heir Apparent to ascend to the throne, he will have her confer Qidong a title in order to secure Commander-in-chief Qi and keep her from interfering with his plans. Does Second Master still intend to keep the appointment to head down to the Bianjun Commandery?”

Of course Xiao Chiye had to go. The trip to the Bianjun Commandery would determine whether or not Hasen’s surprise attack on Duanzhou would succeed. Besides, he trusted Qi Zhuyin.

Yao Wenyu got his answer from Xiao Chiye’s silence. Changing the topic, he said, “The Grandson-Heir...” Given that Xiao Jiming had inherited Xiao Fangxu’s noble title, Xiao Xun ought to be called the Hereditary Prince now, so he corrected himself and continued, “Does the Hereditary Prince have a teacher to impart him elementary knowledge in Dajing?”

Xiao Chiye tapped his index finger neutrally on the table. “You wish to teach Xun-er.”

Xiao Chiye was quite a perceptive man. He had an inkling of Yao Wenyu’s intent from the latter’s change of topic. Xue Xiuzhuo’s heir apparent was about to ascend to the throne, and they were going to confer a noble title upon Qi Zhuyin too. By the time the war with Biansha was over, they might part ways with Qi Zhuyin. Shen Zechuan had his eyes on seizing Qudu, and Yao Wenyu was already considering the issue of heirs.

“Our wolves from Libei,” Xiao Chiye raised his head slightly and said in a quiet voice, “will not be emperors.”

Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan had no children, so their intent in having Xiao Xun come to Zhongbo to receive the teachings of Yao Wenyu and the rest was clear to Xiao Chiye—Xiao Xun was to be Shen Zechuan’s



successor. This matter was too good a deal for Libei, so much that Xiao Chiye was not inclined to agree.

“Second Master has His Lordship’s interests in mind and so is unwilling to let the Xiao clan take His Lordship’s place. But even if it were another child and not the Hereditary Prince, said child would not go by the surname Shen either,” Yao Wenyu said to Xiao Chiye. “His Lordship would never let Shen Wei’s name enter the ancestral temple.”

Shen Zechuan wanted Shen Wei to continue as a wandering soul in the wilderness of Dunzhou, so giving him a place in the ancestral temple to receive offerings and incense was totally out of the question. What he wanted to choke off was the Shen clan’s bloodline.

Xiao Chiye said, “Xun-er is the Hereditary Prince of Libei. My eldest brother will never agree to this.”

After a moment of silence, Yao Wenyu changed his tone into a conversational one between friends. “Do you have another option?”

The rain of the night pitter-pattered down, and it was not at all cold in the room. Yao Wenyu, however, did not look too good.

“There are countless heroes in the world. Know why I came all the way from afar to Zhongbo and threw in my lot with Lanzhou?”

Xiao Chiye’s eyes were dark and deep.

Yao Wenyu was not afraid of Xiao Chiye. As long as he could finish this game of chess, he did not fear anyone. He continued, “I watched him flee with you northward, only to stop in Zhongbo. I thought he wanted to clear Shen Wei’s name, but he did not care about that at all. He did not treat Zhongbo as his homeland, nor treat Qudu as his refuge. Advance and retreat all hinge on just one thought of his. I know he is not the man to be an emperor, but I still wanted to assist him, because he is a natural-born overlord. Your father knew Zhongbo was on a rapid rise to power and prominence. He granted Shen Zechuan’s entry into Libei, because Xiao Xun is Shen Zechuan’s one and only option.”

Xiao Fangxu was the King of Wolves who established the Great Territories of Libei—Dajing. He could catch a whiff of Emperor Guangcheng’s desire standing on Luoxia Pass, and at the most appropriate timing, he became a conferred prince<sup>2</sup> of Dazhou to hold a massive military force in his hand. He was far more visionary than his sons. Shen Zechuan had only one future. Without Xiao Chiye and Xiao Xun, he would never have allowed Shen Zechuan to return to Zhongbo alive.

“Since Lanzhou dares to head towards that position,” Xiao Chiye enunciated each word, “it’s his.”

“It’s his,” Yao Wenyu said, “but only if he has Xiao Xun.”

Xiao Chiye did not answer under the pattering sound of the rain.



The Heir Apparent found the night to be cold. She had not been sleeping well after her bout of illness and was often startled awake. At present, she was looking at the roof with open eyes, hanging in there until the hour of mao before she rolled over and got up without even needing the palace maids to call her.

The palace maids were all newcomers. They kneeled as they straightened out the hem of Li Jianting’s robes, and when Li Jianting sat before the mirror, they held the jewelry case in hand to tidy up her hair. During this period of time, Li Jianting had lost a lot of weight, and she looked increasingly sharp and stern, with not a trace of a woman’s delicateness and gentleness.

Li Jianting had not slept well, and she was also just recovering from a major illness, so she was inevitably tired. In her trance, she felt a coolness on her ear. Before the palace maid who was leaning over to put on earrings for the Heir Apparent could react, the Heir Apparent jerked to her feet noisily with a ghastly pale complexion. Restraining herself, Li Jianting reprimanded in an undertone, “Take it away!”

The palace maids in the palace all kneeled down in a fluster, not knowing what they had done to incur the Heir Apparent’s displeasure.

Li Jianting pursed her lips into a tight line and, amid the dead silence, saw her blurred figure in the mirror. She stared at this self of hers for a long time. “I don’t wear earrings when I’m receiving lessons from the various gentlemen in the front hall.”

The palace maids kowtowed a few times and answered in timid voices.

Not requiring their assistance anymore, Li Jianting put on her overcoat herself. Those precious and valuable materials covered her on the outside, like her own suit of armor. She felt better, but still did not speak. When she stepped out of the door, she saw a familiar figure under the eaves.

Fuman stepped forth to open up the umbrella for Li Jianting. Fawning on her, he said, “It’s raining so heavily today. This humble slave has prepared a sedan for Your Highness. Your Highness can take a nap. This

humble slave will call you when we arrive before the hall. I'll make sure not to hold up matters."

Li Jianting did not move. She smiled and asked, "Good morning, *gonggong*. You must be busy investigating the case, aren't you?"

Fuman did not dare to rush her either. "How would this humble slave know how to investigate a case? It's all at the Grand Secretary's advice. He specifically sent a few excellencies from the Ministry of Justice to supervise."

What he meant was that he was not the sole person passing judgment on the case, since it all went through Kong Qiu, so it had nothing much to do with him.

Without blinking her eyes, Li Jianting said, "So Fengquan can't be released?"

Fuman switched tactics and started to put on a worried look. "He's Lady Mu's brother, and he has connections with the Garden Service. The Ministry of Justice is ill-advised to bend the law to release him. This humble slave made several successive trips to the office compound and has also mentioned to the Grand Secretary that he's a good man."

Fuman reckoned that Fengquan's return to serve in the palace must have been because he had attended to the Heir Apparent for a long time and had built up a bond between master and servant. So he did not slander Fengquan before Li Jianting; he knew that Li Jianting was still partial to Fengquan. At any rate, he had plenty of time in the future. As long as he maintained this position, Li Jianting would sooner or later get tired of Fengquan.

Li Jianting said, "I've been sick, and have not received any message either. What exactly is going on?"

Fuman held up the umbrella for Li Jianting while he stood in the rain. "Just investigat—ay, Your Highness, please watch your feet. The steps here are slippery. Let this humble slave hold you! The issue with this case lies in the food. This humble slave and the Ministry of Justice checked Your Highness's meals that day, and the Garden Service prove to be the most problematic of all. The people there are a mixed bag, with people harboring ulterior motives lying low among them."

He downplayed his role in this case and let the Ministry of Department that had been supervising assume full responsibility. So if Fengquan were to die, it would be Kong Qiu's problem. The Grand Secretary was her teacher

who decided whether or not she could ascend to the throne. Even if Li Jianting was displeased, she could not get angry with Kong Qiu.

Li Jianting originally did not plan to get into the sedan chair, but she changed her mind at the last minute and bent over to enter. In high spirits, Fuman called out to Her Highness to slow down, then he tucked in the hanging screen of the sedan for Li Jianting and urged the sedan-bearing eunuchs to hurry towards Mingli Hall. By the time Li Jianting arrived at Mingli Hall, Cen Yu had already been waiting a long time. Standing under the eaves, he saw Li Jianting coming down from the sedan and could not help but furrow his brows.

The Heir Apparent had never been one for these before. That was how she could get into the good graces of the ministers. How was it that the moment the Empress Dowager fell from grace, she could not even walk even a few steps anymore?

Cen Yu paid his obeisances to Li Jianting, who stood under the eaves and returned the greetings. Cen Yu did not enter the hall immediately, but said with solemn deference, “Rain in spring is as precious as oil. The fertile farmlands of the eight cities are all affected by this rain. Your Highness has yet to ascend to the throne, and has no title to your name, so how can you ride a sedan in the palace?”

As if enlightened, Li Jianting gathered her sleeves in apology and said, “This student has realized the error of her ways.”

Fuman had been following behind when he heard this. How could he let the Heir Apparent bear the blame? He was the one who arranged for the sedan, so he hurriedly said, “Her Highness has just recovered from a major illness, and her esteemed health is precious. What’s more, this rain is so heavy...”

Cen Yu’s countenance abruptly changed. He bellowed, “Her Highness and I are in the midst of conversation as student and teacher. How dare a eunuch interrupt!”

Bemoaning his blunder, Fuman immediately kneeled and kowtowed. “This humble slave, this humble slave...”

To think that in his anxiety, he had violated the taboo between the eunuchs and court ministers!

Cen Yu and Kong Qiu were both people who had been through the undermining and corruption of state politics by the Pan faction, so it was with a passion that they hated palace eunuchs meddling in governmental

affairs. Fuman usually moved around in the office compound, and his merit lay in the fact that he was willing to play dumb and would never butt in. He had just arrived to serve the Heir Apparent today, and already, Cen Yu could see how he dared to arrange for a sedan and butt into their conversation. If he allowed him to remain for a few more days, wouldn't that lead to an absolute collapse of order?!

"Since you dare to break the Heir Apparent's habit today, then you will dare to mess with the Heir Apparent's court administration in the future!" Cen Yu was flushed with anger. "The audacity of you, castrated crook!"

Fuman kowtowed until his forehead was adorned with new bruises overlapping old bruises.

Li Jianting piped up, "It was my fault, Teacher..."

Cen Yu promptly said, "Your Highness is the Heir Apparent. The sovereign ought to keep his distance from the crafty sycophants! Men, strip him of his covering and drag him away!"

Fuman was a eunuch of the Directorate of Ceremonial. According to the rules during the reign of Yongyi, Cen Yu must never bellow and order him around like this. Hearing the guards' footsteps, both of Fuman's hands trembled as he shuffled towards Li Jianting on his knees and pleaded, "This humble slave deserves death! This humble slave..."

The guards stripped Fuman without so much a word and dragged him to the open space in front of Mingli Hall. Rain poured down over them. Fuman kneeled in the middle, his lips turning blue from the freezing cold.

Cen Yu commanded, "Slap his mouth!"

A guard lifted the hem of his robe and stood before Fuman to give him a slap with such force that Fuman's left ear rang. He did not dare to dodge or yell. Without giving the order to stop, Cen Yu turned around to lift the hanging screen and motioned for Li Jianting to enter, leaving Fuman out cold in the open space.

The sound of slapping never stopped.



#### Footnotes

1. From the quote "Qin lost his deer, and all under heaven chased after it" 「秦失其鹿，天下共逐之」 from Records of the Grand Historian • Biography of Marquis Huaiyin 《史记·淮阴侯列传》. Deer is a metaphor for the throne. It's an illustration of the rise of

numerous rivaling warlords contesting for supremacy to capture the prize, the empire lost by the Qin Dynasty.

2. 异姓王 Specifically princes, or lords, with different surnames from the imperial family These were conferred princes who were bestowed the title by the Emperor.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 238 : BURNING (WITH ANXIETY)



No one was called to serve in Mingli Hall at this time. Cen Yu lowered the hanging screen and led Li Jianting to a seat. Resuming his usual expression, he said, “I shouldn’t have asked Your Highness to come over while Your Highness is still ill, but this is a matter of urgency, and I had no choice but to rush Your Highness into coming.”

Li Jianting took her seat and said, “Please go ahead and speak your mind, Teacher.”

Feeling uneasy and apprehensive, Cen Yu listened to the continuing sound of slaps outside and cautiously lifted the bamboo blinds by the window. Only when he was certain no one else was around that he said to Li Jianting, “The case of the Dancheng field taxes is about to be concluded soon. It implicates many a number of officials. Liang Cuishan has already started to audit the City of Chuancheng field taxes, and next up will be the Hua Clan of the City of Dicheng. Your Highness is alone in the palace, and us humble subjects are all on edge with anxiety.”

The rear palace of the imperial harem was a forbidden zone, and court ministers were all not permitted to enter. Li Jianting had only just gotten poisoned a while back, and the Grand Secretariat was worried that the Empress Dowager would be driven to take desperate action and hold the life of the Heir Apparent hostage against them.

The sides of Li Jianting’s snow-white cheeks were covered with a velvet collar. She frowned slightly, the flower embellishment between her brows moving slightly in response to the movement. “We are now at the

critical juncture with the conclusion of the City of Dancheng field taxes and field surveyance. There mustn't be any delay. The various teachers need not slow down the process for my sake. Just go by the book."

Cen Yu used to be prejudiced against Li Jianting, but the Heir Apparent had a dignified bearing and she was a keen learner to boot. She deferentially addressed them all as "Teachers", and now she was even willing to put her life on the line for the commoners' fields. Emotions welled up in Cen Yu, and he lifted the hem of his robe to kneel to Li Jianting. As he kowtowed, he said with an indistinct sob, "Your Highness... this is really... too aggravating an injustice for Your Highness!"

Li Jianting got out and lightly helped Cen Yu up. "Teacher, please get up quickly."

Cen Yu wiped his tears with his sleeves. "Your Highness, please look out for your safety in the palace. If the Empress Dowager dares to coerce Your Highness, we will undoubtedly fight with our lives."

Li Jianting sighed with deep feeling. "I'm not deserving of it. But Teacher, the Marquis of Helian of Chuancheng is an old family friend of the Han clan of Wucheng. This is a perilous task to undertake."

Seeing Li Jianting being so frank with himself, Cen Yu remembered Han Cheng and could not help feeling sorrowful. As court officials, they boasted themselves of being ministers loyal to the state, and yet they left the Heir Apparent stranded in the palace, leading each day in imminent danger of death. Tears streamed down his aged eyes as he said, "Han Cheng has the Capital Command Troops in his control... We do not dare to act arbitrarily. It has been hard on Your Highness."

"Han Cheng's squandering of public funds is common knowledge among the imperial court and common folks. What's more, he's narrow-minded and unwilling to tolerate others. Teacher is the one being put on the spot. The Eight Great Training Divisions, as the Capital Command Troops, have been sticking to their old ways in recent years and accomplished nothing ever since the reign of Xiande when Xi Gu'an was still around." Li Jianting slowed down at this point. "The Capital Command Troops and the Empress Dowager share a common lot. It's indeed tough if the various Teachers wish to take disciplinary action against Han Cheng."

Cen Yu did not expect the Heir Apparent to see through it so clearly, thus he said, "Commander-in-chief Qi is still in Qudu now, and the Qidong Garrison Troops are just beyond the city gate. The situation is already at a



point where there is no time to lose. Us humble subjects have to remove Han Cheng as soon as possible.”

Li Jianting said, “Commander-in-chief Qi is here to accompany Eldest Madam Qi home for a visit, so there are only a few thousand Garrison Troops in the entourage. If they were really to come to blows, I’m afraid Qidong would be too late to come to the rescue, and Qudu would be in a dangerous situation.”

The Eight Great Training Divisions had 20,000 soldiers. Not only were they familiar with the streets of Qudu, they also controlled the opening and closing of the city gate. What’s more, Han Cheng had the Imperial Bodyguards to be his informants. He could keep an eye on Qi Zhuyin’s movements at all times. Half a month had already passed since the day at the prison when Qi Zhuyin obscured the facts and deceived Han Cheng. Han Cheng should have already realized it by now.

Li Jianting stood up and saw Fuman still getting slapped through the gap in the bamboo blinds. Her expression remained unchanged, but the gaze in her eyes was cold and indifferent. Her tone towards Cen Yu, however, was still mild and gentle. “I have a plan that can remove Han Cheng.”

“Your Highness, please go on,” Cen Yu promptly said.

“The inner court has been just like an ornament after the reign of Xiande. Han Cheng is complacent and full of himself now that the Eastern Depot is empty,” Li Jianting said. “To remove Han Cheng, we need to have the assistance of the palace eunuchs.”<sup>1</sup>

The color drained from Cen Yu’s face as he said in horror, “The Pan faction undermined court politics for a mere ten years, and they ruined court discipline to such an extent. The Secretariat Elder did his utmost in order to get the inner court to relinquish power. Your Highness, these castrated eunuchs must never be used!”

“Wrong, Teacher.” Li Jianting turned around and said to Cen Yu, “The corruption of state politics by the eunuch clique is, in truth, the fault of the Son of Heaven. These palace eunuchs are the domestic slaves of the Son of Heaven. They can be used, but not entrusted with heavy responsibility.”

Li Jianting was taught by Xue Xiuzhuo, so she was very familiar with the Pan faction during the reign of Yongyi to the reign of Xiande. Like Kong Qiu, Cen Yu, and the rest of the Grand Secretariat ministers, she had misgivings about the palace eunuchs. But being a minister and being a sovereign were two separate matters. The forces around authority and

power were just like the surge of undercurrents. They were impossible to eradicate clean, and only by using them would one be able to hold them in check.

“The *Hanshi* Festival<sup>2</sup> is right around the corner. As usual, the palace has to host a banquet for its officials. The time when Han Cheng removes his blade and enters,” Li Jianting raised her hand to pull off the golden hairpin in her hair, “is the time to act.”

As the commander of the Imperial Bodyguards-cum-viceroy of the Eight Great Training Divisions, Han Cheng had the right to carry his blade with him when he came and went. But during the reign of Tianchen when Li Jianheng met with an assassination attempt, an exception was made for Shen Zechuan to become Li Jianheng’s guard. The authority to carry blades was then split apart, and the blade-bearing guards during banquets were all personally appointed by the emperor himself. Now that Dazhou had no emperor, Han Cheng had to attend the banquet without his blade.

Cen Yu looked at that golden hairpin. The fingers holding the golden hairpin were slender and pale from having resided indoors for a long time. The Heir Apparent had gotten so thin after this illness that her bones were prominent, and her wrist, which lay covered under the brocade, exuded toughness.

Cen Yu lifted the hem of his robe and prostrated over the ground, sobbing. “Han Cheng is well-versed in martial arts. What are we to do if he gets violent in the face of danger and hurts Your Highness?!”

“Commander-in-chief Qi won a battle at the Bianjun Commandery in spring. The Grand Secretary can grant her a seat at the feast as a commendation. Han Cheng is the viceroy of the Capital Command Troops. Let him sit side by side with Commander-in-chief Qi.” Li Jianting had given this matter careful deliberations. “Have Fuman and Fengquan lead the palace eunuchs. As long as Han Cheng strides through the palace gate, there will be no return for him.”

It was when Cen Yu listened to this point that he truly got a feel of just how formidable the Heir Apparent was!

The rivalry between Fuman and Fengquan began as early as Emperor Tianchen’s time. Fuman’s placing of Fengquan in the forefront of his investigation this time was precisely to eliminate those who opposed him. He wanted to climb to the top of the inner court and become the Seal-holding Director of the Directorate of Ceremonial after Li Jianting’s

ascension to the throne. This person was adept in the art of flattery and had repeatedly changed sides several times. If they were to put him on his own, then it only took a change in the situation and for Han Cheng to entice him with benefits for him to possibly ruin matters. Li Jianting returned Fengquan to his place beside her because Fengquan would never work in cahoots with Fuman after his imprisonment this time. Their mutual misgivings about the other would keep them in mutual check. In fact, they might even continue to pit against each other in order to win the Heir Apparent's trust.

Han Cheng had the military seal of the Capital Command Troops and the authority token of the Imperial Bodyguards on him. Once he died, the Eight Great Training Divisions and Imperial Bodyguards would both be thrown into chaos, and the crisis in Qudu would be easily averted. But if Han Cheng were to attend the banquet without his blade, he would leave his trusted Imperial Bodyguards outside the hall. The time in which they were able to kill him was rather short. Should they fail, then once he issued the call for action, the court officials inside the hall would be in imminent danger.

"This matter has to be carefully planned by Teacher and the Grand Secretary. Not a word of it must get out." Saying so, Li Jianting partially bent over to help Cen Yu up. "Success or failure hinges on this one move."

The frigid wind abruptly swept up the bamboo blinds. Cen Yu met Li Jianting's eyes and gave a severe nod of his head as he answered in a deep, quiet voice, "We will not fail Your Highness for your overwhelming benevolence!"

Meanwhile, Fuman, who was in the rain, had been slapped until both his ears had temporarily gone deaf. Blood was trickling out of the corners of his mouth. He was weeping when he saw Cen Yu stride through the door and watched him with a frosty expression. Dazed, he pleaded, "This humble slave has realized the errors of my ways. Your Excellency, Your Excellency..."

Cen Yu dusted off his sleeves and said, "If not for Your Highness' benevolence, I would not let you off tonight. Forget it. You may take your leave."

The guards withdrew back and returned to stand at attention under the eaves of Mingli hall.

Fuman shifted forward on his knees and repeatedly kowtowed at Cen Yu. "It is as Your Excellency lectured. This humble slave dare not commit such a mistake again."

Li Jianting lifted the hanging screen and stepped out to see the wretched sight of Fuman's face stained with tears and snot. As she lowered her sleeves, she said, "You may leave. Clean up and put on a fresh set of robes. Wait in attendance before the courtyard."

Fuman raised his arm to wipe at the tears on his face. With eyes on Li Jianting's shoes, he kowtowed a few more times. "This humble slave shall do as you command."

As Fuman got to his feet, he hastily bundled up his soaking wet robe. Through the pouring rain, he saw no sign of disdain on the Heir Apparent's face, only a faint hint of compassion.



Kong Qiu dared not make it public as he went about the preparations; all of their discussions took place in their personal residences. They did not gather in groups, but instead used visitation cards to make individual visits. The rain came and went, and in the blink of an eye, it was the *Hanshi* festival.

Fengquan had been recuperating in recent days after having been tortured in prison. Today, he was helping the Heir Apparent affix her flower embellishment. He bowed over in front of the mirror, revealing the marks of torture on his wrist when he lifted his arm.

Li Jianting did not shut her eyes. She watched Fengquan, as if scrutinizing him.

Fengquan's hand trembled slightly under Li Jianting's gaze and almost affixed the flower embellishment in the wrong spot. Li Jianting held Fengquan's wrist with her fingers and guided the flower embellishment back to the center of her forehead.

"What did the physician say over the last few days?"

Fengquan listened to the sound of the breeze stirred up by the palace maids' movements. Avoiding Li Jianting's gaze, he answered. "My gratitude for Your Highness' concern. The physician said that there's no major issue."

Li Jianting got to her feet, and the palace maid in attendance behind her helped to put on her outer robe. Li Jianting turned her head aside to look at

herself in the mirror. She always seemed to be staring at herself in the mirror, as if she was searching for something.

“Update me on the details concerning the Garden Service after the banquet.” Li Jianting adjusted the golden hairpiece by her temples and turned towards the entrance of her palace, no longer looking at that reflection.

Fengquan understood and intuitively stepped forward to support Li Jianting.

Li Jianting took a few steps forward and stepped onto the light on the ground. She lowered her eyes to look at that light. The polished floor reflected the sky outside, making it seem as if she was standing amidst the clouds, and it was at this moment that she was strangely childlike as she stood there for a long time, as though she was reluctant to part from this scene.

Fuman, who was outside, bowed as he walked up the steps and waited by the entrance, saying softly, “Your Highness, it’s time.”

Fengquan felt his shoulders sink slightly. The breeze after the rain swayed the golden hairpin by the Heir Apparent’s temple. The butterfly spun around in a circle and bumped lightly into her coiffed, bound-up hair.<sup>3</sup>

Li Jianting strode out.



Han Cheng rode a carriage to the palace gate, where he saw the Marquis of Helian when he dismounted. The Marquis of Helian had been waiting a long time. When he saw Han Cheng coming over, he hurriedly went up to greet him and headed into the palace with him side by side. “Why have you been turning a blind eye these days? The Chief Surveillance Bureau is impeaching me now, saying that I have forcibly occupied the commoners’ fields. Isn’t this just using a lie to start a fight?!”

Twirling the walnuts in his hand, Han Cheng said, “Tell that to Cen Yu. Do you think he will be willing to believe that? Now that he has the accounts Pan Lin gave him in his hands, he has an estimation of the eight cities’ field taxes.”

“Then we have to think of a way.” The Marquis of Helian followed close behind Han Cheng and spoke in an undertone, “They want to confine the Empress Dowager. I can’t even get to see her now.”

Han Cheng felt that the Empress Dowager herself was a clay Buddha crossing the river; she could not even save herself, let alone others. The

accounts had already been pursued all the way to the city of Chuancheng. Looking at Kong Qiu and the others' stance of fighting to their last breath, they would not stop and let the matter drop like they had in the past. For this matter, he had been having sleepless nights. Stroking his growing beard, he said, "I'm anxious too, but will being anxious help matters?" He cast a glance at the eunuch leading the way in front and whispered to the Marquis of Helian, "The Heir Apparent fell ill but turned up fine. What can we do about that?"

"What kind of loyal and righteous thing is Fuman?" The Marquis of Helian walked fast, sweating slightly. "Eunuchs like them don't recognize the words loyalty and righteousness. And given the type of poison 'swift pursuit' is? I don't believe a word he says at all. He must have tampered with it, not daring to offend the Grand Secretariat. Isn't he now serving by the Heir Apparent's side? They are all a low-down bunch."

Seeing as they were about to arrive at their destination, Han Cheng tucked the walnuts under the robe on his bosom at the same time the eunuch withdrew. He gave a slight nod to the guard and said to the Marquis of Helian, "Follow me to my residence for a discussion after the banquet. This is not the place to talk with so many eyes around here."

The Marquis of Helian was burning with anxiety, but he had no choice other than to acquiesce and follow right on Han Cheng's heels into the hall.



#### Footnotes

1. Refer to Author's Note in [chapter 7](#), the Eastern Depot run by the eunuchs and the Imperial Bodyguards are rivals that sort of hold each other in check.
2. 寒食节 Cold Food Festival, or *Hanshi* Festival; the day before the *Qingming* Festival when people eat only cold food.
3. 云髻 hair rolled up into a bun/coil at the top of the head

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 239 : JIANING



Particular attention was paid to the seating arrangements during the *Hanshi* Festival. When Han Cheng took his seat, he saw Qi Zhuyin to his left. He held up his sleeves and asked, “When is Commander-in-chief Qi going to return to Qidong? The rain of *Qingming*<sup>1</sup> comes and goes so abruptly that it makes traveling on the bridle path tough.”

The eunuch next to Qi Zhuyin was in the midst of pouring wine. The wine vessels of the palace were all classy and of top quality, and they were a pretty sight to behold when filled with amber-colored wine. Qi Zhuyin rotated the wine cup and answered as she scrutinized it, “The Bianjun Commandery has been pressing for our return. I ought to have left a long time ago, but the rain in Qudu keeps falling. I’m in a spot too.”

Ain’t that the truth.

Han Cheng sneered inwardly to himself. The matter was not over yet, so how would the Grand Secretariat dare allow Qi Zhuyin to leave? The lives of those like Kong Qiu and their family all hinged on the Qidong Garrison Troops, and they were hoping that they could remove him from the equation while Qi Zhuyin was still in Qudu.

Han Cheng said to Qi Zhuyin from a distance, “Head out along the Mount Feng military drills grounds. There’s a bridle path to the south leading directly to Hezhou. It’s a newly constructed path that runs along the Kailing River. Discuss it with the Ministry of War later, Commander-in-

chief Qi. It's much faster to go from here. The war with the Qingshi Tribe may be over, but there are still the other tribes. The Qidong Five Commanderies' Garrison Troops are all waiting for Commander-in-chief Qi's deployment order. Even I get anxious to hear about it."

Although Han Cheng was a narrow-minded person, he was well-informed. No doubt he had some true worth to be able to sit at the same table with Cen Yu and the others. In addition, he had been to many places for fieldwork, and he was familiar with all the routes, so in this aspect, Qi Zhuyin would not be able to hide it from him.

"I'll wait for an opportunity, I guess." Qi Zhuyin set the wine cup down. "It's all hard to say at this point."

As they conversed, they saw the junior marquis Fei Shi arrive too. Fei Shi and Pan Lin were bosom friends. He had taken ill these days after getting news of Pan Lin's death and no longer went out to have fun. It was not easy to catch sight of him even once.

"Marquis junior went over to join the Eight Great Training Divisions?" Qi Zhuyin asked.

"Pan Chengzhi's death shook him up, and he suddenly bucked up and wanted to seek a job." Han Cheng drank some wine. "There are no vacancies in the imperial court, and only the Eight Great Training Divisions can take him in, so I had him transferred to the Chunquan Battalion."

The Chunquan Battalion was equipped with firearms. Qi Zhuyin thought of those firearms from King Yi of Fanzhou and remembered the Scorpion in Qudu. She heaved a long sigh, finally willing to look Han Cheng in the eyes. "Commander Han."

Han Cheng hurriedly leaned forward, making a show of being all ears.

Qi Zhuyin's expression was grave as she said, "I'm hungry."

Han Cheng promptly burst out laughing. "Commander-in-chief Qi was not in Qudu for the past years and did not know that you had to first fill your stomach before the banquet." He lowered his voice. "It's all cold food at the *Hanshi* Festival Banquet.<sup>2</sup> There is more of a spread served during the Mid-Autumn Festival, with fine wine and crabs. What a beautiful sight it is to be sitting in the imperial garden admiring the moon and flowers."

Both of them chatted rather merrily until the eunuch outside the hall announced the Empress Dowager's arrival in a resounding, crystal clear voice. Only then did they rise to their feet and retreat behind the small



tables, where they kneeled and prostrated themselves to pay their respects in unison with Kong Qiu.

The Empress Dowager was wearing a twelve dragons and phoenixes crown inlaid with gold and precious gems, as well as earrings adorned with eastern pearls. All poised and stately dressed, she showed no hints of the weariness that came with suffering a setback. She merely said “*you may rise*” after she took her seat in a dignified manner and uttered nothing more. The officials bowed once again, and it was only when they paid their obeisances that the Heir Apparent, Li Jianting, strode into the hall.

Qi Zhuyin’s capacity for wine was average. The few toasts she made to Han Cheng while engaged in small talk with the latter during the feast were all politely declined. Han Cheng did not bring his blade with him, so he was cautious. He kept his eyes constantly on the entrance of the hall, where he had set up his guards.

Kong Qiu led the officials to toast the Empress Dowager and then the Heir Apparent. The atmosphere of the feast was in full swing when Fuman commanded the eunuchs to serve the dishes. The officials from the Hanlin Academy dished out one witty remark after another, the few jokes they told causing the officials at the feast to bowl over with laughter. Even the Empress Dowager’s expression had softened and relaxed some.

Li Jianting rose at the appropriate moment and held up the wine cup to toast the Empress Dowager.

The Empress Dowager looked at her affectionately and said, “My good child does resemble Emperor Guangcheng so. I feel reassured to leave the empire in your hands in the future.”

Li Jianting was already at this age. What “future” was there to speak of?

Li Jianting stood with a bow and drank up all the wine. A faint flush crept into her cheeks, making her look bashful. Playing the role of a filial child to the Empress Dowager’s compassionate mother, she said, “This Imperial Grandchild is dense and has limited knowledge of political affairs. I do not know when I will see the light, so I will still need Imperial Grandmother to supervise and exhort me daily.”

Li Jianting had yet to be involved in government and political affairs. Before the case of the Dancheng’s field taxes, all she was listening to in Mingli Hall were reports the Grand Secretariat submitted as mere formalities. There were indeed many political issues in which her

understanding was scant. But Kong Qiu and the others taught her out of selfish motives, analyzing and explaining them to her during lessons, so these words of hers were also merely polite banalities.

The Empress Dowager drank the wine with Li Jianting.

Before the Heir Apparent ascended to the throne, all government administration affairs should be decided by the Grand Secretariat led by Kong Qiu, the minister assisting the ruler in governance. The authority of the Empress Dowager to act in place of the Son of Heaven was originally a symbolic right to annotate, endorse, and make a decision on a memorial. Still, the Empress Dowager, in relying on the noble clans and the Capital Command Troops to influence court administration, had long deviated from the supervisory role Li Jianting spoke of.

Li Jianting bowed and retreated. Once her wine cup was refilled, she toasted Kong Qiu, and teacher and pupil both mutually bowed to each other. She did the same in successive order down the ranks until she finally came before Han Cheng.

Reed pipes music was being played in the hall at this time. The hanging drapes at the entrance were lowered, shrouding the palace door under the shadows. Han Cheng returned the bow. When he finished his wine, he heard Li Jianting say, "Commander Han is the former emperor's right-hand man who also serves as the Viceroy of the Capital Command Troops. I have the highest esteem for your meticulous work and valuable service."

As she spoke, Fuman, who was behind her, refilled the wine cup again. On seeing that, Han Cheng hurriedly said, "Your Highness thinks too highly of this old subject; I'm not deserving of such high praises."

Li Jianting smiled. Traces of exhaustion from her illness was still visible in her face, and this one smile unexpectedly turned out to be rather gentle and mild as she jokingly said, "Teacher is the Grand Secretary of the Grand Secretariat, and Commander Han is a veteran old-timer of the Imperial Bodyguards, so how can I favor one over the other?"

Hearing Li Jianting putting him on par with Kong Qiu and piling on words that seemed to be playing up to him, Han Cheng assumed that the Heir Apparent was frightened by what happened the last time and so wanted to ingratiate herself with both sides to play peacemaker.

Han Cheng held up the wine cup with both hands and faced Li Jianting. "This subject is but a mere soldier. How would I dare to compare myself to the Grand Secretary? Your Highness, here's a toast to you."

Li Jianting looked at Han Cheng as she covered her mouth with her sleeve and drank up the wine in the cup. Fuman refilled it to the brim immediately right after. The wine vessel<sup>3</sup> she had was different from a wine cup, with a deep base and a large capacity. Just two rounds later, Han Cheng had already broken out in a sweat and had no wish to drink any further.

“Your Highness.” Han Cheng’s capacity for wine was passable, but when he got a little tipsy and remembered it was all his men outside this hall, he could not help but let down his guard some as he said to Li Jianting, “Your Highness is still young. With the administration of governmental affairs going by the Grand Secretariat’s rulings, you inevitably neglect to inquire about military affairs. The Grand Secretariat wants to cut the military expenses of the Capital Command Troops this year. That won’t do, Your Highness. Our Capital Command Troops have the important responsibility of both patrols and defenses. We don’t even have a decent military drill ground now, and yet our military expense is still going to be cut. This...”

On hearing this, Kong Qiu, who was standing behind Li Jianting at the side, frowned. He butted in to cut off Han Cheng. “No political talks during the banquets. Why are you grouching about all these to Her Highness?”

Han Cheng drank his wine and grasped the wine vessel in his palm. Smiling hypocritically at Kong Qiu, he said, “Boran, you people drew up the writ wanting me to give in, so I can only voice my difficulties when I meet Her Highness in person. The Chief Surveillance Bureau has been pushing the Marquis of Helian hard these days. He is an honest person, but Cen Xunyi berated him until he has lost all face. Oh, forget it, Your Highness. Just treat it as mere chatter.”

Cen Yu stood up from his own small table and paid his obeisances to both the Empress Dowager and Li Jianting before saying to Han Cheng, “The Chief Surveillance Bureau is in charge of impeachments and is commonly known as the ‘imperial censor’. Every matter it brings forth is a malady of the imperial court. The City of Chuancheng lies close to the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path and links up to the waterways of the City of Dicheng. If there are issues with taxation, then we, as imperial censors, have to bring it up. A joint trial has yet to be set up for the Chuancheng case, and the Grand Secretariat has not really gone into the Marquis of Helian’s crimes in detail. So how can you say I am the one pushing him into

a corner? Seems to me like he's the one pushing the common folks of Chuancheng into a corner."

The music in the hall gradually came to a stop. All the court officials present fell silent.

Han Cheng felt humiliated. He could not stand to see officials from humble backgrounds acting all so morally upright. Never mind when it happened in the past before he made it to the top. Now that he held Qudu's life in his hand, Cen Yu still dared to contradict him in public and make his blood boil. Forcing himself to hold back, Han Cheng said with a smile, "Xunyi, you and I are old acquaintances. I understand you. Since Chuancheng has yet to set up a joint trial, that means the document has yet to be endorsed. Every matter presented still needs to be verified. You can't draw conclusions this arbitrarily."

The Marquis of Helian had no troops and power, and even his accounts had been disclosed to the Ministry of Revenue. He was now so restless with anxiety that he was like an ant on a hot pan. Even if he was resentful deep down, he only dared to speak of it in secret. Seeing as they were about to start a dispute now, he lost his appetite. Setting down his chopsticks, he stood up to persuade them tactfully, "Let's not talk about political affairs during the banquet. No political talk..."

Han Cheng handed the empty wine vessel to the eunuch and bowed once more to Li Jianting. "I have marred Your Highness's enjoyment."

Li Jianting also handed her empty wine vessel to Fuman. "Why take it to heart, Commander Han? However—"

However?

Han Cheng looked up in doubt.

A gust of wind blew in from the palace door, and the hanging drape fluttered slowly. Li Jianting raised a hand to hold up the hair at her temple, which seemed to have gotten mussed up. Her fingertips came into contact with the golden hairpin, and she said to Han Cheng with words clear and distinct, "A toast I may share with you; my blade drawn though, yields no mercy."<sup>4</sup>

The hanging drapes fell to the ground, and the doors slammed shut with a thunderous bang. Han Cheng's eyes widened. He instantly retreated, and in his panic, knocked over the small table. The wine vessels and utensils fell and shattered to pieces in a split second. He called out, "Your Highness —!"

Without getting up, Qi Zhuyin slammed a fist onto the small table, jolting up the porcelain plates, bowls, and chopsticks. She grabbed a golden chopstick and thrust it diagonally towards the side of Han Cheng's neck. Han Cheng waved his sleeve to block the blow. A "thud" rang out from the impact of the collision—turned out he was wearing soft armor and arm guards under his official robe!

Han Cheng picked up the small table by a leg and smashed it right towards Li Jianting. He flew into a rage. "Lass of a whorehouse! How dare you kill me?!"

Fuman looked at Han Cheng throw his weight around and heard the resounding clatter of footsteps from outside the hall. Feeling timid, he took a few steps back with the tray in hand. Beside him, Kong Qiu had already lunged over to shield Li Jianting and ended up getting slammed in the forehead by the small table. He pushed Li Jianting back with all his might, paying no heed to the trickling blood. In that startling turn of events, he shouted, "Don't listen to his nonsense! If we don't eradicate this traitor, there will be no peace in the nation! Kill him! Quick!"

A thunderous crash rang out from the door as the guards outside came slamming into the door when they heard the shouts. Fengquan led a few junior eunuchs to press down on the door bolt and hold the door shut. Every single one of the officials in the hall was terrified. The Marquis of Helian, unable to stand steady on his feet, repeatedly retreated and muttered, "What is this..."

Li Jianting lost her balance while retreating and fell to the ground, her heart pounding. Clutching the golden hairpin, she watched Fengquan rock from the slamming at the door and barked sharply, "Block the door! Han Cheng arranged for armored soldiers to surround the palace. His wild ambition is on display for all to see. If we don't kill him tonight, every one of you here and I will die!"

In the panic and confusion, Cen Yu was not paying attention to where he was stepping and tripped over a wine vessel. Xue Xiuzhuo caught hold of him. He waved his arms towards the inside of the hall and said in an urgent tone, "As long as Han Cheng dies, the rebel forces will be without a leader! Commander-in-chief Qi's reinforcements are right behind. Gentlemen, fear not!"

Having said that, he led by example and pounced at the door, working as one with the eunuchs to push against the door.

Han Cheng traded blows with Qi Zhuyin several times, getting the better of her with his well-trained martial arts skills. What's more, he was wearing armor. He pressed Qi Zhuyin hard, causing her to flip over and fall to the ground. The *wuzhu* accessory in her hair promptly broke and scattered. Not daring to tarry, she swiftly rolled over to leave her original spot. No sooner said than done, Han Cheng stomped on the spot where she had just been lying on earlier.

"Qi Zhuyin!" Han Cheng spat hard. "I've been putting up with you. You really think too highly of yourself. Want to triumph over me? Get your old man here!"

Qi Zhuyin did not bring Zhujiu with her. She usually stormed the enemies on the battlefields, so she was at a disadvantage when encountering those proficient in martial arts like Han Cheng. She led Han Cheng back a few steps and was already at Hua Xiangyi's table. Just as she was about to be forced back towards the Empress Dowager, she suddenly picked up Hua Xiangyi's unfinished cup of wine and tilted her head back to down it all. Then she smashed the porcelain cup, bent her index and middle fingers to pinch a broken porcelain piece between them, and wiped her mouth.

"Don't you know?" Qi Zhuyin told it like it was. "My old man had a stroke."

Han Cheng threw a fist right at Qi Zhuyin. She turned to the side to dodge the blow and raised a hand that did not have a porcelain fragment to grab Han Cheng's arm and twisted it back hard.

Han Cheng did not move a muscle.

Qi Zhuyin, though thwarted, did not let go, but kicked out at Han Cheng in the flank. Han Cheng knew she usually wielded an executioner blade, but he never expected her to have such strength to seize and take down a person when she was just a mere woman. He could not break free at all and took the kick. His murderous nature kicked in, and he let loose a bellow. Thuds rang out repeatedly as he used his elbow to jolt Qi Zhuyin off his hand.

Both of them engaged in a savage fight, stomping the debris under their feet into smithereens as they advanced and retreated.

Meanwhile, the imperial court officials blocking the door were all civil officials who relied solely on their courage to engage in a war of strength with the guards at the other end of the door. That gap in the door grew bigger and bigger. Fengquan could already see the ferocious-looking faces

of the guards outside. He suddenly spat a mouthful of saliva at the guards and cursed in a sharp voice, “Despicable bastards wanting to live it up while serving a son of a bitch. Keep fucking dreaming! Push any further, and I’ll flay you!”

He was delicate and refined by appearance. After following the Heir Apparent into the palace, he seemed to have a change of temperament. He did not dare to be reckless and unruly, and no matter who he saw, he was usually all meek and submissive. But he threw all caution to the wind and went all out today, picking up all the tart and scathing words to swear. The officials, too, cursed as well, but they were all men of letters, and even if they had to rack their brains, they had to curse with rhythmic flow, aesthetic sense, and literary grace. And now, hearing Fengquan rattling off a string of expletives like a machine gun, their morales were greatly boosted.

Han Cheng, who was inside, had no wish to engage further. He twisted Qi Zhuyin’s incoming fist to a stop and made to remove Qi Zhuyin’s right arm. Going along with the force, Qi Zhuyin somersaulted and took a blow to the side of her cheek when she landed. The impact from this strike caused her to turn over and crash into a small table at the side. As she propped herself up with her arms, she licked blood that made her tooth ache.

This old dog was truly an expert who wormed his way into Ji Lei’s command, hiding his weaknesses by not making a move and then getting the upper hand when faced up against Qi Zhuyin. How would it have been so easy for him had she been Xiao Chiye with that kind of fearsome arm strength and who was versed in the Ji Clan Boxing Fist?!

Han Cheng pressed in, wanting to kick Qi Zhuyin away by the waist. Qi Zhuyin blocked the blow with both arms and grabbed hold of his leg. She abruptly lifted it up high, turning him over to the ground. Kong Qiu charged out holding a wine jar above his head. Too late to smash it on him, he tossed it aside and latched on to Han Cheng’s arm in a death grip.

For a moment, Han Cheng could not break free with Kong Qiu holding down his left arm. He wanted to turn over and get up, but Xue Xiuzhuo kicked over a small table and knelt at the side, holding down two legs of the table to pin down Han Cheng’s right arm.

With the pressure on both arms, Han Cheng’s expression changed. He hissed aloud, “You despicable lot!”

He jerked himself hard, but Qi Zhuyin leaped to her feet and kicked herself off the ground in a pounce, slicing the broken porcelain shard between her knuckles towards Han Cheng's neck. Han Cheng did all he could to lift his body and took the blow with the armor before his chest. The shard scraped past his neck, drawing out a trail of blood. He was just about to open his mouth when another person lunged at him and wrapped his arms around half of his body.

Gasping heavily for breath, Fuman said, "Commander-in-chief Qi, do it!"

On seeing that it was him, Han Cheng said in a frosty voice with both shock and fury, "A castrated traitor indeed has no righteousness to speak of. I should have killed you a long time back!"

At those words, he really looked as if he was about to stand up, but before he could do so, Qi Zhuyin slammed a fist so hard into him he was knocked back. The force of the blow caused Han Cheng's nose to bleed. He was so full of resentment and hatred that he raised his voice and hollered, "You people are the real traitors by supporting Li Jianting to ascend to the throne! She's merely a whore—"

A squishy plop followed next, and Han Cheng felt an acute stab of pain in his left eye. The pain was so excruciating that he howled with his head tilted back. Amidst the blur of blood, he saw the golden butterfly hanging from the golden hairpin swinging by his cheek.

Han Cheng's voice trembled from the pain. He was already a spent force, like an arrow at the end of its flight. "You... How dare you..."

Li Jianting pulled out the golden hairpin with a shaking hand. Blood splattered over her, sullyng her regal robe. When she saw that Han Cheng was still not dead, she gritted her teeth and closed her eyes to haphazardly stab Han Cheng in the face and neck.

Han Cheng continued, "Whore... You..."

His right eye was injured when Meng pecked it during the downpour in Qudu, and now his left eye was stabbed blind by Li Jianting. He did not look human now, with his facial features a bloody pulp and mouth opening and closing.

"To think... I... meet... my maker..."

Fuman was still pinned down under Han Cheng's back. The latter's blood trickled all over his face, scaring him so much that he shrieked.



With his heart still palpitating, Kong Qiu released his hand and confirmed that Han Cheng was dead. Only then did he heave a sigh of relief and fell onto his butt on the ground.

Han Cheng toppled to the ground, his neck skewed to the side, no longer moving.

Xue Xiuzhuo was gasping for breath too. He stared at Li Jianting with disbelief in his eyes. Li Jianting's bloodstained golden hairpin fell to the ground, making a clear, crisp sound. Both of her hands were washed in blood. Looking as if the sight of Han Cheng frightened her, she took half a step back, holding back the ragged gasps in her throat.

Livestock.

Li Jianting's fingers were shaking badly as she self-mockingly wiped her face under the dead silence. It was as if she was wiping her tears, but all that was left behind were the dark red streaks from her fingers.

I'm not livestock.

Li Jianting met Xue Xiuzhuo's gaze and slowly clenched her fists. Her eyes reddened as she revealed a complicated expression in this sudden change, looking as if she was both crying and laughing.

"I'm not..." Li Jianting squeezed out the words through clenched teeth. She abruptly turned around, facing the doors to the hall, and raised her right hand, as if clenching the power that was once beyond her reach as she enunciated, word for word, "Here stands the Heir Apparent. Who—still wants to be a treacherous traitor?"

The Empress Dowager held on to the handles of her seat for support. Although she was still sitting high up there, she seemed to have returned to the very day she entered the palace. That day, she stood before the towering palace, looking up at Emperor Guangcheng in the prime of his life. Emperor Guangcheng also once stood at the pinnacle of supremacy in the palace with his right hand raised as he said to her, "*Here stands the Son of Heaven.*"

—The Li Clan's Emperor!



#### Footnotes

1. 清明 *Qingming* Festival, or Tomb-Sweeping Day, a time for paying respects to the dead.

2. 寒食节 *Hanshi* Festival, literally Cold Food Festival; the day before the *Qingming* Festival, when people eat only cold food.
3. Sort of like



4. 金樽同(共)汝饮，白刃不相饶 from 明史•列传 History of Ming; words from Emperor Hongwu, Zhu Yuanzhang, to his minister Ru Taisu; i.e., I may tolerate you and drink with you now, but make a wrong step, and I will kill you without mercy.

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 240: ALL OF A SUDDEN



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The heart-stopping Hanshi Festival drew to a close. Xue Xiuzhuo took away Han Cheng's authority token. Having lost their commander and fearing the majestic, regal presence of legitimate royalty, the guards did not dare to charge forth again rashly and retreated under the impact of Li Jianting's "*here stands the Heir Apparent*".

The Eight Great Training Divisions' commanding generals awaiting their orders outside the palace were all keeping watch in the Han residence, where wine was flowing freely as they mingled. They had not received any news thus far.

"Viceroy Han isn't back yet. Could he have been retained by that Kong Boran?"

A lad of the Han clan reclining on the couch sucked hard on his pipe and snorted on hearing it. "Kong Boran may not get along with Viceroy Han, but we have troops in our hands—a 20,000-strong Capital Command Troops that can surround the palace at the slightest movement. Who would dare to act recklessly? They are all scholars too weak even to truss a chicken. Are they really going to pin their hopes on Qi Zhuyin? There's no escape for her either."

Hua the Thirteenth listened to the opera singing on the stage and hummed along as he bobbed his head and rhythmically tapped his folding fan on his palm. "Viceroy Han is a great hero. How are those few people

who are all show and no substance in the palace his match? What are you worrying needlessly for?"

This Hua the Thirteenth was a descendent of common birth from the Hua clan of Dicheng. He poked his nose into the Imperial Army affairs a while back and was taught a lesson by Xiao Chiye. He feared Xiao Chiye the Tyrant, so he fled back home and passed the days by fooling around and idling his time away in Dicheng. It was only until Xiao Chiye left Qudu that he dared to step foot in the capital.

"Besides," Hua the Thirteenth raised his folding fan upright to point up and smugly said, "who would dare to lay a finger on Viceroy Han with my paternal aunt there?"

The Han clan lad exhaled smoke, traded glances with him, and laughed. They were all bungling oafs who were good-for-nothing, so there was no disdain to speak of between them.

"Fei Shi will be coming in a few days." The Han clan lad motioned the maidservant to stuff the tobacco into his pipe. "The few of us should organize a feast for him to welcome him. He's been feeling depressed over Pan Chengzhi's death."

Hua the Thirteenth put away his folding fan and turned aside to say, "If you ask me, it's just as well Pan Chengzhi died. If he didn't die, what is he going to do exiled to Huaizhou? He'll have to die in our hands sooner or later, and that will ruin our friendship with Fei Shi. It's tricky."

Pan Lin handed over the eight cities' accounts book. This had to be counted.

Not once had it ever crossed their minds that Han Cheng would never return from this trip. Ever since the reign of Yongyi, the Eight Great Training Divisions had been arrogantly lording it over Qudu. It was only during the reign of Xiande that the Imperial Army led by Xiao Chiye had ever threatened their Capital Command Troops' status, but later, the Imperial Army left, and they became the Capital Command Troops of Qudu again. They ran brazenly rampant, no longer playing it cautious.

The few of them drank wine and made merry, the day getting late as they chatted.

Hua the Thirteenth was tipsy. He leaned back against the chair and propped up his legs, then shouted for the opera singer to give him a leg massage. In his drunken state, he pinched her face and teased, "Young lady, how old are you? You look unfamiliar."

The Han clan lad behind hurriedly craned his neck and bragged, “Know who she is? Xi Hongxuan trained her! She’s a famous figure in Qudu. You won’t find her anywhere else once you step out of this door.”

They teased that opera singer, deliberately using obscene words on her. Outside, the watchman’s clapper struck a few times, and the maidservants in the residence went under the eaves to light up the palace lamps.

Qudu was silent. Qi Wei led the garrison troops to kill the deputy general guarding the city and snuck into Qudu. He kept an eye on the time, and when it was past the third quarter in the hour of chou, he raised his hand and signaled for his subordinates to surround the Han residence.

Hua the Thirteenth was feeling sleepy when he suddenly felt the urge to pee. He rose to go to the latrine, and when he passed through the walkway, he saw a faint light in front. He fixed his eyes on it—Fire!

Hua the Thirteenth was so scared that he lost the urge to pee. Lifting his pants, he ran backward and chased after the maidservants to ask, “It’s burning. Why isn’t anyone going to put out the fire? Hurry! Get the Capital Command Troops waiting in the other courtyard to fetch water to put out the fire.”

This residence was Han Cheng’s. If he returned tomorrow morning only to see his house burned down, they would all have to bear the consequences.

While Hua the Thirteenth was looking around, the lad from the Han clan and the others came out on hearing the noise and stood under the eaves to look out into the distance, only to see the fire intensifying.

“What’s going on?” The lad from the Han clan tensed up as well. “Why hasn’t the fire been put out yet?!”

The guard guarding the courtyard came to the door and answered, “This fire is extremely strange, coming in intermittent waves. Someone must have deliberately set it off. Sixth Master, please come to the door to take a look. The Capital Command Troops shall heed your command!”

The lad from the Han clan did not dare to be lazy when it came to this matter, so he dragged the few people beside him and called Hua the Thirteenth to come along. They hurried towards the entrance, but before they could reach the front, they heard someone ahead yell, “They are killing their way in!”

The color drained from Hua the Thirteenth’s face. “Killing their way in? Who?!”

The surrounding servants were thrown into confusion. Someone answered, "Can't get a clear look. It's all pitch-dark. They simply killed every one of the Capital Command Troops on sight upon reaching the entrance. They are pushing their way in."

The lad from the Han clan was so startled he dropped his pipe. He took a few steps forth, dragging his robe along, then shrank back and yelled, "Quick, pass on the deployment order and transfer all the Capital Command Troops at the military drill grounds over as reinforcements!"

But he did not have Han Cheng's authority token, so there was no way he could mobilize the Capital Command Troops at the military drill grounds.

The sound of killing in the front courtyard pressed in towards them. The Capital Command Troops at the entrance, which had tagged along, could not stop them. Seeing that the situation did not bode well, Hua the Thirteenth paid no heed to the others and ran towards the back with the servants crowding together. The lad from the Han clan could not even brandish a blade, and on seeing that, followed suit and took to his heels too.

Qi Wei broke through the door and entered with a fire in hand to look for the men. He disregarded the chaos in the courtyard and slashed away when he came across men from the Capital Command Troops. The Eight Great Training Divisions had long resided in Qudu, and they had never encountered such a tough nut other than the last time they had to wield their blades when they encircled Xiao Chiye. The few commanding generals cowered back and withdrew, and the soldiers under them followed them around in circles as the garrison troops hacked them back into a retreat.

The garrison troops did not let the fire rage for long. The Eight Great Training Divisions were scattered all over the place, and they had no channels in which to pass on messages to one another, so if the fire was too strong, it would no doubt arouse suspicions. By the time the fire in the Han residence was extinguished, a portion of the courtyard interior had already collapsed. Qi Wei did not let Hua the Thirteenth and the others off and rounded up this bunch of good-for-nothing young masters. Only the lad from the Han clan escaped by worming his way out of a dog hole.

The next day, when a glimmer of light materialized on the horizon, the court officials escorted Li Jianting over to Mingli Hall. A series of imperial edicts were then issued, first to depose the Han clan's noble title, then to denounce Han Cheng for his crimes. There was also the move to confiscate

the Han clan's properties and execute the entire Han clan on the grounds of "collusion with the intent to rebel against the state". The many descendants of common lineage in the Han clan's hometown of the City of Wucheng were a diverse bunch, and on hearing the news, they all took their valuables and fled helter-skelter.

In just a few short days, the storm in Qudu took a sudden turn. The public on the streets did not even have time to react when a new master stepped onto the throne in that imperial palace. The Empress Dowager took to her bed in illness, and despite her busy schedule, Li Jianting still had to revere and attend to the Empress Dowager as her paternal grandmother, the Grand Empress Dowager. Every day, she would personally sample her medicine and keep watch by her bedside to attend to her.

Cen Yu submitted a memorial to exalt the Heir Apparent's virtuousness and filial piety, and the imperial court and the people promptly broke out in praise. The Empress Dowager was old and frail, and the calls for the Heir Apparent's ascension to the throne gradually grew louder by the day.



"The storm in Qudu has subsided." Yao Wenyu sprinkled baits to the brocade carps in the pond. "Commander-in-chief Qi should have returned to the Bianjun Commandery."

"Ce'an has already returned to the war zone. By the time Commander-in-chief Qi returns, it would be time for him to head over to the Bianjun Commandery too." Shen Zechuan turned aside to face the sunlight and scrutinized the jade pendant in his palm. "Han Cheng died too easily."

This news had only just arrived.

Yao Wenyu's fingers still had residual baits remaining between them. "The Empress Dowager, unable to accept that the noble clans have brought about their own downfall, is too powerless to salvage this hopeless situation. After the Heir Apparent ascends to the throne, she will definitely confer a noble title upon Commander-in-chief Qi to prepare for rainy days."

Carrying the jade pendant in hand, Shen Zechuan smiled.

Yao Wenyu continued, "Your Lordship wants Ge Qingqing to return to Qudu and yet would not permit him to make a move. Presumably, you intend to keep him for a greater purpose."

"No hurry about Ge Qingqing. This move will not be effective until the Heir Apparent ascends to the throne." Shen Zechuan looked at Yao Wenyu.

“I’m looking forward to it.”

The branches of the tender willow by the side of the pond swayed as Hunu pounced out after a butterfly and rolled beside Yao Wenyu’s legs, covered in dust all over. Yao Wenyu lowered his hand to stroke it. “Your Lordship is far-sighted.”

“Xue Yanqing wanted a ‘sovereign’, and Heaven really gave one to him.” Shen Zechuan smiled. “But how would a strong, forceful sovereign subject themselves to the mercy of others?”

“Fear,” Yao Wenyu answered softly.

“That’s right.” Shen Zechuan watched as the brocade carps that had swarmed over scattered in a flurry and floated on the water surface as if satiated. “Xue Yanqing is a powerful minister.”

Xue Xiuzhuo played an indispensable role in supporting the Heir Apparent and auditing the field taxes. He did not covet, snatch, or seize lands by force, but he was a powerful minister. The wise emperors of this world did not fear powerful ministers, but they most certainly feared powerful ministers who had no desires and made no demands.

“If Xue Yanqing is willing to make an effort here, then he ought to give the Heir Apparent a chance to get a handle on him,” Shen Zechuan said. “Even if he has to fabricate it out of nothing, he has to give the Heir Apparent a peace of mind.”

The lack of leverage meant that he was not an easy one to control. In addition, there was no way for checks and balances.

Yao Wenyu pondered over it. “That’s the way Xue Xiuzhuo is. He won’t leave a handle behind for Heir Apparent to control him with.”

Shen Zechuan said meaningfully, “Then he’s in danger.”

The line between the loyal and the treacherous was sometimes blurred, and the decision-making power lay in Li Jianting’s hands. Shen Zechuan figured out what happened during the *Hanshi* Festival from Ge Qingqing’s report, and the facts proved that the Heir Apparent was not a mere vase that Xue Xiuzhuo shifted over. She was like a thorn that had taken root on the throne and was now rapidly growing there with perseverance that far surpassed others.

“Since Han Cheng is dead, there’s no point in keeping Han Jin.” Shen Zechuan seemed to have just remembered this person. He said to Fei Sheng behind him, “Open Han Jin’s door and let him go. Send him back to Wucheng.”



Fei Sheng thought Shen Zechuan would retain Han Jin. He never expected Shen Zechuan to cast Han Jin away just like this. He found it a pity, but did not dare speak out of turn.

“Dazhou is in shambles. It remains to be seen exactly how many heroes the Son of Heaven can command.” Yao Wenyu turned his wheelchair. “The Heir Apparent will not get into an internal conflict with Xue Xiuzhuo at this time. What’s more pressing now is the Bianjun Commandery. Commander-in-chief Qi is going to storm and seize the Qingshu Tribe’s territory in the fifth month. The Youxiong Tribe will no longer dare to stand by and watch it go down. I fear it will be another intense battle when the time comes.”

“Qidong has ample military provisions. Qi Zhuyin is not afraid,” Shen Zechuan said. “But Zhongbo will not feed men of no worth. Hairigu has been resting for nearly half a year. It’s time to let him out for a walk.”

Yao Wenyu understood his intention. “Is Your Lordship meaning to send Hairigu to negotiate with the Youxiong Tribe?”

“I heard Amu’er is the leader of only six tribes. The Youxiong Tribe has yet to submit and pledge allegiance to him.” Shen Zechuan was still looking at the water surface. “The Qingshu Tribe’s lands all belong to Amu’er, and their provisions had all been given to Hasen in the northern battlefields. It’s also for the sake of food that the Youxiong Tribe is being forced to go into battle, and we do not lack food.”

Amu’er split up Dazhou with the Scorpions, and now that Shen Zechuan had a batch of Scorpions in his hands, it was a waste to keep them in his hands. He wanted to make Hairigu put himself to use.

“The Qingshu Tribe, Youxiong Tribe, Gedale, and the Huiyan Tribe in the north.” Shen Zechuan looked back. “Bridging these places together is the New Year’s gift I want to send Amu’er.”

What Amu’er stole from Zhongbo, Shen Zechuan could not get back, but he could use a different way to make Amu’er pay. The line from the territory of the Qingshu Tribe to the territory of the Huiyan Tribe just so happened to obstruct the riverbanks of the Chashi River.

“Duanzhou doesn’t have a wall of defense thick enough.” The tassel on Shen Zechuan’s fingertips swayed slightly. “And coincidentally, so does the Youxiong Tribe.”





## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 241 : A FINE WOMAN



Now that the rain in Qudu had come to a stop, it was time for Qi Zhuyin to make her journey back home. She received Hua Xiangyi at the entrance of the palace. The carriage was right by the side, but she secured Zhujiu on her and said to Hua Xiangyi, “Let’s go for a walk.”

Hua Xiangyi noted that Qi Zhuyin’s broken *wuzhu* hairpin still had a golden thread dangling in her hair, as though this was how it should have been. The commander-in-chief did not cut a sorry figure at all—that was, if one could overlook her bruised face.

Qi Wei raised a hand to gesture for the carriage to follow behind him. It was only after Qi Zhuyin and Hua Xiangyi had walked some distance ahead that he followed along.

A warm breeze was presently drifting through the marketplace, where the crowd bustled amidst air reeking with a blend of sweat and deep-fried food. Spring flowers in full bloom a distance away seemed to be coated in a layer of grease, making Qi Zhuyin feel stifled.

As they passed by the sugar figurine<sup>1</sup> stall, Qi Zhuyin asked Hua Xiangyi, “Want one?”

Next to this stall was a path where people and carriage came and went, sending clouds of dust flying all over. Hua Xiangyi was the apple of the Hua clan’s eyes. Before her arrival in Qudu, she rarely went outdoors, instead staying in her courtyard to live a sheltered, pampered life. She

looked at Qi Zhuyin, who fished out her remaining copper coins from her sleeve pocket and flicked them lightly before her. In the ensuing buzz, Qi Zhuyin said with satisfaction, "I have money."

This street was not bright enough, but as Qi Zhuyin pulled the corners of her bruised lips to flash a smile, the lanterns behind her instantaneously lit up in successive order. She was like a young maiden of eighteen or nineteen of age who had run away from home to play, with nothing on her mind except this candy.

Clutching her handkerchief, Hua Xiangyi lifted a finger and pointed to one of them. "I'd like this one."

She felt bashful over her words, and that subtle emotion lay concealed between her eyebrows. This was something she had never done before, and it was also something she would never have done before.

Qi Zhuyin tossed the copper coins to the vendor and gave the sugar figurine to Hua Xiangyi. She did not care if she had no money. She never had money before, anyway. Money never remained for long in her hands.

Hua Xiangyi carefully held the sugar figurine with her fingertips and kept her composure as she scrutinized it by the light. She had once caught a glimpse of a sugar figurine past her attendants in the brief flicker of a moment through the gap of her sedan's screen when it fluttered. There were candies in the palace, and the Empress Dowager used to ask Matron Liuxiang to keep them on hand for her from time to time.

Qi Zhuyin rubbed the bruise on her face with the pulp of her finger and turned sideways to survey her reflection in the water crock through several overlapping shadows.

Qi Zhuyin was a descendant of a noble, but Hua Xiangyi always felt that she did not look the part. She was so sanguine and broad-minded that she resembled a wandering traveler. Hua Xiangyi had been in Qidong for half a year, and she had never seen Qi Zhuyin fly into a rage. It was as if there was nothing worth Qi Zhuyin getting angry over.

"Does Commander-in-chief Qi come here often?" Hua Xiangyi asked.

"All the ones who dare to play loan sharks in Qudu are here. Whenever I come here, chances are that it's to borrow money." As Qi Zhuyin spoke, she removed the hairpin in her hair and said a little regretfully, "That *wuzhu* hairpin was bestowed upon me by the imperial court. All this while, I never dared to sell it. Had I known that it would end up getting broken in the palace, I would've sold it."

Hua Xiangyi said, "The manors at home..."

Qi Zhuyin did not wait for Hua Xiangyi to finish her words. "Just what I wanted to tell you today. The family manors and shops will all be handed over to you to take care of in the future. You'll decide whether to rent them out or sell them away."

She turned around in all seriousness to face Hua Xiangyi.

"Let's speak our mind here."

Qi Zhuyin did not move the conversation to the teahouse. She loved the downtown streets and the marketplace. By standing here, she was making her stance known; she was not afraid to face up to anyone's scrutiny.

"I have to thank you for the matter regarding the eight cities' granaries." Qi Zhuyin bowed slightly to her, her long hair spreading behind her. She straightened up again. "Or it'd have been perilous this time."

Hua Xiangyi turned to the side, not accepting the bow. "The credit goes to Chengzhi."

Qi Zhuyin looked at her. "Pan Lin was not the one who told me, so I'll only thank you."

At Qi Zhuyin's gaze, Hua Xiangyi gripped at the sugar figurine until it nearly melted.

"But I shall be blunt too. Did you tell me about the eight cities' granaries because you wanted me to do something for you?" Qi Zhuyin was straight and direct to the point, totally forgetting all about tact.

This Third Missy Hua was a rather strange one too.

Qi Zhuyin spent sleepless nights tossing and turning, but could not figure out why Hua Xiangyi would reveal the matter about the granaries to her. Had it not been for her reminder in the palace, the outcome of this game would still be an unknown.

Hua Xiangyi bent her fair neck to look at the sugar figurine amid the babel of voices. "Commander-in-chief Qi needs not do anything for me. Just... fight against the Biansha."

Qi Zhuyin gazed fixedly at Hua Xiangyi. All of a sudden, she propped herself on her knees and tilted her head to look at Hua Xiangyi's expression.

"Is that all?" She asked in puzzlement.

Qi Zhuyin gave Hua Xiangyi a fright. This posture was just like the last time Qi Zhuyin lifted her veil, when she had simply charged before her without giving Hua Xiangyi the chance to compose herself.

“You helped Yao Wenyu escape in Qudu...” Qi Zhuyin looked as if she had just woken up from her sleep. She found Hua Xiangyi pleasant-smelling, with a hint of flower fragrance like she expected. But when her wandering mind snapped back to reality, she realized Hua Xiangyi was still holding the sugar figurine, waiting with composure and rapt attention for her to continue.

“...and told me about the granaries.” Qi Zhuyin covered up the fact that her mind was wandering earlier. “Was that because you married my father?”

Hua Xiangyi answered, “Chengzhi was the one who saved Yuanzhuo.”

Qi Zhuyin shook her head and said with certainty. “It was you.”

Hua Xiangyi pushed the credits to the others on these occasions, as if she could not admit to it. The boundary line that hindered her was the Empress Dowager’s love and affection. The last of the sunset glow of the street was swallowed up, and the lanterns shone so bright they looked like falling stars. Meanwhile, the smell of deep-frying dissipated a little, although the marketplace was still hot and stuffy. Hua Xiangyi looked out of place here.

“Back during the reign of Xiande, my paternal aunt would set questions for me from time to time, most frequently during the spring plowing season every year.” Hua Xiangyi lowered the sugar figurine as if twiddling with the shadows of the past. “In truth, they were all accounts of the eight cities. The more I calculated, the clearer I became. I once advised my aunt during the reign of Xiande to let Jiang Qingshan go over, but they thought it was enough for Jiang Qingshan to oversee the thirteen cities. That year, people dying of starvation became a common sight in Zhongbo. In the years that followed, the six prefectures took a further beating from the grains transferred from the eight cities. Too many people died.” She lifted her head gently. “So much more than when the Biansha massacred the cities.”

Hua Xiangyi lived deep in the palace. She donned exquisite silks, feasted on delicacies, slumbered on satin, while those on the other end of the vermilion walls dressed in rags, sold their children for food, and slept in the bitter cold. She stood with the Empress Dowager on the western tower and looked out into the distance. The illusion of prosperity and glory blinded her eyes, but very quickly, she realized that these people never had the thought to stop. Hai Liangyi killed himself in Mingli Hall, and yet the Empress Dowager never thought to change.

“I want my aunt to stop,” Hua Xiangyi said.

The people were the rivers bearing the weight of boats—this was the foundation. Yet the Empress Dowager still wanted to count on the Eight Great Training Divisions to suppress the rumors—that was defying the laws of nature.

The rise and fall of the empire did not lay on the sovereign at all. The world needed only an emperor with the heart that knew to show compassion for all the hardships in this world.

“I’m confined to my chamber, and my abilities are limited. Compared to Yuanzhuo or Chengzhi, what I can do is insignificant in the grand scheme of things.” Hua Xiangyi slowly returned a bow to Qi Zhuyin when she spoke to this point. “Commander-in-chief Qi traverses Qidong and gallops the battlefield. If you can repel the Twelve Tribes of Biansha, that’d be a great service to humankind. And for that reason, I want Commander-in-chief Qi to walk out of Qudu alive.”

Qi Zhuyin received this bow, looking as if she had just recognized who Hua Xiangyi was.

“You are a fine woman.” Qi Zhuyin paused for a moment. “And I shall repay you with military accomplishments on the battlefield.”



## Footnotes



- 1.
2. 糖人; sugar figure is a traditional Chinese form of folk art using hot, liquid sugar, or sugar syrup, to create three-dimensional figures

that come in a variety of shapes from animals to objects. A dragon sugar figure is shown in the picture above.



## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 242 : YOUXIONG (TRIBE)



The fifth month was the height of summer, and it was so scorching hot that the advisors could not stand the heat. All of them hid under the pavilion in the center of the pond, sipping their tea, smoking their pipes, and fanning themselves vigorously with their folding fans. Yu Xiaozai, after drinking his fill of cooled tea, was now feeling rather uncomfortable. Just as he was thinking of making his way over to the latrine, he saw Fei Sheng leading Hairigu over to the courtyard.

“Second Master is going to cross the border within these two days.” Yu Xiaozai wiped the sweat from his neck with his handkerchief. “Is Hairigu tagging along too?”

“He’s a Scorpion.” Kong Ling, keeping himself in good health, did not consume cold food; instead, he sat by the cascading water to cool off in the shade. “He can negotiate with the Youxiong Tribe.”

This was at the Prefectural Lord’s behest, so Yu Xiaozai could not refute. He nodded and sat next to Yao Wenyu. “I heard the Youxiong Tribe people are all strong and sturdy, and they ride horses that are big and tall, unlike the other tribes in the desert.”

Gao Zhongxiong had never seen the Youxiong Tribe before either. He stayed his brush, and as he dipped it in ink, he turned his head and waited with Yu Xiaozai for Yao Wenyu’s answer.

Yao Wenyu closed the book on his lap. "The Youxiong Tribe is a large tribe in the southwest of the desert. Before Amu'er rose to power, the strongest tribe in the desert was the Hanshe Tribe, followed by the Youxiong Tribe. The Youxiong Tribe used to be stationed in the east of Suotian Pass. They have their own horses, so they don't use the ponies from the Gouma Tribe. The horses of the Youxiong Tribe are also called the 'bear horses'.<sup>1</sup> They are even bigger than the war steeds from Libei."

Gao Zhongxiong initially thought that it was rumors Yu Xiaozai was talking about; he never expected it to be true. Alarmed to hear it, he said, "I heard rumors of the Youxiong Tribe while I was in imperial college. Back then, the Feng clan was the one to guard over Suotian Pass. 'Silver Spear of the Snowy Pass', Feng Yisheng! General Feng was the one who fought the Youxiong Tribe back to the east."

The four generals of Yongyi were renowned: Silver Spear of Snowy Pass, Feng Yisheng; Iron Wings of Hongyan, Xiao Fangxu; Thunderbolt of Cangjun, Qi Shiyu; and, Flying Frost of Bianjun, Lu Pingyan. They were all men the lads of Dazhou spoke about the most in their early years. Feng Yisheng, like Xiao Fangxu, came from a humble background. When he was fourteen years old, he pointed to the continuous range of snowy peaks of Suotian Pass and made a vow to become Dazhou's impregnable bastion of iron. At forty years of age, he buried his youngest, last remaining son under the snowy peaks. Eventually, he met his end in battle, leaving only his thumb ring carved out of bone to his adopted son, Zuo Qianqiu.

"Yuanzhuo is indeed widely read and knowledgeable. To think you even know about the Youxiong Tribe. In fact, Qidong's earliest battle steeds were bred with the 'bear horses'." Kong Ling said. "When the King of Wolves, Xiao Fangxu, was a junior soldier at Luoxia Pass, all the horses from Luoxia Pass were transferred from Qidong, and they were also of this breed of horse."

"Whoa," Yu Xiaozai exclaimed. "That fierce, huh!"

"When Amu'er unified the four tribes of Hanshe, Gouma, Liaoying, and Qingshu, he had the thought of making the Youxiong Tribe pledge allegiance to him." Feeling cold, Kong Ling got up to return to the table. "They fought, and Amu'er ended up with nothing to show for it."

This time, the interest of the remaining three men was piqued, and they sat around Kong Ling.

Gao Zhongxiong said, "That was the four tribes, elites that would even put the Libei Armored Cavalry at a disadvantage."

"These were different places. The Youxiang Tribe was still roaming near Suotian Pass at that time. They occupied the higher grounds, and it proved to be tedious for the Hanshe Tribe to storm and assault them. Charge before the Youxiang Tribe, and they would take a beating." Kong Ling laughed and enacted it out vividly. "There were always the Youxiang appearing and disappearing among the endlessly meandering snowy peaks. Wielding scimitars in hand and sporting leather armors on their arms, they launched an attack from top to bottom and gave the Hanshe Tribe a kick in the chest. The Hanshe Tribe then tumbled down to the ground and passed out—"

Yu Xiaozai promptly yelled, "Oh, dear me. How terrible!"

Yao Wenyu almost choked and spat out the tea he had not swallowed. Covering his nose and mouth with the handkerchief in his palm, he coughed a few times before regaining his composure.

Kong Ling said with a smile, "Indeed. They fought until Amu'er was at the end of his rope and had no choice but to transfer the Qingshu Tribe near the Bianjun Commandery."

Wiping himself, Yao Wenyu said, "The Youxiang Tribe has its hero too. When General Feng was still alive, the man who faced up against him in battle was called Suhebashou. He was the 'Hero' of the Youxiang Tribe."

Gao Zhongxiong moved forward. "This Su... I know him! Yuanzhuo, I don't know if you still remember, but when I just stepped into the capital, it was the legend of General Feng that I never got tired of listening to in the teahouse near the imperial college. He and this Suhebashou were just like... the King of Wolf and Amu'er!"

"He was a hero," Kong Ling said. "If not for Amu'er, the Hanshe Tribe's current standing would have been occupied by the Youxiang Tribe, led by Suhebashou. He was both Feng Yisheng's foe and friend. There was this one tale from the teahouses in Dengzhou. I don't know if it's fabricated, but it is said that when Feng Yisheng shot through the Hongying banner<sup>2</sup> that symbolized the dignity of Biansha, Suhebashou applauded in response. Both men looked at each other across thousands upon thousands of soldiers and horses and roared with laughter. From then on, they would always mutually send their regards to each other before a battle."

Gao Zhongxiong gripped his brush between his fingers and struck a pose to imitate that storyteller. “General Feng, sans his armor, stood amid the snow with his hands at his back and his white robe flapping in the wind, cutting the very picture of a poised, suave man. Suhebashou, cloaked with a fur hide, cupped his fists at the General across the curtain of snow and, in a loud, clear voice, said—”

“Are the grain wagons for the Armored Cavalry ready?”

Gao Zhongxiong paused in mid-pose. Before he could close his agape mouth, he saw Kong Ling and the others all stand up to bow in unison to Shen Zechuan behind him.

“They are ready,” Kong Ling said. “Fei Sheng has already checked them this morning. Qiao Tianya will send them out of the city later.”

Shen Zechuan tapped the back of Gao Zhongxiong’s shoulder with his folding fan and said, “I am Suhebashou, Valiant Tiger<sup>3</sup> of the Youxiong Tribe. I’ve brought along kumis<sup>4</sup> from my hometown. The wine is delicious, and I wish to wait for the General to finish it before we fight.”

Gao Zhongxiong put down his brush in a fluster and turned around to bow to the Prefectural Lord.

“No need to be nervous,” Shen Zechuan said. “As they say, ‘of dreams the lads of Dazhou bear of the snowy pass, who knows not of the Suotian spear?’ Shifu used to love to listen to this tale too.”

Hairigu stood at the entrance of the pavilion and said, “Suhebashou, the Valiant Tiger of the Youxiong Tribe. I know of him too.”

Fascinated with the story, Yu Xiaozai probed, “What happened to both of them after?”

Kong Ling did not answer. Hairigu picked up a fruit on the table and took a bite before saying, “Suhebashou killed Feng Yisheng’s youngest son, and he also killed Feng Yisheng. He was then driven out of Suotian Pass by Amu’er and spent some time in Gedale before retreating behind the Qingshu Tribe.”

This was a strange man.

Hairigu remembered Suhebashou, the legendary Valiant Tiger and hero. He abandoned himself to pleasure and merrymaking in Gedale. Every time he was drunk, he always wanted to pound on the drum and dance in honor of the dead. This tall, strapping man had white in his hair. He was not old, and yet he looked as though he had already died.

“I had a friend.” Suhebashou drank his wine under the firelight. “He drank my kumis, and killed my sons. I took my revenge on him, and he left me.”

He turned the wine sachet upside-down—empty.

“We are the brave eagles<sup>5</sup> on both sides of the snowy peaks. If we have to die, it has to be at each other’s hands.”

“A pity he died.” Hairigu finished his fruit. “He caught a cold in Gedale and was too ill even to get up. The Hanshe Tribe surrounded him. He finished all the kumis in the tent by himself. Eventually, he took his scimitar with him and died in battle on the Gobi desert. Gegenhasi<sup>6</sup> of the Hulu Tribe cut off his head and offered it up to Amu’er.”

Yu Xiaozai uttered an “oh” and said no more.

The crowd in the pavilion at the heart of the pond all fell silent.

Using Suhebashou’s head, Gegenhasi helped turn the Hulu Tribe into a friend of Amu’er. At the same time, he also became Hasen’s friend. Several years later, the hooves of Xiao Fangxu’s horse stomped on Gegenhasi’s neck, breaking it. And several more years later... Kong Ling did not voice it out.

“With Hairigu going to the Bianjun Commandery, does Your Lordship still want Huo Lingyun to tag along?” Yao Wenyu skipped over the topic and asked.

“Huo Lingyun is not going to the Bianjun Commandery.” Shen Zechuan turned his head to look out of the cascading water, where Huo Lingyun stood with his back straightened. He continued, “His firearms are heading north.”



The next day, Xiao Chiye led the Armored Cavalry across the border. Shen Zechuan stood on the bridle path before the city gate and watched the yellow sand roll in. Meng circled down and called out twice above Shen Zechuan’s head; it then soared once more and charged southward.

Hearing the thunderous sound of the Libei Armored Cavalry, Fei Sheng stepped forward and moved to block out the sand for Shen Zechuan. Shen Zechuan held up his folding fan a little and stopped Fei Sheng from standing before him.

Lang Tao Xue Jin, in its heavy armor, snorted hot puffs of air and drove straight over from the other end of the bridle path where it was leading the Armored Cavalry. A smile gradually spread on Shen Zechuan’s face, and he

raised his right arm as Xiao Chiye drew closer. His wide sleeve slid down to reveal the arm guard within.

With eyes in front and without reining in his horse, Xiao Chiye lowered an arm as he passed by Shen Zechuan. A loud, clear “thud” rang out as both arm guards bumped together and scraped past in just a blink of an eye.

The wind fanned up Shen Zechuan’s sleeves and robe. He said, “To a resounding victory.”

Xiao Chiye laughed as he continued to spur his horse on towards the blazing sun. In a loud voice, he responded, “A resounding victory!”

Waves of heat swept across while the windblown sand pounced over the path.

Both men brushed past each other, neither looking back.



#### Footnotes

1. Youxiong is a tribe that takes the bear as its totem. The Biansha Tribes’ names are based on animals. For a list, you can refer to to the [Worldmap guide!](#)
2. Literally rainbow hawk/eagle/falcon
3. Literally ferocious tiger, aka brave warrior
4. 马奶酒 kumis, also written as kumiss or koumiss, is an alcoholic beverage traditionally made from fermented mare’s or camel’s milk.
5. Literally brave eagle, aka heroic fighter.
6. For those who can’t remember him, check out the new [searchable character list!](#)



## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 243 : STRIVE



The Bianjun Commandery, in facing the desert, was subjected to encroachment by the windstorm. Rarely could one see the blue dome of heaven standing atop the city walls. The dwellings in the territory were all low, and all that could be seen if one were to look into the distance at the open ground was a vast expanse of earthy yellow. Greenery along the way was few and far between, and only a few crooked, sickly trees could be seen after a few *li* on the horse. Wild grass and weeds spread unevenly among the Gobi, much like an old master over the age of fifty about to go bald.

Xiao Chiye's helmet was covered in a layer of dust. He took off his helmet and, with his back to the setting sun, looked ahead at the Bianjun Commandery's city walls drifting among the waves of sand.

"This place really is poor." Hairigu leaped off his horse, and the accessories around his neck clanked. He unscrewed his water canteen and tilted his head back to pour water over his face. With eyes closed, he said, "The Scorpions won't come here at all."

The Bianjun Commandery had no fields, and the lands underfoot were too barren and infertile. They were already exposing signs of cracking apart under the scorching hot sixth month. Xiao Chiye shifted his military boot away and watched the insect crawling between the crevices in the loess.

"The grasslands east of Suotian Pass that Amu'er went to great effort to obtain were hit by an onslaught of yellow sands and subsequently turned into a wasteland during the first year of the Xiande reign. Consequently, the Qingshu Tribe abandoned it and retreated back to the eastern side of the Bianjun Commandery." Hairigu brushed back his wet hair. "His Lordship



wants me to discuss with the Youxiong Tribe, but doesn't give me bait. This business requires brains. And of that, I have none."

Hairigu was not honest. He knew how he should negotiate, just like he negotiated with Yan Heru. This Black Scorpion knew the rules. Shen Zechuan did not give him a definite bait, which implied that no matter how good a deal he managed to negotiate, Shen Zechuan had the final say over his rewards. However, Hairigu wanted to glean an opportunity to bargain from Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye did not look at Hairigu as he answered, "You better have one."

Hairigu rubbed the back of his neck, looking a little embarrassed. The water he poured over himself soon vanished. His skin, that lay exposed under the sweltering heat, was a shade of bronze. Hairigu sealed back the water canteen and redoubled his effort. "I'll give the Youxiong Tribe food to tide over the winter. With ample food, they'd be able to remain in their territory."

"If that's all you can do," Xiao Chiye's eyes followed the movements of the shadows and settled upon the city gate of the Bianjun Commandery, "then anyone can negotiate this deal."

Having hit a brick wall continuously, Hairigu rubbed his congested nose and said, "Alright then. I'll give them new options."

The gate of the Bianjun Commandery was in the midst of opening. Qi Zhuyin stood before the hoisted gate with her arms folded and her blade hanging on her waist. She had gone on a night expedition last night to conduct reconnaissance, and she had only just returned at the end of the day today. She looked fatigued, having slept for only four hours, and she did not seem that happy to see Xiao Chiye.

"Yo," Qi Zhuyin said. "You're here."

Xiao Chiye tossed his authority token to Qi Zhuyin, who caught it and offhandedly handed it over to Qi Wei without even looking at it. Then she turned around and led Xiao Chiye into the city.

"When I arrived here in the fourth year of Xiande, Lu Guangbai said he wanted to plant trees." Xiao Chiye's heavy armor was scalding hot under the last rays of the setting sun. "So why is the Bianjun Commandery still so barren?"

"That was wishful thinking on his part." Qi Zhuyin's neck was sore from her sleep, so she exercised her head a little. Watching the lanterns on

the streets gradually lighting up, she said, “The sandstorm was strong during the sixth year of Xiande. He saved up some money to buy a batch of seedlings from Hezhou and planted them at the border while it was still spring. But they barely made it to the end of the month before the cavalry trampled over them.”

“Was Hasen the one stationed in the Qingshu Tribe at that time?” Xiao Chiye mounted the steps and placed his helmet to the side. He then sat with Qi Zhuyin and watched the armored cavalry enter the city.

“It was.” Qi Zhuyin did not sit, instead leaning against the door with her chin dipped in the evening glow. “The letter you had Zhao Hui deliver has long arrived. There will be a tough battle to fight in the sixth month, but only on the premise that Hasen will really turn around and head south to attack Duanzhou. If he doesn’t come, the Sha’er Camp will have to bear the consequences of your deployment of troops this time.”

“Amu’er has united with the Hulu Tribe and is still persuading the Youxiong Tribe to pledge allegiance to him. Meanwhile, Hasen has not much food left,” Xiao Chiye said. “He *has* to go to Duanzhou to obtain provisions.”

“You brought along a Scorpion,” Qi Zhuyin said. “What is Shen Zechuan planning to do?”

“When Hasen attacks Duanzhou, his reinforcements have to stop at Gedale on the opposite bank of the Chashi River. Only the Youxiong Tribe can intercept me in the southeast.” Xiao Chiye stretched out his legs.

“Lanzhou wants to negotiate with the Youxiong Tribe.”

“Then he has to present them with enough sincerity.” Qi Zhuyin stood up straight and raised an arm to point at the snowy peaks far away in the south. “The bears<sup>1</sup> have owned pastures in the south. Shen Zechuan’s granaries can’t fill their stomachs. They’re greedy in ways you can’t even imagine.”

Qi Zhuyin—no, starting with Qi Shiyu, Qidong had attempted to negotiate with the Youxiong Tribe in the hope that they would defect to Dazhou like the Huiyan Tribe in the north, but it proved to be too difficult. The Youxiong Tribe was a strong tribe; they were completely different from the Huiyan Tribe with nothing to their name. They believed that their scimitars and ‘bear-horses’ could grab them even better lands, and for that reason, they did not even give a hoot about Amu’er.

“Lanzhou is willing to cede the Hanshe Tribe’s territory to them,” Xiao Chiye said. “They have been roaming all over after leaving Suotian Pass. This is what they want most.”

Qi Zhuyin squatted down and said to Xiao Chiye, “Right, you guys are really too clever. The Youxiong Tribe does indeed want territory, but are you the great ruler of the desert? The tricks Shen Zechuan used on the Dazhou folks in Zhongbo are useless here. The bears don’t munch on the pies in the sky—empty promises won’t work on them. I have dealt with them before; they are far more cunning than the Hanshe Tribe.”



Li Xiong was catching lizards beneath the eaves. He kneeled on the polished wooden planks, carrying a lizard by its tail as he said to Ding Tao, “Grill it. It’s tasty.”

Ding Tao was sitting cross-legged, with a brush in hand, writing and drawing. When he caught some time to take a breather, he cast a glance at the lizard and said in disdain, “Ew.”

Li Xiong lightly swung the lizard around. “This is a snake of Gedale.”

Ding Tao had not heard Li Xiong bring up Gedale and Lei Jingzhe in a long time. He set his notebook aside and looked at the lizard. “Doesn’t this look just like the lizards of Cizhou?”

Li Xiong sniffed the air, then answered. “It’s not the same. This one has a smell, the smell of the desert, of yellow sand!”

“It even went as far as fleeing from Gedale.” Ding Tao held his chin in a pensive pose. “Life in Gedale must have been tough. Staying here is still the most comfortable.”

Li Xiong answered, “No, it likes to stay...”

Fei Sheng yelled for Ding Tao from where he stood at the other end. Ding Tao scrambled to his feet in one move and ran over without waiting for Li Xiong to finish his sentence. The sweets that he had bundled in his lap fell all over the ground.

“... in the same old place.” Looking at Ding Tao, Li Xiong reached out to pick up all the sweets and stuff them all into his mouth in one go, his words muffled as he said, “I like staying in the same old place, too.”



The current chieftain of the Youxiong Tribe was someone called Dalantai. He was not a relative of Suhebashou, but his bodyguard. After Suhebashou died in battle in Gedale, Dalantai fled to the area behind the

Qingshu Tribe with the remainder of the Youxiong Tribe's elite troops and remained there for many years.

Dalantai sat before the tent and pulled a potato out from the campfire. He broke it apart and ate it with the sun-dried horse meat. His beard was so thick he appeared rather comedic while chewing. He was not as imposing and majestic as Suhebashou had been. On the contrary, he was very short and small, so much that he did not look like a man that hailed from the Youxiong tribe.

"Wise one who traverses the desert, you have ridden your horse before my tent and brought along the exhortation of the Heroic Eagle." Dalantai swallowed the scalding hot potatoes and watched Bayin beside the campfire. "But the demands of the Heroic Eagle are too extortionate."

"Chieftain of the bears beneath the snowy peaks," Bayin sat cross-legged and bowed to Dalantai. "I bring with me the most sincere greetings from the Heroic Eagle. The demands are all negotiable, for the Heroic Eagle sees you as a friend."

Hasen was the Heroic Eagle of the Hanshe tribe. He had sent over the wise Bayin long before Xiao Chiye had set out.

Dalantai gave the other half of the potato to Bayin. "The wolf pup of Libei is young and strong. I heard that he killed Huhelu and Achi, and defeated the proud Scorpions of the Heroic Eagle at the Chashi Sinkhole. I'm already too old to ride a horse anymore. I'm afraid I can no longer fight with such a young man."

Bayin accepted the potato with both hands and hesitated for only a brief moment before replying. "You are the 'bear' of the 'Valiant Tiger', Suhebashou, and you lead the Youxiong Tribe to stand tall in the southeast of the desert. You are a strong man that even the Hanshe Tribe dare not provoke rashly. The Heroic Eagle has strong faith in your might. The wolf pup of Libei is way too young. He is far less terrifying than the King of Wolves."

"If that is truly the case," Dalantai wiped his beard, "then why hasn't the Heroic Eagle, who had hacked off the head of the King of Wolves, slaughtered this wolf yet?"

Dalantai was not lying; he was indeed very old. His hair was not yet white, but both his hands had already lost the ability to hold on to a blade for long. Even though he did not possess the spirit Suhebashou had, he could lead the Youxiong Tribe into weathering blizzards and maintain their

dignity as a powerful tribe of the desert. He was not of the same ilk as Huhelu; he resembled a wise sage more than Bayin did.

“This is the reason the Heroic Eagle sent me to look for you,” Bayin said. “Our mighty cavalry has yet to break through the defenses of the Libei Armored Cavalry not because we are not powerful enough, but because we are out of provisions. The King of Wolves is dead. Honorable and wise Dalantai, you have also seen the future of the desert. We are about to stride into new, uncharted territory where all the tribes will no longer have to starve. This is the wish of the Great Hero, as well as the wish of the Heroic Eagle. We need your help.”

The aroma of the potatoes buried in the campfire wafted out. Dalantai prodded them with a tree branch, not at all moved by Bayin’s deference. “Many years ago, Gegenhasi<sup>2</sup> of the Hulu Tribe resorted to underhand means to kill my chief in Gedale and offered the head of the ‘Valiant Tiger’ to Amu’er. Amu’er did not reject it.” He picked up a potato again, but did not break it open. Instead, he wiped away the dirt on it with the rough pulps of his fingers. “Amu’er is a rapacious vulture. He is not our brother.”

A warrior of the Youxiong Tribe sitting at the other end stood up, a gesture meant to see a guest out.

Bayin did not move. He faced Dalantai and said, “Honorable Dalantai, that was a foolish mistake of ours in the past. We now have a common enemy...”

“Who was the one to force this enemy awake?” Dalantai’s eyes, which resembled a line, looked towards Bayin. “Amu’er intends to conquer every corner where the sun shines upon, and for that reason, he did not hesitate to use such shameless means to coerce us into leaving from our homeland. You stupid, low-down lad. To think you would call Suhebashou’s murder a foolish mistake.”

Bayin said, “I apologize for my words, Dalantai...”

The “bears” blocked the surrounding light off. They stood all around, watching Bayin with a gaze akin to watching an antelope.

“If Hasen wants our help, he should beg for our forgiveness.” Dalantai peeled off the potato skin. “If Hasen is willing to kill his wife and let the bastards of the Hulu Tribe pay the price, we will agree to send our troops to the Bianjun Commandery on his behalf.”

“Don’t do this.” Bayin had already been dragged up. He raised his voice. “Gegenhasi is already dead. Duo’erlan is an innocent maiden.”

Dalantai looked at Bayin as he devoured the potato all by himself.



#### Footnotes

1. Youxiong is a tribe that takes the bear as its totem. The Biansha Tribes' names are based on animals. For a list, you can refer to to the [Worldmap guide!](#)
2. For those who can't remember him, check out the new [searchable character list!](#)

## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 244 : SNOWY PEAKS



Chagan knelt reverently in the tent, his ash-white hair cascading down to the ground as he pleaded, “Honorable Hero, the Youxiong Tribe is the most crafty bear in the great desert. We of the Hulu Tribe are willing to double the supply of grains your esteemed self needs.”

The Great Hero, Amu’er, stared at the letter in his palms. Hasen bore some resemblance to him, but he was far more rugged and stronger than Hasen. Amu’er set down the letter and gently brushed his thumb with the thumb ring across his slovenly stubble. He looked like a man who could topple over drunk any side by the side of the road.

“There’s a saying in Dazhou, ‘act within one’s capabilities.’” Amu’er’s voice was low and deep. “I thank you for your utmost sincerity, but my friend, your sheep flocks have all been sent to the war zone. If this goes on, many people from the Hulu Tribe will starve to death in winter this year.”

Chagan’s kneeling and kowtowing body appeared lowly and humble as he said, “I’m willing to trade all my cattle and sheep in exchange for Duo’erlan’s longevity.”

Amu’er raised his head slightly. His thumb ring slid along his Adam’s apple. He laughed in spite of himself. “Chagan, so you heard those rumors.”

“My son killed Suhebashou. If Dalantai wants an eye for an eye, I can offer up my head. The Hulu Tribe is willing to pay the price for its contemptible act.” Chagan straightened up his back. The yellow sand of the desert had added a blackish-yellow tint to his aged face. He continued, “But he cannot take away my daughter.”

Duo’erlan was Chagan’s only daughter. She was the precious pearl of the Hulu Tribe. The Hulu Tribe did not have strong, sturdy horses, nor did they have eagles that could soar in the skies, but they had the protection the Heavenly God of Chiti bestowed upon them. The Hulu Tribe lived deep in the desert, and it had the most fertile oasis in the desert, Lake Chiti. In the legends, they were the children who grew up drinking the milk of the Heavenly God of Chiti. Duo’erlan was born with eyes like the waters of Lake Chiti, and the Hulu Tribe regarded her as the dew of the morning. She was the most carefree girl of all in the entire desert.

“Duo’erlan married Hasen, so she’s no longer the precious pearl of Lake Chiti, but the precious pearl of the six tribes in the desert.” Holding on to the handle of his chair, Amu’er stood up, his broad shoulders shouldering the slanting ray of sunlight leaking in. “If Hasen can’t even protect his own wife, then he’s unworthy of being Duo’erlan’s husband and does not deserve to have the allegiance of the Hulu Tribe. Chagan, my good friend, stand up and hold your scimitar tight. Watch that lad. If he dares to slight your daughter, you can kill him.”

Chagan kowtowed, the wrinkles on his forehead pressing against the ground. “I serve the Great Hero, and I firmly believe that the Heroic Eagle, Hasen, will not betray Duo’erlan. Because his father is the most valiant warrior of all in the great desert.”

Amu’er walked slowly. When he reached the flap of the tent, he was still scratching at his Adam’s apple. He gazed at the yellowing sky awash in the sunset glow. His old thumb ring rolled over his Adam’s apple, revealing a scar that had been left there. This was a mark Xiao Fangxu left him more than a decade ago in the eastern mountain ranges of Hongyan.

“The Youxiong Tribe has been blinded by the wind of the snowy pass. Dalantai is still reveling in their past glory.” Amu’er looked back and said to Chagan. “Without their Valiant Tiger, Suhebashou, the Youxiong Tribe cannot stop my Hasen at all.”





Bayin received a reply from Hasen. He read it over quickly and drank a bowl of milk tea after he was done. He sat cross-legged before the territory of the Youxiong Tribe, right in the wilderness, with a book spread open on his knees, as he requested Dalantai to meet him again.

A warrior from the Youxiong Tribe waved his hand at him to drive him away. "Get lost."

Bayin drew a line before his knees with a finger and said, "I'm in the territory of the Qingshu Tribe and so have not affronted you."

"You're blocking us from taking a piss," the warrior said.

"Are you going to take a piss like an animal before the eyes of the heavenly gods?" Bayin looked at his book. "As long as Dalantai would see me once again, this piece of Gobi can be given to you people to use as a cesspit."

Bayin was a "wise one". He carried a book with him, and that meant he was the heavenly god's eye of wisdom traversing the great desert. As long as he was not so inclined, no one could pull down his pants to take a piss before his eyes. Achi and Huhelu did not respect Bayin, and so they both died. This gave Bayin even more of an air of mystery.

This was the fifth day Bayin had been keeping watch here. Dalantai finally agreed to see him again.

Bayin gathered up his book and said to Dalantai, "Honorable..."

"The Libei Armored Cavalry has already reached the Bianjun Commandery. There's not much time left for Hasen." Dalantai took off his boots and stepped barefoot on the yellow earth. "Has he killed his wife?"

Bayin slipped out Hasen's letter and made to hand it over. Dalantai raised a hand to stop him and shook his head. "I'm illiterate. You read it."

"The Heroic Eagle wishes me to tell you," Bayin said. "He—"

Bayin was midway through when he heard the sound of horse hooves coming from afar. Dalantai stood up and walked ahead, but before he could open his mouth, he saw a burgundy stallion charging straight into the Youxiong Tribe's territory before eventually stopping in front of Dalantai.

"It was by the lakeside of Lake Chiti that I heard the honorable Dalantai wants my head." Carrying her horsewhip in hand, Duo'erlan looked at Dalantai amid the restless treading of the horse. "If you want to use the Valiant Tiger, Suhebashou, to coerce my husband with, you should ask for my consent first."

“And so you ride your horse into my territory.” Admiring this Flower of Chiti in the legends, Dalantai asked, “Because you’ve decided to use your own head to win this victory for your husband?”

Bayin jolted to his feet and saw that the warriors within the territory had also stood up. He hurriedly walked over and raised his arms to protect Duo’erlan’s horse. To Dalantai, he said, “No, this is not what the Heroic Eagle intends...”

“My elder brother killed your chief.” Duo’erlan raised her hand and wiped the dust on her face with the back of her hand. She had been on the go for several days. “Gegenhasi is the best brother in the world, but he is not worthy of being called a hero. If you want to avenge Suhebashou, you can take away my head, but this is a feud between the Youxiong Tribe and the Hulu Tribe, not your feud with Hasen. You should speak to me.”

Saying so, Duo’erlan tossed the dagger on her waist to the ground.

“I am willing to use my death to apologize to the Youxiong Tribe for Gegenhasi’s rash act. Dalantai is a good man. Take up this dagger and kill me, and our Hulu Tribe would have thus paid off this debt.”

Dalantai picked up the small dagger. It was exquisite and pretty, inlaid with cat’s eye gems, with a kind of incisive yet innocent beauty, just like Duo’erlan.

“You are very courageous. If Gegenhasi was just as courageous as you, the Youxiong Tribe and the Hulu Tribe could have become brothers years ago.”

“There is no ‘if’ in this world. Take my head to offer as a sacrifice for the Valiant Tiger, then pick up your scimitar and pledge allegiance to the Heroic Eagle.” Duo’erlan dismounted from her horse. The hem of her skirt fluttered in the night wind as she walked a few steps towards Dalantai. “The opportunity for the Youxiong Tribe is right now.”

Dalantai spread open his palm and held Duo’erlan’s dagger as if he was holding a flower in full bloom. He looked at Duo’erlan. Strangely enough, the expression in her eyes made it seem as if he was looking at his own daughter. The frigid wind of the night sent the banner of the Youxiong Tribe flapping. With the air of a man who had been through the vicissitudes of life, he said, “Silly girl, this debt can never be repaid.”

Bayin took the opportunity to say, “The Heroic Eagle can promise Dalantai that whether or not the Youxiong Tribe is willing to send troops to the Bianjun Commandery, he is willing to return the Youxiong Tribe’s

homeland. He will also give the Youxiong Tribe all the cattle and sheep he owns as an apology on behalf of the Hulu Tribe. But if Dalantai insists on taking his wife away from him, then he will fight to the bitter end with the Youxiong Tribe at the risk of his life.”

Dalantai’s always narrowed eyes widened a little. He had heard similar words before.

Just two days ago, Hairigu had sat in the tent and said respectfully to him, “The Prefectural Lord of Zhongbo extends his arms to Dalantai. We’re willing to seize back the homeland for the Youxiong Tribe, and until then, Duanzhou is also willing to supply sufficient grains to the Youxiong Tribe.”

These people all knew that the Youxiong Tribe wanted back their homeland. They preferred to remain in their old place and guard the snowy peaks on Suhebashou’s behalf.

Dalantai clasped his hands and said, benevolently and briskly, “The Youxiong Tribe, in receiving what it is due, is willing to fight for you.”

It was the same answer he had given Hairigu.



## QIANG JIN JIU – CHAPTER 245: RELAY STATION



It was the second quarter of the hour of zi, when the stars hung over the vast plains.

Xiao Chiye stood on the sand dune and drank his remaining *On Horseback*. The strong wine gushed down his throat, and he swallowed it slowly, letting the pungent spiciness linger in his mouth for a long time. Once night fell, the wind would intensify, and yellow sand buried Lang Tao Xue Jin's hooves. The moment the second quarter passed, Xiao Chiye saw Hairigu returning.

Hairigu dismounted from his horse and removed the veil covering his mouth and nose. Turning his head aside, he spat a few mouthfuls of sand and said, "Dalantai has agreed to it."

Xiao Chiye did not speak. Behind him, Chen Yang asked, "What terms did you offer him?"

"We gave him the grasslands to the east of Suotian Pass. That's the homeland of the Youxiong Tribe. Dalantai wants to go home."

"You gave them a vast expanse of grasslands." Xiao Chiye repeated.

Hairigu lifted both hands slightly and said to Xiao Chiye, "His Lordship wants to give the Youxiong Tribe the Hanshe Tribe's territory, which is even more fertile. I think what I've negotiated is even better of a deal."

"The Hanshe Tribe's territory is near Libei. Moving the Youxiong Tribe there makes it easier to control them. This is the outcome Lanzhou wants, but you pushed them back to the eastern side of the snowy peaks." Xiao

Chiye sealed the wine pouch tight and tossed it to Chen Yang beside him. "We have no eyes on the eastern side of the snowy peaks to keep watch on them."

Hairigu chased a few steps after Xiao Chiye and said, "The Youxiong Tribe treasures old ties. No matter how fertile the Hanshe Tribe's territory is, it will be hard for it to shake their determination. Second Master, only the eastern side of the snowy peaks can sway Dalantai. Besides, the grasslands there are almost gone. They still have to move north, eventually."

"You're playing tricks." Chen Yang turned sideways to block Hairigu with his chest, then raised an arm to create some distance between them, preventing Hairigu from continuing to chase after Xiao Chiye. "You didn't talk to Dalantai about the Qingshu Tribe's territory."

As bait, the Qingshu Tribe's territory was also Zhongbo's bargaining chip. Going by Shen Zechuan's game plan, Hairigu ought to have first discussed the Qingshu Tribe's territory with Dalantai before finally throwing out the Hanshe Tribe's territory, but Hairigu did not do so. He knew to seek benefits for himself out of this. He wanted to swap out the Hanshe Tribe's territory for the grasslands on the eastern side of the snowy peaks, so that he could keep the fertile land for the Black Scorpions led by himself.

Xiao Chiye had already gotten on his horse. Chen Yang was still blocking Hairigu.

Hairigu could not shove Chen Yang away. He paced restlessly where he was and spread his arms resignedly at Chen Yang. "You should go and chat with Dalantai yourself and see if he'll move according to your presumptions."

Chen Yang corrected the position of his blade that Hairigu had bumped askew and said, "He's already moving according to your presumptions. You want the Hanshe Tribe's territory, and His Lordship will naturally give it to you, but not by resorting to such means. You've been with His Lordship for so long, and yet you don't understand your master at all."

Looking as if he did not wish to argue with Chen Yang, Hairigu turned his back to Chen Yang.

Chen Yang took a few steps back and made to chase after Xiao Chiye's horse.

With his face to the plains, Hairigu then said in the Biansha tongue, “The way you are acting all like a dog is really very devout.”

Having said that, he looked back and flashed a smile at Chen Yang as though nothing had happened.

Chen Yang stepped onto the saddle and flashed a smile at Hairigu too. As he turned his horse around, he similarly answered in the Biansha tongue, “The envious expression in the eyes of a bastard is very devout as well.”

Fuck!

The Biansha words Chen Yang spoke in an accent close to the Hanshe Tribe gave Hairigu a fright. Before he arrived here, no one in Zhongbo understood his words in the Biansha tongue.

“There’s nothing about me that’s outstanding, except that I’m a pretty quick learner of the Biansha language. What you learned in Gedale was in the Liaoying Tribe’s accent, which, in truth, doesn’t really sound nice,” Chen Yang politely said. “Bark one word more, and I’ll smash your head in.”

Caught off guard, Hairigu obediently nodded and watched as Chen Yang rode his horse away and kicked up dust all over his face.



Xiao Chiye returned to the Bianjun Commandery but did not find Qi Zhuyin in the tent. He circled around and found the commander-in-chief in another tent. Qi Zhuyin had just woken up, and upon hearing movements, leaned out to whistle at Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye, with Langli Blade in hand, was in a quandary over whether to advance or retreat.

The rouge on Qi Zhuyin’s lips had been partially applied, and the pulps of both her little fingers were stained with this bit of red. However, she was not applying it herself. Instead, she leaned over and handed the job over to Hua Xiangyi. Hua Xiangyi rose and carefully applied the rouge evenly on the commander-in-chief’s lips.

“...This color is really pretty.” Hua Xiangyi’s voice was soft and pleasing. “It suits Commander-in-chief Qi just right. It’s not conspicuous at night.” She applied that last bit and turned her head to ask Xiao Chiye with a smile, “Pretty?”

Xiao Chiye folded his arms and looked for a long time. In a rare moment of hesitancy, he answered, “...Not bad.”

It wasn't that Qi Zhuyin had never put on makeup before. When she was in her regular wear at home, or attending a banquet in her court attire, she would put on a little makeup. But no matter how superb Xiao Chiye's eyesight was, he could not tell the difference between this rouge and the one that the commander-in-chief usually applied.

"You don't understand." With her slender, delicate fingers, Hua Xiangyi brushed open the handkerchief on her lap to reveal a small carved mirror inlaid with pearls that had been wrapped within. She picked it up and held it up for Qi Zhuyin to take a look.

Qi Zhuyin wiped her hands on the handkerchief. She could only see her own lips and chin in the mirror. She smiled and said, "It's pretty."

Xiao Chiye waited for a moment before Qi Zhuyin let down the tent flap and stepped out.

"Eldest Madam is here to work out the accounts for me," Qi Zhuyin explained.

Xiao Chiye coughed into the expansive night and said, "Oh..."

Xiao Chiye glanced at Qi Zhuyin out of the corners of his eyes. The commander-in-chief was young, but she also wasn't young anymore, at least for a woman; she had long passed the marriageable age. Xiao Jiming and Lu Guangbai were on good terms with her, but they never asked her about her marriage, because everyone knew that Qi Zhuyin could not get married.

"Third Missy's mental arithmetic is outstanding. I heard about it when I was in Qudu. The accounts in your residence are complicated and tedious. With her help, it will be a lot easier."

"The Empress Dowager has fallen, and her status in Qidong is not like before. Once Xue Yanqing is done investigating the City of Chuancheng, it will be the City of Dicheng's turn. The Hua clan is in imminent danger. I'm worried my father's concubines at home will create a scene and stir up trouble if I don't let her stay by my side." There was still a lingering fragrance of rouge on Qi Zhuyin. She did not continue explaining along this line, but instead teased, "And besides, I am this fond of girls."

Xiao Chiye stood still. Both of them had already ascended their way up the city wall.

"Your Scorpion is back," Qi Zhuyin said.

Xiao Chiye pointed to the southeast and said, "The Youxiong Tribe is willing to make way and open up a path for you. They want to retreat to the

grasslands on the eastern side of Suotian Pass, to return to their original land.”

The fire reflected Qi Zhuyin’s raised face. Hua Xiangyi was right. This color of rouge was inconspicuous, and it resembled Qi Zhuyin’s natural color when tinted by the color of the night. With a pensive expression, she said, “Dalantai is foolish.”

Only a fool would give up the Qingshu Tribe’s territory and return to the eastern side of the snowy peaks that had already been engulfed whole by the yellow sands of the desert.

“He’s not foolish,” Xiao Chiye said. “He makes way for you with the intent for you to take a detour to Gedale. Once you get there, he will be the hand that chokes off your retreat path, and when the time comes, he can make any demands of you as he pleases.”

“Then Dalantai is still a fool, because you and I can see through such an obvious and easy-to-understand tactic.” Qi Zhuyin tapped her fingertips on the side of her arms as she looked out into the depths of the night. “You’ve been hanging out with Lu Guangbai for a long time and learning all about his ‘earthiness’. You want to dig deep into the earth when you stand on the ground, and you itch to commit to heart the terrain stretching for thousands of *li* all around. However, you have overlooked the tribe itself.”

Qi Zhuyin skirted around Xiao Chiye. Bracing herself on the battlement, she nimbly vaulted onto it, then stepped on the opening and bent over to inspect the mechanical crossbow at the top of the wall.

“Dalantai makes way for me. My guess is that he won’t obstruct me. The Youxiong Tribe doesn’t have that many warriors. Dalantai can only choose to concentrate his military force; otherwise, he won’t be able to ward off attacks from any party.”

Xiao Chiye thought for a moment. “You’re saying that Dalantai is going to concentrate his forces to attack some other places?”

“When I leave the Bianjun Commandery, half of the 40,000 garrison troops here have to leave too. Without Lu Guangbai, there’s no commanding general who can engage in a to-and-forth battle with them. If they don’t attack now, then what are they going to wait for?” Qi Zhuyin said.

“Even so, it’s not worth it, *jiejie*,” Xiao Chiye said. “Since Dalantai doesn’t have sufficient troops, then once he takes down the Bianjun Commandery, you’ll soon be on the journey back. He will also be attacked



by the Cangjun Commandery Garrison Troops from the rear. There's no way he can hold on to the Bianjun Commandery at all. If he goes through all that trouble to get here, it won't be just for the sake of food, like Hasen."

Qi Zhuyin straightened up, and as she turned her head aside, the wind mussed up her hair. She did not continue to make further inferences like Lu Guangbai did, but said, "Then we shall give it a try."



After Xiao Chiye left the battle zone, Libei started to show signs of exhaustion. However, Hasen's onslaught of attack never abated. Lu Guangbai could only hold down the fort and have Mount Luo increase its vigilance. The eagle eyes of Duanzhou could not see the banks of the Chashi River. It was at this time Huo Lingyun quietly left Duanzhou.

Huo Lingyun's squad was small in number. They were all Imperial Bodyguards, taciturn men of few words who traveled simply and rode the ponies they had captured from Achi. They headed north along the Chashi River, resting at sunrise and moving after sunset.

The wind was dry tonight. Huo Lingyun finished the last drop of water in his canteen and wiped his mouth as he sat on horseback with eyes in front.

If only that annoying chap, Fei Sheng, was here.

Huo Lingyun hung the water canteen back on the back of his horse. As he lacked Fei Sheng's observational insights, he was very slow to react in the darkness. Yet, he could only make his moves at night.

"Where exactly are we going?" An Imperial Bodyguard following Huo Lingyun took off his fur collar and poured water over himself. "We've been heading north for five days."

"We'll stay here," Huo Lingyun said, "until we can walk out with our eyes closed."

Whenever they came within the vicinity of the Shasan Camp while heading north, they would turn back. However, they would not return to Duanzhou but continue going north on the same route, and so on and so forth. The Imperial Bodyguards kept silent. Before setting off, Qiao Tianya had given them a dressing down, so no one refuted Huo Lingyun during the journey.

The ponies had great stamina and endurance. They were not tired even after walking in the Gobi desert for several days. With their thick necks, they looked stupid, but the Imperial Bodyguards had already gotten used to

their speed, which was at odds with their appearance. These were all splendid horses.

When it was almost dawn, Huo Lingyun stopped on the riverbank. He let the ponies quench their thirst, while he himself squatted at the side to wash his face.

The water of the river in the early morning was icy cool, and a splash to the face proved to be invigorating.

Huo Lingyun opened his water canteen and pressed it into the river. Under the gurgling sounds, he suddenly saw a flash of dark red lurching out. The fingers he had been pressing down came into contact with something icy cold but soft. Then, black hair floated up alongside the red.

“A body!” An Imperial Bodyguard who was similarly washing his face shouted in a low voice and yanked at the hair to drag the body out of the water.

Huo Lingyun turned over the body, whose face was bloated from being soaked in the water. He wrung out the muddy slit and started establishing the identity of the body.

“He has been stripped of his armor,” the Imperial Bodyguard said quickly. “He died upstream.”

Huo Lingyun pulled apart the clothing on the body and jolted to his feet. “...He’s an Armored Cavalryman.”



An Armored Cavalryman was galloping on the bridleway connecting Mount Luo to Shasan Camp. He tottered on the verge of falling amid the jolts and bumps, leaving a long trail of blood on the ground where his horse’s hooves passed. His helmet concealed his face from view. He was just an unknown junior soldier. His lips moved, but all he could do was to breathe his words.

“The...”

The horse galloped into the relay station fifty *li* south of Shasan Camp. He tumbled off and crashed into the ground.

“The riding stable requests...”

He hung on until this point, but breathed his last before he could finish his words. As long as he could reach this place, it was a victory. The Armored Cavalry at the relay station would immediately convey the news to Shasan Camp, and reinforcements would head south. But then, the relay

station was deathly still. Corpses were strewn everywhere, including the falcons in the falcon cage. There were no longer any survivors here.

Waves of heat shimmered.

Not even the cry of a bird could be heard.





## CHAPTER 246: NIGHT DISPATCH



Huo Lingyun got on his horse. Pulling his reins, he bellowed, “Head over to the Luosha Relay Station!”

The riding stable on Mount Luo was too far away. Even the ponies would not be able to make it there on time. Huo Lingyun could only opt for the Luosha Relay Station, which was closer. That place was near the Shasan Camp, and it was a supply station for the transmission of messages between Mount Luo and Libei.

The ponies’ panting began to intensify. The weather was too hot, and the physically strong and healthy Imperial Bodyguards all had to pour water over themselves to avoid getting heatstroke. Huo Lingyun rode northwest from the riverbank of the Chashi River for a full four hours. By the time he was able to see the relay station, it was already dark.

“Dead bodies.” An Imperial Bodyguard raised a finger to scratch his nose and said from the back, “It’s all dead bodies here.”

An armored cavalryman sprawled face-down before the open main gates of the relay station. He had already been dead for several hours, and his blood had soaked the ground black. It would not be long before the body under the heavy armor would begin to stink.

The Imperial Bodyguard dismounted from his horse. Without turning over the armored cavalryman’s corpse, he crouched down to examine it for a moment before saying to Huo Lingyun, “He was a real man.”

Huo Lingyun looked at the arrows on the armored cavalryman’s back and nodded.

There were two arrows on the armored cavalryman's back. It was with these two arrows in tow that he had galloped his way to the relay station, where he finally closed his eyes.

The Imperial Bodyguard stood up and covered his mouth and nose. With his other hand, he shone the torch forward. "This place—"

His voice came to an abrupt halt.

Corpses were strewn all over the relay station. The postal relay stationmaster had been hung up on the flagpole, like tattered rags hanging out to dry in the silent night. Huo Lingyun took over the torch and moved in for a closer look, only to realize that the stationmaster's head had been hacked off.

"The horses have all been hacked to death," the Imperial Bodyguard illuminating the stable said. "Even if someone survived, he won't be able to make it to Mount Luo and Shasan Camp before daybreak... The falcons are dead too."

The door to the falcon cage had not been securely closed. Falcons that had yet to break free of their ankle chains all had their necks snapped. There were no survivors in the Luosha Relay Station. Even the stray dogs they had been feeding here had all been slashed to death.

The Biansha Cavalry had been here.

Grasping the torch in hand, Huo Lingyun fell deep in thought.

Mount Luo's riding stables, after its establishment, became a fledgling information hub between Libei and Zhongbo. For that reason, Shen Zechuan built it to be exceedingly solid. Eight hundred people were stationed at the Luosha Relay Station, with not only the Libei Armored Cavalry, but also the Zhongbo Garrison Troops. It was equivalent to a small-scale military camp. Emergency reporting points had been set up on the four-way bridle paths, and the watchtower could keep a watch on three sides. Several days ago, Lu Guangbai had even asked the Luosha bridleways to step up vigilance. There was no negligence to speak of at all.

"The Biansha Cavalry are skilled at launching surprise attacks," the Imperial Bodyguard said. "Back then, they launched a surprise attack on the Bianbo Camp..."

"Bianbo Camp." Huo Lingyu pivoted around and repeated, "Bianbo Camp... Bianbo Camp!"

In the sixth month of last year, when the Biansha Cavalry mounted a surprise attack on the Bianbo Camp, they had taken a detour from the south

and used the Mount Luo path to pass through. Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye later blocked off all access to that path, but there was no way the area near the Chashi River to the east could be choked off.

“The Biansha Cavalry came here before during the reign of Xiande, and they know the terrain here like the back of their hand. The relay station connects Mount Luo and the Shasan Camp, and it stands right on the path the Biansha Cavalry once used to head for Mount Luo.” Huo Lingyun jumped up the stairs in a few steps and pushed the door open.

“For them to be able to launch a surprise attack here away from spying eyes, their numbers must have been small.” The Imperial Bodyguard gave a helping hand and lowered the station master from the flagpole. “Very likely, the ones who infiltrated their way in are the Scorpions.”

Whether or not it was the Scorpions, Hasen cut off the relay station because he did not want news of the surprise attack on Mount Luo to make its way to Libei. He was delaying the reinforcements. But this group of Biansha Cavalry who had launched the surprise attack did not stop. Based on the direction of the bridleway, Huo Lingyun guessed Hasen planned to have this group of people continue on south to directly sever the connection between Dunzhou and Duanzhou, so that Duanzhou would find itself isolated and cut off from help.

“This place is closer to the Shasan Camp.” Huo Lingyun turned around and descended the stairs, then whistled to summon his horse. “We’ll continue to head north. We can reach Shasan Camp before daybreak and ask Libei for reinforcements.”

Huo Lingyun could not make it in time to Dunzhou. He could only choose one path, and that was to get the Libei Armored Cavalry at the Shasan Camp to head south immediately to assist Duanzhou. But this meant that Duanzhou and Dunzhou had lost all information, especially Duanzhou, which would be the first to bear the brunt. If anything were to go wrong with Shasan Camp’s reinforcements, Duanzhou would face complete annihilation.

Huo Lingyun cracked his horsewhip.

Time for him was pressing. He had to be fast!

The Imperial Bodyguards galloped away as if they were chasing after the stars and trying to catch up with the moon. They broke through the silence on the bridleway and moved fast among the shadows of the trees. Huo Lingyun’s breathing was slightly urgent. As he had been riding on the

horse for a long period of time, his inner thighs were burning with stinging pain. The saddles were damp, and their cheeks were slick with sweat. Not having the time to rest these few days, they were all like strings stretched taut with tension.

Hurry!

Huo Lingyun clenched his horsewhip tightly and raised his arm amidst the jolts and bumps. But before he could lash out, the horse under him neighed as its knees buckled and it went down. Huo Lingyun promptly covered his head with his arms and rolled to the ground. Specters dashed among the shadows of the trees on both sides of the bridle path. Huo Lingyun leaped to his feet and drew his blade out as he listened to those rapid footsteps breaking through the bushes to lunge at him.

“Tripping rope!” An Imperial Bodyguard following close behind him reined in his horse and shouted, “There’s an ambush!”

Huo Lingyun held up his blade to parry the blow, but to no avail. With his body, the other party slammed Huo Lingyun off his feet. Huo Lingyun turned aside and grazed past the ground to roll beside the roots of a tree. The moment the rustling of wind behind him sped up, Huo Lingyun held on to the root with one arm and made use of it to slide up and raise both legs to dodge the blow from the blade.

*Scorpions... no*, Huo Lingyun hissed through clenched teeth, “It’s the Biansha Cavalry!”

The elites of the Hanshe Tribe!

The elites moved swiftly as they outflanked them, like a tightly woven net closing in on them. The rustling of the footsteps was abnormally uniform, like snakes writhing in unison. Even the traces they left behind while passing through the sandy grounds were so identical it gave one the creeps.

The scimitars on the left side slashed towards the knees of the Imperial Bodyguards’ horses, but unexpectedly, they were intercepted midway by the Xiuchun Blades.<sup>1</sup> The Imperial Bodyguards kicked out at the Biansha Cavalrymen’s chests, then drew their blades out and spun around to land on the ground. At the same time their soles touched the ground, their blades flashed like a sudden burst of daylight to slit the Biansha Cavalrymen’s throats. Then they stomped on the ground and flipped back atop their horses again, completing the entire sequence of action in one smooth move!



The elites who did not succeed took half a step back in unison. One of them touched his throat and said, "The Imperial Bodyguards!"

An Imperial Bodyguard turned over his blade and wiped the blood on it on the back of his waist at the same time he slid his arm out and said, "Imperial Bodyguards? We are now called the Imperial Cavalry!"

Huo Lingyun's horse could not stand up in its shock. He dashed a few steps and grabbed the outstretched arm of the Imperial Bodyguard to leap onto the Imperial Bodyguard's horse.

"Libei has their hands full right now." The Imperial Bodyguard tugged at the reins of his horse even as they were tightly encircled. "Biansha has also laid ambushes here. Even if we make it to the Shasan Camp, it will be too late!"

"Return—" Before Huo Lingyun could finish his words, he held his blade with both hands and abruptly swung it in a semicircle to strike away a scimitar that had suddenly come attacking. "Return to Duanzhou!"

Going to Libei was impossible now!

"Turn around." Huo Lingyun hastily wiped away the sweat on his face. "Break out of the encirclement from the south."

Hasen was too cautious. He slaughtered everyone in the Luosha Relay Station and did not even spare the horses and falcons. Yet he also left his elites on the bridle path to the north to guard against survivors who could possibly appear after slipping through his ambush. But this also gave Huo Lingyun the opportunity, as the number of elites Hasen left here was small.

"Fuck." The Imperial Bodyguard shook off the drops of blood on his blade. "This blade was bestowed by the emperor, and now it's all jagged!"

The horse stomped its hooves, and the Imperial Bodyguard yanked the reins to forcibly turn it around. The Biansha Cavalry at the side had already lunged over. The saddle slipped to the right, and unable to bear the weight of the gravitational force, the horse tilted over to the right as well. Huo Lingyun bent his elbow and slammed it into the Biansha Cavalryman's face. Meanwhile, cavalymen on the left climbed their way up like locusts. The Imperial Bodyguard held his blade up to parry a scimitar, and was thrown off by the force of the blow.

The Imperial Bodyguard fell to the ground, and several scimitars instantly came hacking down on him. He bellowed with all his might and propped up his Xiuchun Blade with both hands. Under that ear-piercing

sound of friction as blade scraped against blade, he lifted it up, the veins bulging on the back of his hands.

"I can't hold on anymore..." The Imperial Bodyguard shouldered the force of several men as he lay on the ground with his neck raised, panting heavily and sweating profusely. With protruding veins on his temples bulging, he strained himself to say, "Buddy... fight..."

Huo Lingyun, however, rode the horse away.

The Imperial Bodyguard almost deflated with disappointment and cursed, "Motherfucker..."

With the horse, Huo Lingyun slammed away the Biansha Cavalrymen. All that lay between his tightly pursed lips was the taste of salt. That was not sweat, but the blood from having bitten through his lips. After galloping for some distance, he spun around and kept his blade away into its sheath. Then he rode straight back, his horse's hooves trampling through the superimposed human shadows.

The Imperial Bodyguard's slipping arms could not block the blow anymore. The Biansha Cavalryman's head was almost right in his face. At the critical juncture, the pungent smell of gunpowder wafted into the Imperial Bodyguard's nostrils, choking him. The deafening explosion was accompanied by the splattering of blood that spurt all over the Imperial Bodyguard's face.

Huo Lingyun leaned down to grab the Imperial Bodyguard's hand and brought him back onto the horse.

"Break through the encirclement." Huo Lingyun's emotions were running at an all-time high as he took the lead with his smoking firearm and charged his way out from the south, shouting, "Break through the encirclement!"



Yin Chang tilted his head back and downed the wine. He finished it, then belched several times in succession. Leaning over the battlement, he asked the soldiers guarding the gate, "Any more? This wine is delicious!"

The soldier guarding the gate shifted a few steps and got a clear look at Yin Chang's face under the firelight and moonlight. "Nope. Elder, you should drink less. We are still on duty!"

"I won't drink when it's break time." Yin Chang's legs felt a little weak. He drunkenly swayed to his feet and strained himself to look at the torches

on the battlements. “Aye, why is it short of bows and arrows here? Men, fill them in, quick!”

Fei Sheng had yet to walk his way over to the city wall when he heard Yin Chang making a big hoo-ha. He hid the newly purchased wine underneath, kicked it under a mechanical crossbow, and pulled a piece of fabric over it. Then he menacingly headed up and lifted Yin Chang by the back of his collar. “Sure. Someone will do it right away. You go back to bed!”

Yin Chang’s heels slid across the ground as he was carried away like this. He rubbed his reddened nose and grumbled, “Why isn’t General Lu here yet? I’ve been waiting for so many days just to see him again, and I even drank so many rounds of wine.”

The last time Yin Chang went to the war zone with Xiao Chiye, he had been very excited to see Lu Guangbai. He dragged Lu Guangbai to drink with him, drinking until Lu Guangbai puked thrice in a night and passed out cold in his tent on the second day. Without saying another word, Zuo Qianqiu dispatched someone to send Yin Chang back.

Fei Sheng, unable to stand the stench of a drunkard, waved his palm as he pinched his nose and said, “Not another word from you. I’m not going to embarrass myself.”

Displeased, Yin Chang waved his arms and tilted his head back intending to look at Fei Sheng. Stubbornly, he said, “Is drinking wine an embarrassment to you? Bah, you are a fine one to talk about being an embarrassment.”

Fei Sheng dragged him to the bottom and exchanged his authority token with the duty room. Patrols were strict these days, and he had to spend some effort signing in for duty.

Yin Chang took the opportunity to look for wine, using his nose that could not smell to sniff around as he muttered, “Where is it hidden? Here, right...?”

He tucked away the corner of his robe and kneeled on the ground. With his butt sticking up, he looked under the mounted crossbow.

Fei Sheng was indeed still a little too green.

Cocking his head, Yin Chang stretched his hand in to reach for the wine, muttering, “My little precious, aye, why so far away, aye...”

Fei Sheng looked back and set down the brush, ready to shout at the old man to stop, but right at this moment, he heard a very soft “click”. His ears

were so sensitive that he could even hear the wind clearly. He could not help but turn his head to the side and listen again with bated breath and rapt attention.

The banner fell, and the wind near the city gate stopped.

Yin Chang finally reached the wine, but instead of raking it out, he maintained his posture and crouched on the ground to sniff the smell of the land. Before Fei Sheng could react, Yin Chang bellowed, “ENEMY ATTACK—!”

The heavy rock from the catapult crashed into the top of the wall. A kickup of dust splattered all over. As Fei Sheng covered his head and avoided the debris, he heard the alarm sound from the watchtower. A soldier from the garrison troops raised the drum sticks and began pounding on the drum, shouting, “Enemy attack, enemy attack! Get the fuck out of bed!”

Fei Sheng pushed aside the soldiers and rushed up the city wall. When he got a clear look before Duanzhou, he sucked in a chilly breath.

Yin Chang climbed to his feet, patted a garrison troop passing through with the sheath of his blade, and barked, “Light up the beacon and report it posthaste to His Lordship.”

Yin Chang stomped up to the city gate and pulled over Fei Sheng.

“Take your authority token with you and lead the Imperial Cavalry to pack up and protect His Lordship and the various advisors.” Yin Chang’s reddened nose twitched twice. Without looking out of the city, he pointed to the smoke signal tower<sup>2</sup> at the side. “If the smoke signal here starts burning, then Xiaosheng, protect His Lordship and head west to Dunzhou!”

Shen Zechuan had yet to go to bed. He was under the lamp, pinching the center of his brows as he listened to Kong Ling speak on the matter of the dam when he heard chaos break out in the courtyard. Qiao Tianya lifted the bamboo blinds, and Ding Tao and Li Xiong followed him in. Kong Ling stood up and asked, “This...”

“Master,” Qiao Tianya secured his blade. “The Biansha Cavalry has mounted a surprise attack.”

The advisors in the hall all stood up with an exclamation of surprise. Yao Wenyu immediately looked at Shen Zechuan and said, “The reinforcements from Libei aren’t here yet.”

Shen Zechuan put down his arm and stared at the candlelight. After a moment, he said. “Duanzhou didn’t get any updates. Either the battle zone

has fallen into the enemy's hands, or Mount Luo is lost to us."

Everyone in this room was a scholar. Those like Gao Zhongxiong who had never experienced war looked even more ghastly pale. They all looked at Shen Zechuan—the Prefectural Lord was everyone's pillar.

Shen Zechuan could not show fear at this moment. He set the lid of his teacup straight and rose to his feet. Ding Tao shook open the overcoat and made to drape it over Shen Zechuan, but Shen Zechuan turned his palm aside to block his attempt.

The Prefectural Lord said, "Get Yang Shan Xue."



## CHAPTER 247: THE SOVEREIGN



“Where are the mounted scouts?!”

“Dead.” The garrison troops who had been startled awake followed closely behind Yin Chang. “All the scouts in the perimeter were wiped out. No one returned.”

Yin Chang filled his wine bag to the brim and hung it back at the side of his waist. As he slotted his blade, he spat, “Son of a bitch Hasen.”

No movement from the relay stations, and all the scouts were dead. Unable to get the news out, the reinforcements would not come.

“Reorganize the scouting squad,” Yin Chang said. “Wait for an opportunity to get out. We have to light up the smoke signal tower before daybreak. Only then will Libei, Dunzhou, and the Bianjun Commandery receive the news.”

Duanzhou once suffered a massacre because the scouts could not outrun the Biansha’s horses. That was why Shen Zechuan imitated the Bianjun Commandery’s Ten Thousand *li* Beacon Tower when he established the four-way bridleway of Duanzhou. As long as these three tower routes were lit, the three parties would know that Duanzhou was in imminent danger.

Yin Chang had only just lifted the flap of the tent when he heard the “*thump, thump, thump*” pounding of the battle drums outside the city.

The Biansha Cavalry was sounding the drums!

Yin Chang broke into a run towards the top of the city wall. As he ran, he shouted with all his might at the top of his voice, “READY—”

The archers between the battlements drew their bowstrings in unison, holding their breaths as they focused their gaze outside of the city.

Cylindrical drums had been secured on both sides of the Biansha Cavalry's ponies, its reverberating beats through the night serving as the first sign of an impending assault. Just as the drumbeats were about to stop after hitting a feverish pitch, the ponies snorted hot puffs of air and charged.

Yin Chang immediately waved his hands and continued to roar, "Release the arrows!"

Unexpectedly, the charging Biansha Cavalry instantly split into two flanks, revealing the shield-bearing infantry behind. The infantry moved swiftly against the rain of arrows and pressed in towards the city gate.

Duanzhou faced the east. Its terrains were open and expansive, and it was near the Chashi River too. Shen Zechuan was digging canals here to make a trench, intending to construct a moat that could protect the city. But time was tight this year. Only the ditch at the east-facing main gate had begun to take shape, and the waters from the Chashi River had yet to be diverted over as well. Xiao Chiye cautioned Shen Zechuan prior to his departure south, and so Shen Zechuan removed the square bricks at the bottom of the ditch and replaced them with the caltrops the Libei Army used.

The city gate opened. Yin Chang led the Duanzhou Garrison Troops and charged out to remove the passage planks on top of the trench before the Biansha Cavalry stormed them. Without the passage planks, the Biansha Cavalry would have no way of crossing over the trench to advance through the city gate.

As soon as the rain of arrows from the top of the city walls stopped, the kerosene cans started burning.

Dragging the passage planks as he retreated, Yin Chang continued to shout, "Smash the cans!"

The kerosene cans on the battlements were smashed in unison, and the flames suddenly flared. The garrison troops leaned forward and threw the kerosene cans down with all their might. Oil splashed all over the infantry's shields, which went up in flames with a bang, but Yin Chang did not rejoice, for he had seen the infantry scatter to make way for the concealed head cart.<sup>3</sup>

Shit!

This kind of siege wagon was originally used as a cover for the digging of ditches. It had a screen shield in front, and an assault wagon at the back.

The head cart in the middle could shield soldiers digging the earth from the arrows. Other than that, it also had a prominent function, which was to extinguish fires. The infantry hidden inside the head cart lifted the roof and emerged, using their daggers to slash through the cowhide sacks that contained water from the river. In no time, they were able to contain the fire started by the kerosene cans.

Yin Chang now had a clear grasp on the other party's aim. Hasen had used the infantry to deplete the arrows and kerosene cans of the garrison troops, as well as pushed the infantry before the trench, all to set the stage for the Biansha Cavalry who were poised for action at the back.

"Archers, stand by—"

The words had only just left Yin Chang's mouth when the infantry raised their shields once again. But Yin Chang had no intention of releasing the arrows at this moment. He drew his blade and led the garrison troops in a mad charge forward before the trench, where he sprang out like an old lion under the astonished gaze of the Biansha Cavalry.

"Block the trench!"

Yin Chang landed heavily on the brick wall of the trench, and his feet slid downward right at once. He clung onto the edge of the trench and kicked out with his legs a few times to crawl his way up. The garrison troops followed Yin Chang to fight their way into the infantry camp.

"Release the arrows!"

The rain of arrows came assailing down, and infantrymen who could not free their hands to raise their shields finally toppled over to the ground.

"Who is that?" A strong and sturdy man riding on a pony craned his head and saw Yin Chang's white hair through the crowd. He touched his own scimitar—his bare arm had a lizard tattoo on it. With considerable interest, he said in the Biansha tongue, "He's like a hero."

"The strong and hale Zhuoli doesn't know him," a cavalryman following by the man's side said. "He's the commander of the Cizhou Garrison Troops, the old general who captured Fanzhou for Shen Zechuan. His name is Yin Chang."

Imitating the Dazhou language, Zhuoli repeatedly read it out, "Yi, Yi Chang?"

"It means prosperity." The cavalryman soothed his restless horse.

"He has the courage of a lion." Zhuoli continued to size up Yin Chang. He clamped down tight on the horse's belly and moved forward unhurriedly



amidst the swaying. “I want to fight with him.”

The cavalryman turned back to look at the Hongying banner at the back and advised, “Hasen’s orders have not been issued yet. Now is not the time for Zhuoli to launch an attack.”

Zhuoli exercised his strong, muscular arms and drew out his scimitar. “Hasen wants us to fight a quick battle. I can’t wait anymore.”



The garrison troops assembled the people inside the city. They were going to send the commoners over to the west gate, where the connecting bridle path led to Dunzhou. This was so that the commoners would still have the opportunity to flee before the east gate was breached and the massacre began. The commoners came one after another, looking to be in a hurry as they dragged their families with them. Occasionally, the wails of infants could be heard, although they were very quickly stifled. The number of people gathering increased, and repressed gasps all over followed in the wake of the bombarding from the east gate.

The advisors had long been waiting here. They carried with them simple luggage, as well as records under their arms—these were the fruit of their painstaking labor. Gao Zhongxiong’s ghastly pale complexion had yet to regain its color. He tugged his cloth bundle<sup>4</sup> tightly and stood together with the crowd of people.

Kong Ling was pushing Yao Wenyu, who had a bag containing a restless Hunu hanging in front of his chest.

As Yao Wenyu’s wheelchair passed by the commoners, he heard someone in the crowd sobbing. He turned his head to the side and fixed his eyes on the other party.

“M, Mister,” a lone widow with her child in her arms covered her mouth and nose. Amid her sobs, she asked in a small voice, “Is, is there going to be another massacre...”

The young gentleman’s gaze was gentle as he raised his hand to hand her his own handkerchief. He answered, “There won’t.”

Sobs rose all around. His words seemed unconvincing under the sound of combat and killing ahead.

“Humans won’t be able to outrun horses if the city were to be breached. We still have to die. Everyone will die.” A man squatting in the corner pulled at his only remaining donkey and said in an accent, “I shouldn’t have come to Duanzhou!”

“Where did the Garrison Troops go?” Someone came up to the gate and slapped on it. “Open the gate now and let us flee to Dunzhou. Every person who can flee before the city is breached is still a life saved!”

A clamor broke out among the crowd as they jostled their way towards the west gate. An air of uneasiness pervaded the night. Gao Zhongxiong had no choice but to lurch forward under the force of the pushes and shoves. Hugging his bundle close to him, he turned aside and jostled his way towards Kong Ling.

“Please don’t trample.” Gao Zhongxiong protected his bundle and tilted his head high to say, “Everyone, please don’t...”

The jostling crowd could not hear his voice at all. Someone’s elbow hit Gao Zhongxiong in the stomach. Losing his grip on his bundle, he watched as his paper and brushes scattered over the ground. He hurriedly bent down to pick them up, but there were too many people, and before he could reach them, the brushes broke under the trampling of feet.

Gao Zhongxiong said in an urgent voice, “Don’t step on the brushes! Don’t step on the brushes!”

Kong Ling could barely stand steady on his feet from all the jostling, and Yao Wenyu’s wheelchair proved to be an inconvenience here. It would be bad if Yao Wenyu were to get swept away into the crowd! Holding Hunu in one hand and pulling at the wheelchair with his other hand, Kong Ling said around him, “Where are the guards? Hurry over to protect Yuanzhuo!”

The wheels of Yao Wenyu’s wheelchair got stuck on a hard object, making a loud clang and nearly overturning from the impact. Yao Wenyu turned his gaze and looked at the crowd. Moonlight, in its untimely silence, cascaded down along his sleeves and robe to the ground.

The slapping on the gate intensified, with yells of “open the gate” everywhere. The memory of the massacre in Duanzhou was so deeply ingrained that they could not see the light in the darkness. The more savage the fighting ahead was, the more everyone lost confidence.

“Oh, blast it!” Gao Zhongxiong angrily flung his sleeves. Giving up on his brushes, he reached out to grab the wheelchair and brought it before himself. Blocking the waves of people, he cursed, “Stop jostling! People are getting hurt! What’s the hurry? The city hasn’t been breached yet. His Lordship stands before us!”

Shouts promptly rang out all around. “Where did His Lordship go?”

“Where did Shen Zechuan go?”

“No soldiers. No guards. Did he run?!”

How would Gao Zhongxiong know it would turn out this way? He hurriedly said, “His Lordship is...”

“Shen Zechuan fled!” Someone stomped their feet and fumed, “I don’t see him!”

The atmosphere seemed to have been set ablaze. Cries once inhibited erupted forth among the crowd, and irascible sentiments ran rampage. Gradually, the slapping on the gate turned into poundings. Panic and terror pervaded the air. Hysteria abounded all over.

The latent time bomb called “Shen Wei” finally detonated. It was like a sharp sword hanging over Shen Zechuan’s head all the time. Concealed within was Zhongbo’s resistance to Shen Zechuan, which could never be eradicated even if Shen Zechuan obtained the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo. Shen Wei abandoned the city and fled, resulting in a bloodbath in Duanzhou and Dunzhou. And now, Shen Zechuan still had yet to show himself. Once again, the Shen clan had cowered back and fled.

“Open the gate, open the gate...” Someone bawled.

The gate protruded forward slightly, opening up a crack from all those crowding. One of the remaining soldiers on garrison duty, unable to stop the crowd, craned his neck and rebuffed, “Stop jostling!”

But it was to no avail. The crowd had already been thrown into disorder.

The soldier on garrison duty gasped for breath, not daring to open the gate. The scouts in the east were all killed. No one would know even if the Biansha Cavalry took a detour around to the west. If he opened the city gate now, he would be giving Duanzhou a stab in the back. The city would be really breached then!

The soldier on garrison duty shoved the commoners with brute force. Drawing out the blade on his waist, he bellowed, “Who the hell gonna jostle again?!”

Kong Ling instantly said, “Oh no.”

Sure enough, as soon as the soldier of the garrison troops flashed his blade, pandemonium completely broke out all around. Cloth bundles and fists came raining down on him. The tide of people surged forth and yelled, “Open the gate!”

The garrison troops could not really kill the people. Protecting his head as he retreated, the soldier on garrison duty sensed someone seizing his

blade and could not help but blurt, "Grab my blade and I'll start slashing!"

The city gate shook from the banging. Before the soldier on garrison duty could stand steady on his feet, a massive force suddenly came assaulting from the back. The entire city gate let loose a muffled "bang" as a battering ram broke the gate from the outside!

"Fuck me!" The soldier on garrison duty lay prone on the ground and got trampled upon a few times. He crawled to his feet and kicked out at the commoners blocking the way, frantically pushing them backward. To his own soldiers, he yelled, "Quick, block the gate!"

"The Biansha Cavalry!" The crowd shrieked in fear. Everyone scrambled backward in an attempt to flee. "The Biansha Cavalry has breached the city!"

Dragging his blade, the soldier on garrison duty pressed his back up against the gate that was on the verge of collapse. He shouted in unison with dozens of other soldiers as they attempted to push the battered gate back into place. But then, the huge wooden battering ram outside struck the gate once more, the impact so forceful it made their backs numb.

Yao Wenyu braced himself against the armrests of his wheelchair. Gao Zhongxiong and Kong Ling stood on each side, wanting to push Yuanzhuo away. Kong Ling's hackles were raised. Through that partially open city gate, he finally heard the long-awaited sound of horses' hooves.

"I'll take Yuanzhuo through the alley." Pushing Yao Wenyu, Kong Ling disregarded the records and picked up the hem of his robe. "Shenwei, run!"

Gao Zhongxiong's hands were trembling badly. "I'll stay with you..."

The city gate was completely destroyed, and wood splinters flew all over. The garrison troops could not hold up against the onslaught of attacks, and the Biansha Cavalry galloped in over their heads and swung their scimitars at Gao Zhongxiong.

The garrison troop soldier lunged and suddenly parried the scimitar. With his back to them, he said, "Run. Report to His Lordship quickly. The west gate is down. Our garrison—"

Before he could finish his words, his head tumbled to the ground.

Gao Zhongxiong involuntarily yelled out. His legs went weak, and he held onto the wheelchair for support, almost falling to the ground. Yao Wenyu saw the scimitar come attacking once again. His back was soaked in

sweat. All of a sudden, he turned the wheelchair around to shield Kong Ling and Gao Zhongxiong.

A column of light cavalry passed through the crowd so swiftly they looked like a stream of mercury in the darkness of the night. A longsword that had been hurled forth stabbed into the throat of the Biansha Cavalryman. The light cavalry, meanwhile, had already charged to the front just as the other party toppled off the horse.

Qiao Tianya reined in his horse, pulled out his own sword, and inserted it back into its sheath. He looked at Yao Wenyu as he gasped for breath and shouted to Ding Tao behind him, "Take the gentlemen away!"

Yao Wenyu did not move. He gripped the armrests of his wheelchair tightly. As he turned his head, his eyes looked past Qiao Tianya to see Feng Ta Shuang Yi neighing as it raised its hooves. On its back, Shen Zechuan's white sleeves flipped over. Yang Shan Xue was like an enraged dragon, moving with swift efficiency as it passed through the Biansha Cavalry's throats like a sudden burst of lightning so quick one could barely get a clear look at it.

Feng Ta Shuang Yi passed over heads as it galloped towards the city gate. The Imperial Cavalry behind swept towards the Biansha Cavalry, the impact of their blades upon scimitars sending up a spray of sparks in the frigid wind.

Qiao Tianya made to leave too, but Yao Wenyu looked at him, faint veins bulging on the back of his hands as he whispered to him, "Bring His Lordship back!"

Shen Zechuan was in ill health, and he had ruined his right hand a long time back in Dunzhou. What's more, he was now the master of the six prefectures. If he were to die on the battlefield in a moment of carelessness, then all the painstaking efforts of everyone in Zhongbo would be all for nothing.

Qiao Tianya showed no expression.

Yao Wenyu looked pleadingly at him and enunciated, word for word, "The ruler who commands all doesn't put himself in harm's way."

Shen Zechuan shook off the drops of blood on Yang Shan Xue and reined in his horse in the open space. With his chest heaving, he faced the wind. The two fingers on his right hand throbbed faintly with pain. He stood at the very front, looking at the dusky world. He was not strong, but he would not fall. He was like an obscure grit in the daylight, and also like

the shiny steel blade nailed to the ground right before the city of Duanzhou.

He was insidious, cunning, unscrupulous, and even vindictive.

He was not cut out to be an emperor at all.

But—

Qiao Tianya leaned over and feebly flicked the center of Yao Wenyu's forehead. Just as Yao Wenyu thought he would do as told, Qiao Tianya turned his horse around and bellowed, "Unto death we pledge to follow His Lordship in slaying the enemies—!"

Light instantly broke through the horizon, and the vast expanse of darkness dispersed in the blink of an eye. Shen Zechuan's blade slipped past the outer side of his thigh, and the sharp edge of his blade shot straight out in the light.

Like its master, Feng Ta Shuang Yi would only move onward.

Onward!

The Imperial Cavalry sternly shouted in a chorus of voices, "Unto death we pledge to follow His Lordship in slaying the enemies!"

In the eyes of these people, he was the sovereign who heralded the dawn of a new era!

## CHAPTER 248: NAMELESS



### Warning: Birds Abuse

The Biansha Cavalry that had come to mount a surprise attack at the west gate did not expect there to be such a light cavalry concealed within Duanzhou. This cavalry rode ponies that were similar to theirs, advancing and retreating freely among the dark and gloomy landscape.

Shen Zechuan was a white-feathered bird amidst the flock of crows. The blade he had wiped clean cut through the first glimmer of dawn. Before the second wave of assaults began, he commanded. “Retreat.”

Ding Tao guided the commoners into evacuating. The west gate of the city had already been breached; this place would soon be reduced to a battlefield. Li Xiong hoisted up Gao Zhongxiong and brought Kong Ling and Yao Wenyu with him as he followed behind the commoners.

The Imperial Cavalry stood in order before the gate. They were few in number, but they were presently the absolute elites of Zhongbo. The surviving garrison troops at the west gate, not daring to make an oversight, pushed the mobile gable wall wagon that served as a substitute at the base of the city wall. This kind of movable wall filled with lime mortar was not as thick as the city gate, although the recessed areas allowed for the placement of powerful bows.

The Hongying banner flapped in the wind. The Biansha Cavalry had already started to beat on their drums. Those cylindrical drums were deafening, and the ponies dug in their hooves, poised for action. They did not give the west gate the opportunity to be patched up. Under the beats of

the drum, they launched their second round of attack before the Imperial Cavalry did.

The sound of hooves was like a sudden rainstorm that hammered down with such vehemence that the ground shook slightly. Gravel bounced all over, and dust went assaulting them in the faces all at once. The imposing momentum of the Biansha Cavalry came bearing down on them right in the face, so swift they were like starving jackals and leopards.

Qiao Tianya's horse was just right behind Feng Ta Shuang Yi to the side. He pulled the reins tightly and said, "Ready—"

It was as if the Imperial Cavalry had entered a state of meditation. The wind blew across their cheeks, but no sound followed in its wake. Even their breathing seemed to have vanished. Galloping on his pony, the head of Biansha Cavalry closed the distance and pressed in towards Shen Zechuan. Shen Zechuan got a whiff of the strong stench of the Biansha Cavalry's sweat, and even saw the hideous expressions on the Biansha Cavalry's faces.

Time seemed to have stood still.

The next moment, Shen Zechuan flashed his blade and charged. At the same time Feng Ta Shuang Yi bulldozed its way into the ranks of Biansha Cavalry vanguards, he said, "Slay the enemies!"

Slay the enemies!

Like a raging tide of dark clouds, the Imperial Cavalry and the Biansha Cavalry collide fiercely on the passageway of the city gate. Steel blades and scimitars clinked and clanged as they crossed each other. The west gate had no battle tactics to speak of; the only way was to kill the enemies. It was only by thwarting the Biansha Cavalry head-on that Duanzhou's defensive battle could continue. Shen Zechuan had to charge at the very front, using this kind of crude way to rally and unite the people of Duanzhou.

The Biansha Cavalry congested the passageway and blocked out the light. It was here both parties crowded as the sound of combat and killing thundered through the skies. Sprays of splattering blood from all around soaked through Shen Zechuan's sleeves. He brandished his blade and cut down the enemy troops before him. The first light of day penetrating through shone upon his cheeks, which were trickling with blood and sweat. With a malicious and ruthless expression in his eyes, the Prefectural Lord knocked down the Biansha Cavalry with unstoppable momentum and charged right ahead.



This branch of Biansha Cavalry was a sneak attack squad that had circled to the back. They were no match for the Imperial Cavalry – whose morale was at an all-time high – and repeatedly retreated into the passageway. Both times they crossed swords, they suffered badly, and eventually, they had no choice but to withdraw from the passageway. The garrison troops saw their opportunity and acted, pushing the mobile gable wall wagon in unison to block the destroyed city gate when Shen Zechuan retreated.

The wheels made clicking sounds as they rotated, and a garrison troop pushing the wall yelled, “Not enough bows and arrows!”

Shen Zechuan reined in his horse. Yang Shan Xue hung by his side, dripping blood the entire way. He said, “Let down the backup overhanging gate.”

The garrison troops at the top of the city hauled in the rope, and the overhanging gate crashed down to the ground amid the rotating sounds of interlocking gears, blocking off access to the interior of the passageway. This was Duanzhou’s second layer of defensive wall, specifically designed to deal with situations like what was happening now.

Shen Zechuan’s right hand could not hold his blade tight. He only had to stop, and his two fingers would throb with pain. He felt in his sleeve pocket and only found Xiao Chiye’s blue handkerchief. He used it to secure the hilt of Yang Shan Xue to his palm, strapping his two fingers tightly to ensure that the blade would not slip from his hand.

“Pass the word to the north and south city gates now,” Shen Zechuan said. “Lower all the backup overhanging gates.”

Amu’er had the Zhongbo’s military map seven years ago, and he could be said to know Duanzhou and Dunzhou like the back of his palm. Judging from Hasen’s tactics of launching swift surprise attacks and precise points of attacks, he must have also seen Zhongbo’s military map. Since Duanzhou had already become an isolated city, it would be unwise to defend just the east gate alone.

“Lower the backup gates, and we won’t be able to get out anymore.” Qiao Tianya watched the rays of morning light sweep over the city walls. “The smoke signal towers<sup>5</sup> have yet to be lit.”

“There will naturally be people going to light up the smoke signal towers in Dunzhou and Mount Luo.” Shen Zechuan clenched his fist. “The east gate is still open. As long as the smoke signal tower near the Bianjun

Commandery is lit up again, the reinforcements from the Bianjun Commandery will arrive.”

Hasen must have used some way to delay Xiao Chiye, but Xiao Chiye would definitely come. That was why Hasen had opted for a swift surprise attack; he wanted a quick battle, so that he could breach Duanzhou first before Xiao Chiye led the reinforcements over and looted the granaries clean before making his escape. He had no wish at all to engage Xiao Chiye head-on in a battle in Zhongbo.



Yin Chang led the garrison troops to kill a bunch of Biansha infantry soldiers before retreating. As long as he could prevent the infantry soldiers from erecting the passage planks, the east gate would not immediately face the brunt of the Biansha Cavalry’s assault.

“Retreat, retreat! Don’t risk your fucking life and go all out; we are going to fight a protracted war with these sons of a bitch.” Yin Chang wiped the blood from his face and kicked out at the backsides of the slow-running garrison troops.

All four gates of Duanzhou had to be defended and secured, and to the 20,000 garrison troops, this was a challenge. Yin Chang wanted to stall for time, so his garrison troops had to be able to withstand the assault of the cavalry. In addition, he had to be able to both hold off the infantry and preserve his physical strength before the Biansha Cavalry charged.

The garrison troops retreated into the city. Yin Chang was the last batch. He was all prepared to cross the trench when he heard the sound of horse hooves behind him. He promptly broke out in a cold sweat. Relying on the foresight of a seasoned war veteran, the old man rolled on the ground and yelled, “Draw your blades!”

That crescent-like scimitar went slashing through the position where Yin Chang’s head had been earlier.

His heart palpitating, the old man rubbed his neck and shouted at the new arrival, “How can you not even say hello!”

Zhuoli could not understand Yin Chang’s words. His powerful hooves had already stomped its way in front of Yin Chang. Yin Chang rolled over, covering himself in dust all over.

Zhuoli happily said, “What a nimble prey.”

Yin Chang did not understand what Zhuoli was saying either. He braced himself on the ground with one hand and grasped the blade backhandedly

with the other hand as he faced off against Zhuoli in a bizarre confrontation beside the trench.

Savage.

Yin Chang wiped his red nose with his thumb that reeked of the earth and made his assessment of Zhuoli. The expression in his eyes was as silent as this expanse of sky. Those din from the artillery bombardment could not sway him. He was one with the mother earth, completely poles apart from the raucous image his appearance portrayed. He always had with him an unparalleled composure in times of crisis.

“You,” Yin Chang’s dropping voice was slightly hoarse as the old man said with certainty, “have been to Cizhou seven years ago.”

On hearing “Cizhou”, Zhuoli gestured to Yin Chang with his scimitar and said in broken Dazhou language, “I, been there. With, this blade.”

The strong wind tousled up Yin Chang’s white hair. The old man kicked out against the ground with legs and sprang up high. He swung his blade towards Zhuoli’s head. Zhuoli held up his scimitar to block the blow, and the battle pony under him took several steps back from the impact of Yin Chang’s force.

Perceptive, Zhuoli asked, “You, recognize me?”

Both of Yin Chang’s palms trembled slightly when he landed on the ground. He slid his feet apart and suddenly burst out laughing. “I recognize you, but you don’t recognize me. Seven years ago in Cizhou, I watched you people burn down the houses and slaughtered the entire city...” His expression abruptly turned cold and still.

“You took away their heads.”

Zhuoli half-listened and half-guessed. He waited until Yin Chang was done speaking before he undid the hemp rope at the side of his thigh, where the heads of the Chashi River scouts were hanging. He lifted them up and threw them to Yin Chang, then said in the Biansha tongue, “I don’t want them anymore. I want your head.”

The heads rolled at Yin Chang’s feet. They were all young faces. Yin Chang looked at these faces, then at Zhuoli.

He watched Zhuoli quietly.

Yet Zhuoli felt that the ferocious beast in this old body was roaring.

“You should accord dignity to those who died in battle,” Yin Chang said. “You beasts.”



Fei Sheng followed the garrison troops to disperse the commoners. He stood on the street and hesitated for a moment, then turned around and ran back to the east gate. Midway through, he heard the sound of hooves, and Fei Sheng looked back to see Shen Zechuan leading the Imperial Cavalry towards the east gate.

“Get on the horse!” Qiao Tianya threw the horsewhip hanging at the side to Fei Sheng.

Fei Sheng caught the whip and slowed his pace. When an unoccupied horse galloped past him, he flipped onto it. Grabbing on the reins, he asked Qiao Tianya, “How’s the west gate?”

“Destroyed.”

The color drained from Fei Sheng’s face.

Qiao Tianya continued, “And His Lordship walled it up again.”

Fei Sheng couldn’t help but curse, “Can’t you fucking finish your sentence in one go?!”

Qiao Tianya burst into laughter. Both of them followed Shen Zechuan and continued to gallop eastward. When they reached the city gate, they saw the gate wide open. The garrison troops had yet to completely withdraw.

Shen Zechuan dismounted and took long strides to the top of the city. Midway through, the intensive bombardment stopped him in his tracks. He brushed away the floating dust and asked, “Do we still have the parapets?”

“Not for long.” Covering his ears, Fei Sheng shouted, “The Biansha Cavalry switched to single-branch cannons!”<sup>6</sup>

Shen Zechuan’s heart sank slightly. Hasen meant to smash down the eastern defense wall of Duanzhou with continuous bombardment. He looked down along the battlements and saw that the Biansha Cavalry had already forced their way to within a short distance from the trench.

“Open the sluice gates and release the water.” Shen Zechuan’s expression was heavy. “The Biansha Cavalry is going to charge.”

“Open the sluice gates—” Fei Sheng dashed towards the south. Midway through shouting, he choked on the dust. Covering his mouth and nose, he instantly recalled something. Grabbing a garrison troop soldier at the side, he asked, “Why isn’t the city gate closed yet? The Biansha Cavalry is about to attack!”

The garrison troop soldier answered as he coughed, “The commander, the commander has not withdrawn yet!”

Startled, Fei Sheng disregarded the heavy rocks flying all around and held on to the city wall as he looked down. There were too many soldiers and horses in a jumble down there, and he strained to find Yin Chang among them.

“Come on, man, return to the city...”

Yin Chang’s blade hooked onto Zhuoli’s scimitar, both of them engaged in a back-and-forth battle on the ground. The old man’s feet slid. He bellowed and moved backward, his peripheral vision capturing the sight of the oncoming cavalry.

He couldn’t fight a protracted war!

Yin Chang immediately relaxed his strength, and the blade dropped down along the gap of the scimitar. He reached out an arm to grab the hilt and broke into a run towards the trench. The water storage sluice gates on both sides of the city walls had yet to be opened; they were waiting for the garrison troops to return to the city before releasing them. But Yin Chang felt scalding heat behind his back while he was dashing like mad, and as he rolled forward, he shouted, “SHUT THE GATE—!”

The oncoming Biansha Cavalry behind did not come to storm the city at all. Taking advantage of the fact that the city gate had yet to be closed, they tipped out the tits with their tails lit from their bags. These birds panicky rushed around blindly, their bags already in flames. Then they swarmed across the trench and went crashing towards the city gate.

The overhanging gate within the passageway of the city gate was made of wood. Once it started burning, the defense of the east gate would be lost.

Yin Chang stopped before the trench and sprang up without warning, but behind him, Zhuoli followed suit and lunged over to snag Yin Chang’s robe. Under the sound of ripping, he dragged Yin Chang to the ground.

Yin Chang thrust his blade onto the ground to steady his body, which was being pulled along by the pony. He shouted himself hoarse at the city gate, “Shut the gate! Release the waters!”

“Fuck, fuck!” Fei Sheng braced himself with his arms and leaped down the stairs, pushing through the crowd as he ran towards the passageway. “Wait. Fuck your ancestors!”

The flaming birds struck against the city gates. The clothes of the garrison troops were already on fire. The men rolled on the ground to put out the fire and ran into the passageway. The base of the inner city wall all had water pouches on standby to extinguish fires, but there were too many

birds on fire. If they did not shut the gate now, the overhanging gate would be set aflame too!

Shen Zechuan's throat was dry and hoarse under the persisting bombardment. The sunrise in the east stung his eyes as he stood amidst the dust and gave the order. "Shut the gate."

The city gate moved with a muffled noise. Fei Sheng was still jostling among the crowd of people who were surging back. He was like duckweed<sup>7</sup> going against the currents, with nary a lifesaving straw for him to grasp on to for support. The light within the passageway began to fade. The garrison troops crowding their way in blocked Fei Sheng's view. He could not see outside, much less across the trench.

"Don't shut the gate..." Fei Sheng desperately pushed aside the garrison troops and said the fastest he had ever spoken, "Don't shut it!"

The city gate slammed shut, and the passageway went completely dark. The sluice gates on both sides suddenly lifted, and the unfinished trench held in the water with some difficulty, drawing a boundary line between the city gate and the Biansha Cavalry.

Shen Zechuan abruptly raised his voice. "Put out the fire!"

Unable to hold up against the force, Yin Chang was dragged backward by the battle pony. He dragged his blade, scuffing against the ground. Under the sound of hooves, he ripped off the wine bag at the side of his waist, opened it with his teeth, and poured the wine all over his face. Then he tossed away the wine bag and wiped his face. With his face to the sky, he laughed, "Whoa, it's *On Horseback!*"

Fei Sheng fell to his knees before the city gate. Clawing at the gap with both hands, he said through gritted teeth, "Open the gate—!"

Shen Zechuan pursed his lips tightly and watched Yin Chang, his eyes both reddened.

Fei Sheng's hands had both gone bloody from clawing at the iron-sheet-covered crack. He pounded on the gate and slammed himself against it. "Open the gate. I'm telling you to OPEN THE GATE!"

Zhuoli lassoed his horsewhip around Yin Chang's neck and hauled the old man up with the strength of his arms. Yin Chang was still gripping his blade. He could not tread steadily on the ground from the stranglehold. He looked at Zhuoli, choking as he said, "Make, make it swift!"

Zhuoli held his scimitar against Yin Chang's neck. He scythed it forward, but Yin Chang unexpectedly lunged forward. The old man took

advantage of Zhuoli's raised arm and abandoned his attempts to paw at the whip around his neck. The cutting glint of the steel blade he was backhandedly gripping flashed suddenly as he practically twisted around half of his body, using his forearm to bring over the sharp edge of the blade as he roared. Before Zhuoli got to scythe off his head, he slashed off Zhuoli's head.

Yin Chang fell to the ground, the horsewhip still tightly secured around his neck. He let out a ragged breath, then, propping himself up on the ground with his elbows, he crawled a little in the direction of Duanzhou. Armored hooves thundered behind him like an incoming tidal wave.

Nameless nobody.

Yin Chang laughed out loud.

And started crying.

Xiaosheng.

Taking sharp, urgent gasps for breath, Yin Chang shouted at the city gate, his voice reverberating through the skies. "Your Lordship, seems to me today is—a resounding victory!"

Thundering hooves engulfed the old man whole.

After a brief moment of dead silence on the other end of the city gate, Fei Sheng pounded on the iron sheet as he slid down along that tiny ray of light to the ground, where, with both hands against the gate, he began to bawl.



#### **Author's Notes:**

I fabricated the mobile gable wall wagon. Perhaps there indeed was such a defensive weapon with such a function, but I didn't see a definite name when I was doing my research, so I made up one here. (And Lianyin made up the English term .\_.)

Thank you for reading.

## CHAPTER 249: WARFARE TACTIC



The flaming birds barging all over were shut outside the gate. Meanwhile, the garrison troops did not stop. They darted about in the passageway, dragging the reserve water bags to pour the water over the city gate as a precaution.

The Biansha Cavalry across the trench was infuriated and exasperated as they faced Zhuoli's corpse. Zhuoli was a Lizard who followed Amu'er deep into Zhongbo seven years ago, and he was a gift Amu'er gave to Hasen. It was precisely because of him that Hasen could sever Duanzhou's external connections in just a few short days.

"Drag him away!" A Biansha cavalryman looked at the Duanzhou gate. "This reckless, stupid good-for-nothing... Buck up! Before Hasen arrives, we must think of a way to cross over this trench!"

Yin Chang removed the passage planks and even killed the infantry pushing the head cart, subsequently plunging the Biansha Cavalry into a brief period of anxiety as they faced the trench. At the same time, he also gave the garrison troops within the city the chance to catch their breath. But then, the trench of Duanzhou was still not considered a moat. In order to connect the trench on both the north and south sides, the square bricks on both ends had not been solidly embedded, so this trench could not be kept filled for a long period of time. The water storage sluice gates had been opened, and the water had been emptied out. Even if the trench could hold out, the Biansha Cavalry would soon think of a way to cross it.

Before dark, the Biansha Cavalry would definitely storm the east gate.



“Prepare the heavy rocks,” Shen Zechuan turned his head to the side to say to Qiao Tianya. “Push the mounted crossbow up the city wall!”

The garrison troops at the foot of the city worked as one and exerted themselves to push the mounted crossbow up along the wider passageway. The Biansha Cavalry’s single-branch cannons<sup>8</sup> kept up with their onslaught of assaults, and the heavy rocks hurled at the city wall had already smashed out an opening in the city wall facing east. Broken pieces of bricks fell off along with pieces of clay and mud. In addition, a few of the battlements had collapsed too. The garrison troops had no choice but to cover their heads with their arms and dodge the debris as they pressed their bodies against the mounted crossbow that was sliding downward.

The garrison troops were unable to hold up against the force of gravity, and the mounted crossbow weighed down on them until their heels scraped against the ground as they slid down too. All they could do was to shout, “It’s too heavy!”

Qiao Tianya leaped over the stairs, intending to lend a helping hand, but he saw a commoner in cotton clothes lower his body slightly and raise both arms to hold up the part of the mounted crossbow that was sliding down.

Ji Gang, with dust on his white hair, bellowed in a deep voice, “Lift —!”

The garrison troops felt the weight on their backs lighten. Bulging veins on Ji Gang’s temple jumped slightly. He strode forward a step at a time, slowly shifting the mounted crossbow up along the slope. By the time the mounted crossbow was in position, both of Ji Gang’s arms were trembling, and his back, too, was all drenched in sweat.

It was now the hour of si, when the sun shone bright. Soldiers ran everywhere, their faces smeared with a blend of sweat and dust that made them choke. They did not dare to recklessly fire the arrows on the battlements, as the enemy troops might sway them into depleting their inventory. They had to save it until the Biansha Cavalry charged before firing the arrows. The same went for the mounted crossbow too. This killing weapon could not be activated too rashly. It had to be lethal in one blow and hurt the Biansha Cavalry, just like how Yin Chang killed Zhuoli.

“Split up the garrison troops into three squads to defend the three gates. Have the Imperial Cavalry await their orders at the east gate.” Shen Zechuan raised the hand gripping his blade and used the back of his hand to

wipe the sweat on his cheek. "We have to seal off the remaining three gates before night falls."

Duanzhou's granaries were in full abundance. To attack Duanzhou, the Biansha Cavalry could lay a long siege to deplete the granaries in Duanzhou. Trap and strand Duanzhou for a month, and wear down Duanzhou to death. But Hasen wanted a quick battle, so he would not adopt the strategy of laying a long-term siege. The Biansha Cavalry had been mounting a violent onslaught of attack since last night. If they were to come to a deadlock at the east gate, then the Biansha Cavalry would very likely circle around to the other three gates and advance from the side, just like how they launched a sneak attack on the west gate.

Shen Zechuan had lowered the overhanging gate at the other three gates as a defense, but this was not a long-term solution, as the Biansha Cavalry had siege weapons. The battering rams equipped with thick, sturdy woods could directly break down the city gates, followed by the overhanging gates to let the Biansha Cavalry enter the city unobstructed.

"Kerosene. Rocks," Shen Zechuan said. "Then tear down the collapsed watchtower in the city and have garrison troops separately defending the three gates bring whatever they can use for resistance to the top of the city. As long as you catch sight of the Biansha Cavalry, blow the horn to sound the signal and throw down the miscellaneous objects to stop them from charging."

He had to think of a way to get out of the city again as soon as possible.

Shen Zechuan looked at the horizon in the southeast.

The smoke signal tower there was still and silent.



All the gentlemen were gathered at the riding stables. This place, being wide and spacious, could accommodate several groups of commoners from the city. Gao Zhongxiong had only just regained his composure. He leaned over to rub at his calves as he said to Kong Ling, "Just, just now, that situation..."

The moment he got anxious, he started to stammer again.

Kong Ling soothed him. "No harm done. Your courage in wanting to bring Yuanzhuo away with you at that time is already deserving of praise. Back then in my younger days in Dunzhou when I learned that the cavalry had entered the city, I really couldn't care about anything else at all."

Yao Wenyu was clutching at his sleeves when a hand interrupted his train of thought in the silence. He glanced over and saw that the woman from earlier was calling her child over to return the handkerchief. Yao Wenyu raised his hand but did not take the handkerchief. Instead, he extended his dust-tainted fingers and gently touched the child's cheek.

Alive.

Yao Wenyu's chest heaved slightly.

The sound of footsteps along the riding stables intensified as the garrison troops sprinted past and made to get to the top of the wall.

"Supply the bow and arrows to the west gate!" The junior general in the lead sheathed his blade and moved the miscellaneous objects with his bare hands. "Leave the collapsed watchtower to us!"

"Not enough," the soldier at the top of the wall answered. "Just one tower collapsed. It's not enough!"

Duanzhou had quite a number of defensive weapons. The armory had all been emptied, mainly to support the east gate. The remaining gates could only pick from what was left to share between them. A wave of their bows and arrows had been depleted by Biansha Cavalry in the morning, and now they had to make up for the shortfall over at the west gate where the entrance had been blocked up with the mobile gable wall wagons.

What were they to do?

A man suddenly stood up from the riding stables. Weighing up an old hoe, he asked, "Can this be thrown?"

The junior general said, "Throw it away, and it won't be returned to you!"

"Then you take it." The man tried his best to speak in officialese. "The city is besieged. No point in keeping this hoe if we can't beat the Biansha Cavalry to death. Are you short of men?"

The garrison troops did not answer, considering that they had just clashed with the commoners earlier at the west gate.

Many a number of people then stood up from the riding stables. They were all men in the prime of their lives, carrying with them their own farming tools. They shouted at the garrison troops. "Are you short of men? If so, we are all men here!"



The Biansha Cavalry's artillery assault persisted until the hour of you when dusk fell. The east gate was patched up over and over again, and the

spare parapet walls were all about to be smashed down to nothing. Yet, the Biansha Cavalry did not show any intention of stopping. This was the real artillery bombardment—they would never stop until the collapse of the eastern side of the city wall.

“The single-branch cannons are all rocks.” Crouching behind the battlement, Qiao Tianya said to Shen Zechuan against the sounds of the cannon. “They are out there in the open fields, so they have no lack of rocks. If this keeps on for two more days, then even if the Biansha Cavalry doesn’t charge through the trench, the city wall would not be able to hold up any further.”

“Hasen can’t wait two days.” Shen Zechuan’s cheeks were filthy. “The Biansha Cavalry will definitely attack before nightfall.”

Now that the garrison troops had lost Yin Chang, the Biansha Cavalry had to probe just how far over their heads the garrison troops were at present. Having endured a day of bombardment, the garrison troops were already very exhausted, and this was presently an excellent opportunity for the Biansha Cavalry.

“When they cross the trench, we’ll open the city gate,” Shen Zechuan said. “The garrison troops will continue to defend the city. Let the Imperial Cavalry fend off the attack.”

“Fei Sheng and I...”

“You and I.” Shen Zechuan raised his eyes. “You’ll alternate with me. As long as you beat back the Biansha Cavalry’s charge, retreat into the city immediately. Don’t persist in fighting.”

The number of Biansha Cavalry far exceeded that of the Imperial Cavalry. A steel needle could not face up against a broad ax head-on. Shen Zechuan only had to pierce through the Biansha Cavalry’s momentum, and he would be able to maintain a defensive posture.

Qiao Tianya licked his lips and said with a stern countenance. “You’re the Prefectural Lord, not a general.”

Shen Zechuan did not answer. Bracing himself against the wall, he stood up. Under the dim filament of heaven, he looked past the dense cluster of Biansha Cavalry at the Chashi River. The Chashi River was like a jade belt<sup>9</sup> dipping in the sunset, reflecting the thick, magnificent clouds where the saker falcons soared among.

The expression in Shen Zechuan’s eyes gradually took on an edge of sharpness.

“I’m the Prefectural Lord of Zhongbo,” he said.

Before the magnificent clouds above the Chashi River had dispersed, the wall beside Shen Zechuan’s hand quaked with a thunderous crash.

“The catapults!” The garrison troop on the lookout at the watchtower sounded the alarm at the top of his voice. “Here comes the Biansha Cavalry’s catapults!”

After a full day’s rest, the catapults that had sounded off the prelude to the battle last night were now back in the game following the single-branch cannons. The Biansha Cavalry started to split up into squads, pounding on their cylindrical drums to swiftly pass on information on the battlefield.

Shen Zechuan promptly yanked off his cumbersome wide robe, secured that singular arm guard tightly, and descended the steps to the base of the city wall where Feng Ta Shuang Yi was waiting with its chin up. He got onto his horse and said to Qiao Tianya, “Stay vigilant at the remaining three gates.”

Qiao Tianya bowed, then shouted. “Your Lordship, to a resounding victory!”

Shen Zechuan tugged at the reins and turned the horse around, steering it towards the passageway. His ravishing appearance was covered with blood and sweat; only his eyes remained bright. Behind him, the Imperial Cavalry steadied their breathing—they too wanted to end this battle quickly.

The war steed at a side abruptly sunk slightly as Fei Sheng got on and shifted the Xiuchun blade at the side of his waist before him. His bloodshot eyes looked at Shen Zechuan. “I am Your Lordship’s guard.” He paused for a moment, then drew his blade and raised his voice. “We are Your Lordship’s shields!”

Shen Zechuan nodded slightly, and Feng Ta Shuang Yi started to trod forward. His figure gradually stepped into the passageway. In the moment of silence as he faced the city gate, Shen Zechuan proclaimed. “I live and die with all of you.”

The city gates opened once again. That dull thud ushered in the last of the daylight that weaved in and out of the countless horse hooves.

All at once, the Hongying banner was raised high in the evening glow. A cavalryman hoisted up the flagpole, and from where he was behind the reorganized infantry, waved it suddenly and shouted in the Biansha tongue, “Charge—!”

The stray wisp of Fei Sheng's hair swayed in the wind. His badly scraped fingers gripped onto the hilt of the blade tightly, and in the instant Shen Zechuan spurred his horse on forward, he shouted. "A resounding victory!"

Feng Ta Shuang Yi trod on the dust and galloped forth.

The infantry abandoned their shields and kneeled orderly with the passage planks in their arms. As the Biansha Cavalry was about to cross over them, they started erecting a narrow bridge. Stepping across the planks, the men with scimitars crossed the trench and came head to head with the Imperial Cavalry at the foot of the city.

After a full day's rest outside the city, the Biansha Cavalry was brimming with energy. They drank their fill of milk tea and ate their fill of dried meat jerky. At first, they thought they would face up against an already exhausted garrison troop, but who knew that the Imperial Cavalry was also sufficiently rested and had also stuffed themselves full with dry rations. There was no opportunity at all for the Biansha Cavalry to take advantage of.

Amidst the disarray of hooves, both parties collided with brute force, like blade striking against blade.

All along, Yang Shan Xue had never met force with force with the scimitars, for Shen Zechuan artfully went straight for the throats. His arm guard became heavy, and blood that trickled in slid further down along his arm, staining half of his body red.

The number of men for the Biansha Cavalry's first charge was not enough, and the passage bridge that had been hastily erected was too narrow and could not hold up against the Imperial Cavalry's combat at close quarters. So the Biansha Cavalry could only retreat temporarily and hastily end this round of attack.

Shen Zechuan immediately turned his horse around and returned to the city. The city gate shut again when he entered the passageway. Torches were lit up in the passageway. The hour of hai was somehow already fast approaching.

Shen Zechuan's right arm was slow to react. When he was still in the Imperial Bodyguards, he had never fought with all his might for such a long period of time. Then he had neglected his martial arts practice after arriving in Zhongbo. He was already now aware of how slow-reacting his body was.

No sensation in both fingers.

Shen Zechuan lifted his left hand to wipe away the blood on his face without so much an expression, then swapped positions with Qiao Tianya.

The Imperial Bodyguards had not even rested for two hours when the drums outside sounded again, and the Biansha Cavalry attacked for the second time. This time, Qiao Tianya led the troops to resist and fight back, and it was not until the hour of chou that he returned.

“The warfare tactic of taking turns to fight and wear the opponent down.”<sup>10</sup> Fei Sheng watched from the battlements as the Biansha Cavalry moved their torches around. “Their cavalry is different every round of attack, so the fight won’t stop even if the fight goes on until daybreak.”

“Hasen stashed away a portion of his troops.” Shen Zechuan leaned against the wall for a rest and stuffed several mouthfuls of steamed buns into his mouth. “Otherwise, there won’t be complete silence from Ce’an.”

Before Xiao Chiye headed down south, he had done a simulation with Lu Guangbai. The purpose of his trip down south was to lure Hasen into mobilizing his troops, but the warning sign to this was that the Biansha Cavalry at the entrance of the battle zone would be reduced. Lu Guangbai still had yet to come to provide reinforcement, and that meant that the onslaught of assaults at the battle zone had not stopped. Hasen had long put enough camouflages in place in order to attack Duanzhou. It was very likely that there were more than the six tribes behind Amu’er.

Gazing at the cavalry, Fei Sheng said, “I have to bring the old man back.”

Shen Zechuan managed with some effort to finish his steamed bun and stood up with Yang Shan Xue in hand. He had already gone without sleep for a day and a night.

“We have to think of a way to do so...” Shen Zechuan raised his head slightly. “Qiao Tianya need not retreat during the next round of attack. We’ll head out of the city together.”

Fei Sheng looked back.

The expression in Shen Zechuan’s eyes was somber as he said with clear enunciation, “Fuck.”

Fei Sheng’s stiff facial muscles gradually began to move. He did not know why either, but he suddenly broke into laughter. He laughed and laughed, and in the midst of laughing, he raised a hand to wipe his tears as he followed suit and said, “Fuck.”





## CHAPTER 250: DEFENSIVE BATTLE



Warning: Violence

Three quarters past the hour of chou, gloomy clouds concealed the moon.

The Biansha Cavalry withdrew from the front lines after they regrouped, replaced by the elite forces from the first attack. The torches they raised suddenly went out, and the drums that had been sounding all night stopped. The outskirts of Duanzhou were abruptly plunged into darkness. Without the illumination of the torches, the archers along the city wall could not see across the trench clearly. The sentry climbed up the only remaining watchtower and bravely stepped on the railing, where he craned his neck to survey from high above the ground.

“Can’t get a clear look.” The sentry’s temples dripped with sweat as he gestured to the top of the wall. “Too dark!”

The onslaught of attacks from the single-branch cannon and catapults ceased too. Other than a scattering of sound from hooves, no other news could be gathered from within the city. In this rare moment of silence, the garrison troops trod lightly, as if afraid of startling something. They stood up in their respective positions, with some premonition of the rainstorm that was about to come assaulting.

The garrison troops in the passageway began to withdraw outward, dragging the corpses they had cleared out to make way for the Imperial Cavalry. Clear water splashed over the green slab stones and flushed past the hooves of the horses, dissipating the strong, heavy stench of blood.

The ranks of the Biansha Cavalry moved. They planned to pass through the passage planks they had securely erected, then form a wall before the city gate. They had figured out the ways of the Imperial Cavalry after numerous attempts at feeling them out. To deal with the steel needle, they had to form a thick brick to smash it to pieces!

The garrison troops stationed at the top of the city wall did not dare to wipe their sweat. Their Adam's apples bobbed as they listened to the sound of hooves and silently counted down in unison in their hearts.

The Biansha Cavalry dashed towards the trench.

The hooves of the Biansha Cavalry's ponies stepped onto the passage planks, and the thunderous sound instantaneously resounded through the trench.

Now!

The garrison troops waved their banners and shouted in a hoarse voice, "Shove—!"

The heavy rocks at the top of the city wall started rolling along the small wooden passages, rumbling as they turned past a few small and short areas, where they bumped against the edges and went springing out to rain upon the trench. The Biansha Cavalry, who had been hidden in the darkness, could not block the sudden assault from above, and they were knocked off stride by the smashing rocks. More than half of the passage planks immediately broke apart, and countless Biansha Cavalrymen plunged into the trench.

The city gate was already wide open. With Shen Zechuan in the center and Qiao Tianya and Fei Sheng as the flanks, the three squads charged in unison. The Biansha Cavalry's formation that had fallen to pieces left countless voids, and the Imperial Cavalry attacked where they saw openings, tearing the Biansha Cavalry's attacking squads into pieces starting from the trench.

Archers replaced the rock pushers at the top of the city wall. Hot oil was poured over the arrowheads, which were wrapped in tattered rags. The arrows were then fired down at the same time they were ignited. The Biansha Cavalry did not have the cover of the infantry's head cart, nor did they have the protection of armors, so the moment the flaming arrows brushed past their clothing, they would start burning.

All at once, the entire trench lit up.

Fei Sheng's right flank had already charged across the trench through the Biansha's passage planks. He bent half of his body over in the strong gale and lashed out with his horsewhip to speed ahead. As he passed by Yin Chang's position, he suddenly slid over to pull out the old man's blade with one arm. The instant he grabbed hold of the hilt of Yin Chang's blade, he turned his head aside to wipe his cheek hard on his shoulder and thrust the blade into the vacated sheath on his back.

In the wind, Fei Sheng pulled the reins to turn the horse aside and continued to gallop towards the smoke signal tower in the southeast.

The Biansha Cavalry sensed a branch of light cavalry breaking out of the encirclement in the dimness. Before the cavalymen they mobilized could close up the opening, Shen Zechuan, who had similarly crossed the trench, clutched them by the throat and forcibly dragged them over. The center and left flank of the Imperial Cavalry were all meant to act as a shield and cover. With their backs to the burning trench, they spared no effort to fight at close quarters under the rain of arrows.

The scattered Biansha Cavalry speedily regrouped themselves, but the speed of the Imperial Cavalry was swift too. None of them held an advantage over the other on their mounts; it all hinged on whose blades were faster.

Qiao Tianya's original appearance was barely discernible under the splatter of blood. He wiped his blade with his sleeve and whistled as he followed Shen Zechuan.

"Your Lordship." Qiao Tianya was done wiping his blade. "Is *this* blade still good to use?"<sup>11</sup>

In the darkness of the night, where bursts of sparks erupted all over, Shen Zechuan said, "Just as fast as Yang Shan Xue."

Qiao Tianya's tattered sleeves exposed his arm. He had not even put on his arm guard. He was just like a blade without a sheath. All of a sudden, he turned around and said in a way which no one could tell if he was being serious, "Don't say it like that to Yuanzhuo. It's a big misunderstanding. I'm not fast."

"Then I'm really," Shen Zechuan suddenly held up Yang Shan Xue that he had been grasping in a reverse grip at an angle to block the scimitar behind for Qiao Tianya. Blood splashed all over Qiao Tianya's face under the slashing sound of a blade. Calmly, Shen Zechuan continued, "...so very happy for Yuanzhuo."

The Imperial Cavalry in the back returned to their position, and Shen Zechuan ceased to speak. With Yang Shan Xue in tow, he turned the horse around to face the direction of the Biansha Cavalry's single-branch cannon, then broke into a run.

The man in charge of passing on military intelligence sped through the ranks while waving a small flag. Pointing at the single-branch cannon, he said, "Withdraw the cannon!"

But the Imperial Cavalry was too fast. The Scorpion guarding by the side of the single-branch cannon swung his hammer at Shen Zechuan. Just as Shen Zechuan, who was regaining his grip on Yang Shan Xue, was about to cross swords with the Scorpion, he suddenly rolled off his horse, and Feng Ta Shuang Yi instantly lifted its hooves to sidestep away. The Scorpion's intention to break Feng Ta Shuang Yi's legs with a swing of his hammer fell short, and as he turned around, he cursed in the Biansha Tongue, "Cunning—"

Shen Zechuan kicked out at the ground and leaped forth in a pounce. The Scorpion was strapping tall and sturdy, and Shen Zechuan climbed onto the back of the Scorpion's shoulders and used a hand to suddenly crank the head of the Scorpion askew to expose his neck. As the blade met flesh, Yang Shan Xue slashed across it.

His right hand lacked strength, and he unexpectedly missed, failing to slit the Scorpion's throat.

Blood spurted out from the Scorpion's neck. The hammer he was brandishing did not stop. He let loose a ragged gasp that did not sound human and grabbed hold of Shen Zechuan with his free hand.

A drop of blood on the ridge of Shen Zechuan's brow trickled down. He resisted the force, and that blade that had once slashed across the Scorpion's neck made another attempt. As if he was slaughtering cattle and sheep, he used a sawing motion to completely sever the other man's throat.

This relentlessness to persist until the other man's death sent a chill down the backs of the Imperial Cavalry behind him.

The Scorpion toppled over to the ground with a crash. His hammer and Shen Zechuan both went falling.

Feng Ta Shuang Yi had already circled back. Shen Zechuan climbed to his feet and mounted his horse once again. With the tip of his toe, Qiao Tianya lifted the hammer and weighed it in his hand, then swung it down hard on one of the legs of the single-branch cannon stand. The leg of the

stand promptly splintered and broke, and the entire single-branch cannon tilted over to the side.

The sound of wood splitting erupted in their ears. Fire instantly started to burn.

Fei Sheng was holding a torch. The right flank had already charged their way close to the smoke signal tower. Exhaling puffs of air as he dismounted, he stumbled and used the other arm to grab to the edge of the steps and scrambled up the tower with both hands and legs.

The Biansha Cavalry, who were in pursuit of them, shouted as they came attacking. Once again, the Imperial Cavalry crossed swords with them at the foot of the tower.

Fei Sheng sprinted along the steps, and when he reached the tower where smoke was to be lit, he tossed the torch in. The dry tower pit burst into flames. He took two steps back and said, "It's done..."

Following that, the garrison troops on top of the city wall cried out loud and shouted below, "It's lit!"

Feng Ta Shuang Yi retreated, and Shen Zechuan said, "Withdraw!"

The flames at the smoke signal tower blazed. Just a few more moments, and the smoke signal towers to the east would all start lighting up in successive order. Fei Sheng held his hand to his chest, wanting to wipe his eyes. But unexpectedly, the sudden wind sent the ashes fluttering all over. The sky that had been overcast for half a night began to act up, with a few drops of rain serving as a forewarning. Before the cheers in Duanzhou could even get going, the torrential rain came pouring down like cold water all over Fei Sheng's face.

It was raining.

The flames of the smoke signal tower were just like delicate flowers swaying in the rainstorm, their heads bowed low from the pounding of the water droplets. Gradually, the fire became smaller.

Fei Sheng lunged to the front of the tower. Blocking out the rain with his hands, he raged. "Bloody heaven!"

No doubt Duanzhou was bound to usher in a bout of rainstorm after several days of clear skies. This rain poured down in torrents, which meant that the trench at the east gate would not lack water for the time being, but it would be tough to light up the smoke signal tower again.

"Come on... light up... Fuck your ancestors!" Fei Sheng struck the flint. However, this rain that had come out of the blue was pouring too hard,

and his hands were both soaking wet.

He could not light it up anymore.

This was a sudden rainstorm that came without warning, but it stopped fast too. As long as they could temporarily retreat back to the city, they would still have the opportunity.

Shen Zechuan steeled himself and brandished his blade towards the southeast. "Withdraw!"

Fei Sheng's vision blurred. He thought it was because of the heavy rain. He frantically struck at the flint and watched as the spark spluttered.

Old man.

Fei Sheng's fingernails that he had badly scraped while clawing at the gate were bloodstained. His hands trembled as he raked out the hay that had yet to be extinguished in the tower pit.

It's too hard to be a hero.

Fei Sheng widened his reddened eyes and pulled out the book he had used for information-gathering from his bosom and stuffed it into the pit. He leaned over and blew with his mouth, the smoke choking him to the point he almost suffocated.

In all my life—

Fei Sheng blew on the small fire to let the tongue of the flame lick the book. The fire suddenly flared and almost singed Fei Sheng's hair. He fell to the ground and spat.

—This is the only time I've ever sacrificed myself for others!

The twice-lit smoke signal tower did not blaze high in this downpour, but it was enough. Following the one tiny spark in the southeast that shone faintly, countless flames lit up in succession. They spread abruptly along the smoke signal towers into the shape of a long, snaking dragon that flickered in the heavy rain.

Fei Sheng took a few steps to the front of the tower and prepared to jump down. The voice he wanted to shout out stalled in his throat, and he stepped back again.

The flood of the Biansha Cavalry before the smoke signal tower was so overwhelming that there was no opening to be found at all. The right flank of the Imperial Cavalry was just as slender as an awn of wheat in this sort of large, retracting squad.

Fei Sheng was drenched through. He looked over his Xiuchun Blade that was already chipped from all the hacking, and said to the rain, "I told

you a long time ago that a hero doesn't come to a good end."

The rain pounded on Fei Sheng, the cacophony of noises sounding like it was engaging in a war of words with him.

The blood on Fei Sheng's face had been washed away. He tossed away his Xiuchun Blade. Stepping on the edge of the smoke signal tower, he abruptly pulled out Yin Chang's blade. Towards Duanzhou, he shouted, "Your Lordship!" His chest heaved. "Erect a stone tablet for me. Engrave 'Loyal and Courageous, Old Fei the Tenth'. I want to face the Chashi River with the old man and stand guard over Duanzhou for you for ten thousand years!"

Shen Zechuan spurred his horse on. Rainwater splashed across his facial features.

Duanzhou.

Zhongbo.

He was no longer the frigid wind coursing through the territories.<sup>12</sup> There were countless figures behind him. That heavy weight lay upon his shoulders, pinning down a Shen Zechuan who once drifted in the world back onto the ground. As he stepped onto this expanse of land, he couldn't

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The Prefectural Lord lifted his head high under the torrential rain and roared, "Break out of the encirclement!"

Fei Sheng leaped off the smoke signal tower, rolled to the ground, and flipped over to his feet. Wielding his blade, he hacked off the front knees of the ponies and barged his way in along with the muddy water. The Biansha Cavalry swarmed over like a colony of ants, breaking up the right flank with its charge.

The glint of Yang Shan Xue broke through the rain. Hooves trampled over corpses to break out of the encirclement from the southeast direction.

Fei Sheng held his blade up against a scimitar and was pushed backward. At the critical juncture, he heard an explosion through the torrential rain. He abruptly fell back into the mud and rolled once. He was beside himself with joy as he wiped his face. "Reinforcements!"

The sound of explosions on the south end of Duanzhou erupted once again. Following close on the Biansha Cavalry's heels, Huo Lingyun relied on the firearms of this Imperial Cavalry squad to blast out a path for themselves. Exerting himself, he loaded the firearm and blasted away as he

charged his way through the ranks of the Biansha Cavalry, all without wiping the rainwater off himself.

Behind, Tantai Hu could no longer hold himself back. As he drew out his blade, he shouted, “Motherfucking Biansha baldies. Your Granddaddy Hu is here!”

The vanguard squad of the Dunzhou Garrison Troops that had set off in advance was here!



Thick clouds enveloped the canopy of heaven. When the rain stopped, the city gate was once again tightly shut.

Shen Zechuan gasped for breath. His fingers were already all white from the soaking. When he dismounted from his horse, the water in his boots gushed out, and his boots made squishy sounds as he stepped across the ground. “Remove your blades and take a break.”

The Imperial Cavalrymen all dismounted one after another and stuffed themselves with food the garrison troops delivered. They replaced blades that were bent and went to the shacks at the foot of the city to rest. Time was precious. They did not even have time to change their clothing; instead, they just wrapped a thin blanket around themselves and took several sips of hot tea before leaning against the wall to sleep.

Tantai Hu took off his helmet and followed Shen Zechuan up the city wall.

Huo Lingyun followed closely behind him and reported, “I headed north along the Chashi River, and midway through, I found that the Luosha Relay Station had been massacred. I originally wanted to return to Duanzhou to report to Your Lordship, but there were too many of the Biansha Cavalry, so I headed west and lit up Dunzhou’s smoke signal tower.”

Shen Zechuan’s drenched hair plastered against his cheeks. “How is the situation in the battle zone?”

“The bridleway has been cut off,” Tantai Hu said. “Looking at it from the current situation, it’s not easy going for the battle zone either.”

The few of them reached the top of the city wall and sat on the ground behind the intact battlements. A rudimentary shed had been erected here, so it was still rather dry.

Shen Zechuan spread open the military map, and in passing, took off the agate on his right ear that was so dirty it resembled a bead of mud and



put it under the clothing on his bosom. He looked at the map for a moment and said, "It's raining, and the entrances are all muddy. The Biansha Cavalry's military supplies are going to sink and get bogged down in the mud. They will not attack rashly before the sun rears its head."

"But they will not stop for too long, either." Qiao Tianya pointed at Dunzhou. "They already know that the reinforcements from Dunzhou are coming."

"The garrison troops are all infantry. They are slow on their feet. It will still take another night for the majority of the troops to rush over to Duanzhou." Tantai Hu touched the scar on his eye. "My advance squad only has two thousand men."

Fei Sheng was almost lying down. He hugged Yin Chang's blade in his arms. He no longer had any strength left to wail, and his voice had gone all hoarse. "The smoke signal tower in the southeast has been lit. We only need to defend until the night passes..."

"The Biansha Cavalry is fast." Huo Lingyun interrupted Fei Sheng. "If Hasen wants to intercept and stop Dunzhou's reinforcement, he can still make it in time if he mobilizes troops south. We can't gamble time on this night."

Hasen's advantage lay precisely in his understanding of Zhongbo's terrains. The Dunzhou Garrison Troops were not the Imperial Cavalry. They had to run on two legs. They only had to be obstructed by the Biansha Cavalry, and they would very likely stall behind Duanzhou and delay the reinforcements.

"We have to hold until reinforcements from the Bianjun Commandery arrive." Huo Lingyun traced his finger along the bridle path from the Bianjun Commandery to Duanzhou. "Second Master said it before when he headed down south. As long as Hasen moves, Commander-in-chief Qi will circle back to Gedale to launch a sneak attack from behind Hasen. No matter what, Hasen can't stay in Duanzhou's territory for long. The city walls of Duanzhou are solid, and there is no lack of food. At the very least, we can defend for another two days."

Defend for another two days.

The hearts of everyone present sank at these words.

Qiao Tianya turned his head and looked out of the battlements. "... A battle to the death, huh?"

Haze shrouded the firmament. The Chashi River, which could still be considered magnificent last night, was now reduced to a deathly white tattered cotton. After being scoured by the rain, the city walls would darken. The garrison troops continued to clean up the battlefield at the city gate. It did not matter which side the soldiers had been on. As long as they had become corpses, they would all be stacked together. The faces of those people were similarly deathly pale as they lay in the mire, like lush grass that had dried up from a lack of water.

Shen Zechuan walked down the stairs alone and headed over to the side of the water vat to wash his face. He braced himself with one arm and looked at his own right hand. He dipped his hand into the clear water, and the bloodstains on the handkerchief promptly blossomed in the water.

A-Ye's handkerchief was now dirty.

Shen Zechuan undid the handkerchief. Both of his fingers were swollen from the tight binding. He turned and sat down, then wrung the blue handkerchief dry and set it out to dry on his knees. He tilted back his head, fixing his gaze at the top.

The wind caressed the tree beside him, strewing the ground all around with fallen leaves.

And Shen Zechuan, leaning against the water vat, fell asleep.



Hasen scooped up the river water with his hands. While facing east, he buried his face in it and said his farewell. The heads by his feet had been strung together. His scimitar was stained red with fresh blood, and his newly cut leather clothing revealed both of his wrists. Hidden away in the pocket of his sleeves was the flower of Chiti<sup>13</sup> that Duo'erlan had given him.

The aged wise one cupped the river water in his hands and raised them to pour the water over Hasen's head. "May the gods bless and protect the Heroic Eagle of the Hanshe Tribe."

Hasen lifted his dripping wet face and looked at the wise one as he asked, "Will I win?"

The wise one leaned over and stroked Hasen's forehead, his cloudy eyes bearing the weight of the river. He seemed to be even older than the Chashi River was. His wisdom was not one that Bayin could match. He kneeled, cupped Hasen's cheeks, and answered slowly, "You are already standing in a place we have not gone before."

“There’s still a wolf ahead standing guard,” Hasen said. “I killed his father.”

“The King of Wolves killed your brothers and sisters.” The wise one’s aging face was just like the barren sand dunes in the desert. “The compassion bestowed upon by the Heavenly God of Chiti comes accompanied by pain. He took away the grasslands and the blue sky; we are already committed to fight to the bitter end where only one of us is left standing.”

Water droplets dripped from Hasen’s chin. After a moment of silence, he said in a quiet voice, “I will win.”



Shen Zechuan was startled awake by the sound of artillery bombardment. He felt cold all over the very instant he opened his eyes. Under the flurry of footsteps, he swiftly secured the handkerchief back on his hand and rose to his feet.

“Light the fire!”

Torches around him lit up in a flash. Shen Zechuan stepped up the stairs to the top of the city wall.

“There are still Biansha Cavalrymen crossing the river.” Fei Sheng looked out into the distance. “They are gathering in the direction of Duanzhou.”

Shen Zechuan drank up the ginger soup Qiao Tianya handed him. “Hasen is here.”

“The Biansha Cavalry has split up into flanks.” Cold sweat broke out on Fei Sheng’s back. “This is bad. They’re going to charge from three sides!”

The Biansha Cavalry seemed like an eagle who was in the midst of spreading its wings open. The center came together to form a horde, their numbers far exceeded those in the daytime. Meanwhile, the two flanks of the Biansha Cavalry bearing torches and taking a detour dashed at lightning speed.

“Notify the south and north gates.” Shen Zechuan smashed the bowl and raised his voice. “Be on guard and defend to the death!”

Before the words were fully out of his mouth, half of the battlement near him collapsed with a “bang”. The Imperial Cavalry and Garrison Troops all broke into a run, while the archers hoisted up their bows on the battered battlement and drew their bows.

Unlike the two flanks, Hasen's center squad did not move. He put all his catapults and single-branch cannons to use. Heavy rocks came hurtling over in torrents at the Duanzhou city wall, the impact so strong it sent debris of the wall flying all over. The archers could not keep a steady hand on their bows at all.

The Biansha Cavalrymen beside Hasen erected their banners, and the cavalrymen in the rear all abandoned their drums. Instead, they held up their horns and blew them. The two flanks had already reached the north and south gates. The north gates released a batch of arrows, although the south gate could only hurl farming tools.

The advisors in the riding stables were all taking a short break when they suddenly heard a resounding crash from the gate. The women and children present promptly broke out crying in alarm as they huddled together.

"They are attacking the city!" Gao Zhongxiong started trembling as he hugged his papers and brushes close to him.

The battering ram did not succeed the first time, and not a moment later, an even heavier crash rang out. The outermost city gate broke apart at once, and the shouts of the Biansha Cavalry permeated through the overhanging gate. The commoners present were all in a panic now as they frantically jostled their way backward.

A garrison troop soldier at the top of the city wall leaped down and drew his blade, shouting to the crowd, "Run for the alley!"

He had yet to finish his words when the battering ram slammed into the overhanging gate with a loud crash, sending forth a spray of wood splinters and creating a hole in it.

The garrison troop soldier raised a hand, his sweat and tears flowing as he gasped violently for breath. At the very moment the battering ram sent the lower side of the overhanging door flying, he took the lead and broke into a run, brandishing his blade as he charged and shouted, "Slay the enemies!"

With Kong Ling pushing the wheelchair, the advisors followed behind the commoners as they flooded towards the residential areas.

The garrison troops could not hold up against the Biansha Cavalry's assault. Scimitars scythed across the garrison troops' heads as though they were reaping harvest. The sounds of hooves never stopped at all as they charged right into the running crowd.

The advisors had already dashed over to the entrance of the alley, choked full with commoners inside. A woman had to pull along several children in tow and carry an elder on her back. All the young and strong had already taken up their places before the overhanging gate, and all those who remained here were totally powerless to fight back in the face of the Biansha Cavalry.

Gao Zhongxiong's papers fell off along his arms. His legs were shaking, as was his body. Before he could squeeze his way in, a Biansha Cavalryman hooked the back of his collar and dragged his entire body over. Gao Zhongxiong yelled in terror, his tears and mucus flowing profusely.

The Biansha Cavalryman said something and spat at Gao Zhongxiong.

Gao Zhongxiong, at the end of his rope seeing no way out, summoned up a burst of strength out of nowhere and spat at the Biansha Cavalryman too. He shouted, "A scholar would rather die than be humiliated!"

The Biansha Cavalryman fell off his horse with a thud. Swinging a bar of door blot<sup>14</sup> he had picked up at random, Kong Ling urged, "Quick, Shenwei, run!"

Covering the back of his head, the Biansha Cavalryman clambered to his feet and felt for his scimitar.

Gao Zhongxiong had initially taken a few steps back. Seeing as Kong Ling was about to fall behind, he yanked over the cloth bundle under his arm, which still had brushes and an ink slab in it, without even thinking and slammed it right at the head of the Biansha Cavalryman, sending the cavalryman, who was caught off guard, back to the ground.

Without throwing the bar away, Kong Ling lifted the hem of his robe and pushed Gao Zhongxiong into moving. Both of them then ran for the alley. Gao Zhongxiong was still turning his head, looking at his bundle as he cried and said, "That, that ink slab of mine was really expensive!"

Qiao Tianya galloped past, leading a column of Imperial Cavalry head-on into the Biansha Cavalry. Both parties start battling and slaying each other in the darkness. The commoners in the alley covered their mouths, only daring to whimper and not wail as they listened to the violent sounds of fighting at close quarters. A constant stream of garrison troops ran past.

Yao Wenyu turned his wheelchair, keeping close to the edge, but he could not hear any sound from Qiao Tianya.

After an hour, torches suddenly lit up at the entrance of the alley.

Wiping his chin that was dripping with blood, Qiao Tianya raised his head slightly at the interior. His gaze swept past Yao Wenyu to Kong Ling. “May I trouble Mister Chengfeng to lead everyone back to the residence?”

Kong Ling repeatedly answered in the affirmative. Only then did he throw away the bar in his hands. He hurried forward and called out the commoners to follow. Gao Zhongxiong hurriedly bent down to pick up his papers.

Amidst the weaving flames, Qiao Tianya moved aside a few steps and pressed in towards Yao Wenyu.

Yao Wenyu said, “His Lordship—”

The wheelchair bumped lightly against the wall. Yuanzhuo suddenly grabbed the armrest with a hand to brace himself as Qiao Tianya cupped his cheeks and walled him in this dark, gloomy corner for a kiss. This kiss was not at all gentle. It blazed with astounding desire under the taste of blood.

Qiao Tianya abruptly let go of Yao Wenyu. He wiped down Yuanzhuo’s bloodstained chin for him and stepped back quickly, then got on his horse and left, leaving Yao Wenyu behind, covering his chin in shock.



Hasen cracked his horsewhip. He led the elites to break across the trench and charge towards the east gate with mud in tow and the battering rams following behind him.

Tantai Hu waved his arm and said, “Get ready.”

The mounted crossbow at the top of the city wall clicked into action. A dozen soldiers from the garrison troops propped up the long arrows. This mounted crossbow with exceptional destructive power could only be used to deal with Hasen, but it was tough to find the opportune moment; they had to first make Hasen retreat.

The water surface in the trench rippled. Hasen’s horse had only just landed on the ground when a blade came at him head-on. He urgently held up his scimitar and blocked the blow. Through the flames and dust, he saw Shen Zechuan.

Neither man gained a lead over the other in their first confrontation. At the very instant they sidestepped each other, they obtained a measure of the other.

Hasen’s red hair inclined slightly as he spun his scimitar and pointed the blade at Shen Zechuan, as if taking aim at him. He said with precision, “Shen Zechuan.”

Shen Zechuan lightly grazed past the blade. Feng Ta Shuang Yi raised its hooves and stepped around Hasen, and Shen Zechuan suddenly slashed off the head of the Biansha Cavalry tagging along with Hasen.

Hasen remembered Xiao Chiye. Xiao Chiye had sent Achi's head back. This was a humiliation of sorts, reminiscent of how he too had taken away Xiao Fangxu's head.

Both sides were at the point of no return, and steel blades clashed several times. The Biansha Cavalry pushed the Imperial Cavalry back, and the Imperial Cavalry stubbornly pushed them back again. The hooves of their horses weaved among each other in the mud. Men kept plunging into the trench, turning into mire.

The garrison troops at the top of the city wall shoved the remaining heavy rocks down, but an endless stream of replacements kept filling in for the cavalymen who were knocked down. It was as if there was no end to it no matter how many they killed.

Shen Zechuan was different from all the opponents Hasen had encountered. He still had his wits about him even in the face of such a critical assault. Perhaps he was not as strong as Hasen, but he was sufficiently cunning. All of Hasen's forceful attacks went smashing into the water. That was an elusive sense of powerlessness—this was the most thorny opponent.

Hasen retracted his scimitar and drew out his piked dagger.

Kerosene splashed all over at the top of the city wall, and it started burning all around. Hasen made the first move, blocking the trajectory of Yang Shan Xue's diagonal slash. The battle steed suddenly charged forward, pressing up against Feng Ta Shuang Yi as it rammed Shen Zechuan back towards the city gate with brute force.

Forward charge!

Yang Shan Xue nearly slipped off his hand. The hilt pressed against both Shen Zechuan's fingers so hard that his fingers were almost contorted. Shen Zechuan, however, did not feel it. He forcibly turned the hilt and used his remaining three fingers to grasp it such that the back of the blade bumped against his forearm. Just like that one move of Yin Chang, he held up the blade with his elbow at the same time he turned around to slash it towards Hasen's throat.

Hasen bent over to dodge the blow, and holding his piked dagger in a reverse grip, dealt out a strike at Shen Zechuan's chest. With a lightning

move of his hand, Shen Zechuan caught hold of Hasen's wrist, but his strength was not enough, and in this blink of an eye between life and death, he abruptly pressed Hasen's piked dagger down so that Hasen's forward thrust only stabbed him at the side of his waist, avoiding the vital points.

"Your Lordship!" Watching Hasen attack from the top of the city wall gave Tantai Hu such a fright that his soul nearly took leave of him.

Having stabbed Shen Zechuan in the waist, Hasen attempted to retreat, only to realize that the fingers grabbing him were like steel nails.

Shen Zechuan's eyes were grim as he said, "Shove."

The Imperial Cavalry that seemed to be in disarray behind him instantly reorganized and followed Shen Zechuan to withdraw back to the center, where they then swarmed towards this one squad of Hasen.

We've been had!

Hasen pulled out his piked dagger. The Imperial Cavalry's battle steeds had already come barging over. His squad of vanguards was promptly slammed back, and the horses in the rear all fell butt first into the trench. The mounted crossbow had already been hoisted up; however, it still was not enough.

Shen Zechuan barked, "Shove again!"

The passage planks over the trench were all more or less broken. River water splashed, and the rain of fire from the top of the city wall was still falling. Hasen's assault charge had already fallen apart. In his retreat, he violently rolled off his horse, taking Shen Zechuan along with him.

Shen Zechuan fell into the mud. Without even pausing to wipe his face, he rolled over first to draw out some distance between him and Hasen. He was filthy through and through, and there was no way to tell where he was bleeding. Drops of blood fused into the mud and water, masked under the surging beats of hooves.

Hasen knew to seize his opportunity. In the few blows he had traded with Shen Zechuan earlier, he had already seen through him. This man's physical strength had been exhausted to the point that he was not his match at all. He pounced, and took advantage of the splattering muddy water to immediately flash his way in front of Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan parried the blow with his blade and was knocked back half a step by the impact of Hasen's force. Before Hasen could stand firm, Shen Zechuan protruded a foot and swept Hasen off his feet. Hasen braced himself against the ground with one hand and immediately sprang back.



The piked dagger between his fingers twirled around with unusual dexterity. Shen Zechuan dodged it, and Yang Shan Xue and the piked dagger struck against each other in a collective “crack”.

With a piece of quick thinking, Tantai Hu raised his hands and bellowed, “Release a fire attack to cover His Lordship!”

Braving the blasts from the cannons, the garrison troops at the top of the city wall drew their bows. As expected, Hasen retreated a little. It was only when he got a clear look at the top of the city wall he knew he had fallen for it again—there was no more kerosene left at the top of the city wall. Before he could retract his gaze, he felt a sudden weight on his chest as Shen Zechuan kicked him back. As Hasen fell backward, he grasped hold of Shen Zechuan’s ankle, dragging Shen Zechuan to the ground as well.

Mud splashed all over. The handkerchief loosened, and the three fingers that could still feel failed to hold on tight to Yang Shan Xue, which fell over to one side. Shen Zechuan coughed out blood. He attempted to rise to his feet, but failed.

Hasen agilely straightened up. Seeing that Shen Zechuan was about to grasp his blade, he dragged Shen Zechuan by the ankle and hauled him backward. From where he was in the mud, Shen Zechuan grabbed at empty air. He resolutely gave up on Yang Shan Xue. With one hand, he pressed down on his waist where he was injured, and flipped to his feet, relying on the physical strength of his waist.

These few moves were really going to be the death of him!

Gasping hard for breath, Shen Zechuan elbowed Hasen in the face hard. The Ji Clan Boxing Style was fierce and hard-hitting, and the force of it caused Hasen to let go of his hand. However, he reacted quickly. The piked dagger slipped from his right hand and landed into his left hand, which he thrust right at Shen Zechuan’s throat, catching him unawares.

Unable to block with one arm, he swiftly clamped down on Hasen’s left hand with both arms and leaned the upper half of his body slightly. The piked dagger stopped right within a hair’s breadth of him. Blood spilled between Shen Zechuan’s teeth. With the metallic taste of blood in his mouth, he twisted over Hasen’s left hand and raised his knee to slam it into Hasen’s chest as Hasen was leaning over towards him.

Hasen instantly fell to the ground.

Shen Zechuan turned his head side to spit out the blood. When Hasen raised his head, he smashed a fist into Hasen’s head, knocking it askew.

Hasen turned his face away and grabbed hold of Shen Zechuan's forearm with his bare hands. At the same time Shen Zechuan retracted his strength, Hasen flipped over, bringing Shen Zechuan falling down with him into the mud once again.

Shen Zechuan's right arm was dislocated. As he fell to the ground, he gripped the side of Hasen's collar and called out, "Tantai Hu!"

Tantai Hu roared, "Release the arrows!"

Sparks sprayed all around the mounted crossbow. At the very moment the long arrow sprang forth, it hurtled right towards Hasen with a trail of swift and fierce wind following in its wake! Hasen yanked Shen Zechuan up and rolled backward to lunge right into the trench. The arrow of the mounted crossbow went crashing into the trench, stirring up a billow of waves.

Shen Zechuan gulped in a few mouthfuls of filthy water, which choked him until his head was swimming. Throughout it all, Hasen did not release his grip on him. Dragging Shen Zechuan along, he climbed his way to the opposite side of the trench.

"Your head." Hasen pulled out the scimitar by the side of his waist again. "I'm going to gift it to Xiao Chiye."

With his neck tilting up, Shen Zechuan spat out the muddy sediment amidst his gasp for breath and let loose a laugh. His expressive eyes that were partially closed appeared particularly nefarious as he said, "The wind is here."

Hasen scythed his scimitar over, but Shen Zechuan instantly raised a leg to stomp hard on Hasen's chest. In the very instant that he did so, he grabbed the dagger at the side of his leg with his left hand and caught Hasen's scimitar in its track.

With the scimitar stuck, Hasen strained himself to inch backward.

Shen Zechuan had already landed on the ground. Snagging the scimitar from his dagger, Shen Zechuan landed another blow right in Hasen's face when Hasen retreated back. Hasen tilted over and staggered. Imitating Shen Zechuan's earlier action, he crouched and swept out a leg without warning.

Shen Zechuan did not fall!

Hasen braced himself against the ground to get up. Right at this moment, a burst of what sounded like the wind being ripped once again erupted in the air. A sharp arrow followed in the wake of a burst of muffled

thunder and, along with the torrential rainstorm, stabbed into the ground beside Hasen.

The Conqueror Bow, soaking in the rain.

That was not muffled thunder from the sky, but thunderclaps on the ground. The heavy cavalry thundered as they stomped across the ground, even crashing away the rainwater as they charged like an overbearing, ferocious beast pouncing out of the dark night. Lang Tao Xue Jin charged through the curtain of rain, and Xiao Chiye, awash in blood all over, came killing like a bolt of jet-black lightning from the horizon to the battlefield.

The passage of heavy frost through the lands.<sup>15</sup>

The wolf was here.



## CHAPTER 251: RESOUNDING VICTORY



Hasen stood up as the ground quaked and turned back to see the thunderclouds billowing over to where he was.

The torrential rain washed over the Armored Cavalry and splashed among the hooves along with the splatter of mud. As the pack of wolves howled and dashed, the intimidating sense of oppressiveness, which had not made an appearance in a long time, swept across the battlefield. This was the edge that belonged to the Libei Armored Cavalry.

The moment Xiao Chiye appeared on the battlefield of Zhongbo, Hasen's swift assault failed. He did not manage to storm into the City of Duanzhou. Instead, he lost his brave general and elites here. Staying any longer would be a drain on resources. He ought to withdraw his soldiers at this time.

The vanguards at the city gate had already turned their horses around, while the messengers at the back of the trench brandished the Hongying banner in between gallops. The Libei Armored Cavalry that formed a long dragon intercepted access to the southeast, so the Scorpions pushed their siege weapons and began to retreat towards the Chashi River in the east.

The city gate opened soon after, and Tantai Hu led the garrison troops, who had been holding back for two days, out in a charge with blades in hands. With all his might, he shouted, "Second Master is here!"

With his scimitar, Hasen flipped onto an empty horse. He commanded in the Biansha tongue for the elites to fall out and split into two barriers bringing up the rear. They were to obstruct the Imperial Cavalry and Libei

Armored Cavalry in the west and southeast, so as to buy time for the withdrawing military supplies squad in the center.

“Your Lordship!” Huo Lingyun spurred his horse on with one hand and rushed over to Shen Zechuan with Feng Ta Shuang Yi in tow.

Shen Zechuan picked up Yang Shan Xue with his left hand. He did not mount his horse, but watched as Hasen led the elites in a gallop south to face Xiao Chiye head-on in a battle.

The Prefectural Lord said, “Ready.”

Huo Lingyun reacted swiftly. From where he was on his horse, he raised his arm and shouted towards the city wall, “Ready—!”

Hasen’s back figure was just about to disappear into the heavy rain, but his red hair was far too conspicuous, like an illuminated live target in the rain. Shen Zechuan looked at him as if he was staring at a moving rabbit.

Hasen seemed to sense something under the raindrops, and he looked back to see Shen Zechuan saying something through the rainstorm.

The mounted crossbow at the top of the city wall fired at once. Massive arrows, which resembled an ox cart rampaging in the air, shot its way behind Hasen in the blink of an eye. Hasen was forced to dismount at this critical juncture as the swift torrents of rain splattered all over. At the very instant he rolled, those huge arrows crashed into the squad of elite cavalry, knocking them off to the ground. The ponies could not dodge in time at all, and those that were struck were all killed on the spot.

The ponies neighed in alarm and tumbled over into the mud. Sprays of blood instantly spurted. This squad was now broken up. The mounted crossbow struck terror in the hearts of the Biansha Cavalry. Its superior killing power was not something that one man alone could withstand. Every time it appeared on the battlefield, it would result in countless casualties.

Hasen crawled to his feet and suddenly swung his scimitar in front to intercept Xiao Chiye’s Langli Blade! However, Xiao Chiye was not Shen Zechuan. Hasen’s scimitar paused for only a split second when Xiao Chiye slammed it down to the ground, causing it to nearly slip from his hand.

This strength was too terrifying!

Hasen’s entire body sank along with it. He steadied his scimitar with both hands and bellowed as he attempted to lift it.

Xiao Chiye was not wearing a helmet. Rainwater trickled down along his temples, and filthy blood that had yet to be scoured clean by the rain slid

across his facial features. He slowly dragged Langli Blade, and at this moment when he looked down on Hasen, he flashed a spine-chilling smile.

“I. Was. Looking. For. You.”

The sound of the rain raged. Dark, gloomy clouds blotted out the sky, threatening to crush down on the battlefield. Thunder crashed close overhead. In the darkness, Hasen saw the fangs of the wolf.

The scimitar slammed sideways, letting Langli Blade slip away.

The instant Hasen retreated, Lang Tao Xue Jin's front hooves stomped down on the footprints he had left behind and sent up a splash of dirty filth. The surrounding Biansha Cavalry and the Libei Armored Cavalry clashed together into a chaotic whole. The Armored Cavalry's brand new blades had their fills of fresh blood over at Bianjun, so sharp were they as if they were roaring right now. As Hasen swiftly retreated, he got on his horse once again. Langli Blade suddenly came attacking right in his face, and his horse took several steps back in response. Xiao Chiye pressed in every step of the way, as if revitalized.

Tantai Hu sprang up and jumped into the Biansha Cavalry, who was attempting to withdraw. Swinging his blade, he first hacked off the ponies' legs, then led his men to chase after the Scorpions who were moving their weapons. He squeezed out a fiendish smile and said, “To hell with you! Pay with your lives, Baldies!”

Duanzhou finally began to launch a counteroffensive. The Imperial Cavalry raced across the trench, pushing the surge of the Biansha Cavalry towards the east. The Armored Cavalry squad near the riverbanks of the Chashi River intercepted along the north of the river, severing the path right at the riverside where the Biansha Cavalry were dashing back. Together with the garrison troops and Imperial Cavalry, they formed a three-way encirclement to force the Biansha Cavalry into gathering at the open space in the center.

The only opening still left now was in the north, but Hasen hesitated to order a retreat to the north, because the north was close to Shasan Camp. He was worried that this was a deliberate trap Xiao Chiye left for him, and he was even more worried that Lu Guangbai was lying in ambush in the north. He was already virtually in a dead-end, besieged on all sides.

Langli Blade cleaved towards his throat, and Hasen nimbly bent over to dodge the blow. At the same time he parried the blade, he commanded in the Biansha tongue, “Switch vanguards!”

The elites who were meeting the Libei Armored Cavalry's attack instantly retreated. Seizing their opportunity, the Scorpions formed a diagonal wall in the southeast. As they spurred their ponies on, they swung their hammers high.

Langli Blade suddenly lifted, the face of the blade catching the rapidly drumming raindrop as it lay leveled in mid-air, like the last chain that tethered the Armored Cavalry. Xiao Chiye did not move, and neither did the Armored Cavalry behind him.

"CHARGE!" Hasen commanded.

The hooves of the Scorpions' ponies galloped into the mud. At the same time the mix of muddy water and rainwater hit them in their faces, they yelled out in the Biansha tongue.

Xiao Chiye lowered his arms. Before the garrison troops at the top of the city wall could get a clear look, they heard the Armored Cavalry simultaneously returning their blades to their sheath—the Armored Cavalry was actually keeping away their blades at this time.

Standing in front, Xiao Chiye twirled out his new long blade. It was as if the Armored Cavalry had flung off their iron sheet cover. Loud clangs simultaneously rang out, revealing uniformly-colored long blades on the flanks of the horses. The long blade had never seen blood back at the Bianjun Commandery. These blades had only revealed their prowess at the Chashi Sinkhole. And now, as they soaked in the rain, it was still rainwater dripping off the shiny tips of the blades.

The Scorpions' iron hammers swung before them, and the Libei Armored Cavalry suddenly opened up. They broke up the vanguard squad and swiftly shifted over to both sides to allow the Scorpions to gallop in unimpeded. The Scorpions were midway through when Hasen had a sense of foreboding. However, his order to withdraw would not make its way here at all, because the Armored Cavalry vanguard squads on both sides had started to gallop back.

Xiao Chiye charged at the very front and brushed past the Scorpions. Thunder crashed in fury, and the sound of rain intensified. The Scorpions' hammers had not even come close when the long blades slashed off their heads.

The Libei Armored Cavalry at the southeast were just like fortified iron cages as they "ate" the Scorpions, pushing them even deeper into an

encirclement trap. Then they snuffed out the lives of the Scorpions with their long blades right there and then, just like what Xiao Chiye did.

The Armored Cavalry flashed their blades in unison, followed right after by the sound of heads tumbling.

Hasen instantly commanded, "Break out from the east!"

He could not continue to battle on. Whatever advantages the Biansha Cavalry had vanished entirely here. All that awaited the Scorpions when they charged into the Armored Cavalry's encirclement was slaughter. Hasen risked a surprise attack on Duanzhou, and he had already lost too much here. He had to immediately cut his losses and break out of the encirclement and cross the river as soon as possible.

The Scorpions at the back abandoned their fights. They mounted their horses and urged on the infantry hauling the weapons as all of them charged eastward.

Hasen galloped in the rain. Icy rainwater pounded on his cheeks. He stared ahead, killing a bloody way out at breakneck speed, but the sound of hooves suddenly rang out beside him as Lang Tao Xue Jin kept up in hot pursuit. Hasen's scimitar chipped as he parried the blow. Xiao Chiye's speed was even faster. Both men spared no efforts galloping, charging in the rainstorm like an artillery shell!

Hasen broke through to the very edge. The Gobi on the banks of the Chashi River was just right ahead. The Biansha Cavalry that had gone into the water engaged in an intense battle with the Imperial Army that was lying in ambush here. The shallows were already an expanse of red.

Hasen galloped into the river. Lang Tao Xue Jin slammed into the side of the battle steed's neck, knocking Hasen's horse askew. He had to pull the reins to control it. Xiao Chiye brandished his blade to cut off Hasen's reins, and the horse powerlessly turned its body and tumbled into the shallows with Hasen in tow.

Hasen rolled the moment he landed on the ground. He lost his piked dagger at the edge of the trench when he fought with Shen Zechuan, and all he had now were his scimitar and dagger. The sound of killing around him was deafening. He scooped up the river water with his freed hand and wiped his eyes clean of the dirty blood obscuring them.

Xiao Chiye landed on the ground too, his tall, strapping body blocking off Hasen's eastward-looking gaze, becoming the mountain standing between Hasen and the desert. Hasen brought his bent scimitar before his



chest and adjusted his breathing. At the same time Xiao Chiye sprang towards him, he lunged over.

The sound of blades clashing jarred on the ears.

Xiao Chiye pressed his blade against Hasen's scimitar and pushed Hasen back. With some difficulty, Hasen stabilized himself. Rainwater pounded on his blade. At the very instant they splashed away, he abruptly withdrew his blade and dodged aside to evade the blow as Langli Blade swept forward.

River water splashed all over along with their footsteps.

Xiao Chiye's cheeks were still stained with residual blood on them. His combat style of only advancing and not retreating seemed like the moves of a desperado, revealing an intense desire to go on the offensive. Every slash of his numbed Hasen's arms. Under the intensive assault of Langli Blade, his scimitar near about turned into scrap metal.

Hasen abruptly tumbled over amidst Xiao Chiye's hacks. As he was about to fall into the water, he forcibly braced himself with his arms and raised his body. Then he squatted and lifted his blade to block the blow once again.

Without changing his posture, Xiao Chiye simply pressed down on him with all his might. Under the force of it, Hasen's scimitar slowly shifted down close to his shoulder. He could even feel Langli Blade's sharpness. A ragged gasp escaped from Hasen's throat. The downward pressure from Xiao Chiye was making his legs hurt, and they were already beginning to bend downward.

Hasen would never kneel to Xiao Chiye.

Untold numbers of people had starved to death when the Twelve Tribes kneeled before Dazhou. He had come this far all just to find that one way out for themselves. Hasen held Lake Chiti dear. Yet, for countless years, he had been sleeping among blades and swords. He had never once bowed to the Armored Cavalry. He was the Heroic Eagle soaring in the blue dome of heaven.

Hasen did his best to hold up against Xiao Chiye's strength. He bellowed and roused himself to hoist up Langli Blade. Brazenly, he lunged forward and very nearly sliced Xiao Chiye's neck.

Xiao Chiye took a sudden step back and bent his elbow to knock away Hasen's scimitar. The horse beside him neighed and fell over. Hasen flipped his dagger out and lunged again before Xiao Chiye could attack. Unable to

turn Langli Blade around in time, Xiao Chiye let go of the hilt and blocked the dagger with the arm guard on his right arm. His left hand clenched into a fist, and he socked Hasen into the water.

A spray of water exploded forth from Hasen's fall. He coughed out water and lunged before Xiao Chiye came up to him. Wrapping his arms around Xiao Chiye's waist, he hooked his leg around Xiao Chiye to trip him and knock him down into the water. Water splashed. In a countermove, Xiao Chiye grasped the back of Hasen's collar tightly and held him in a chokehold from behind.

Hasen could barely breathe. He thrust his dagger out and struck heavy armor. He immediately gave up and jabbed the dagger at Xiao Chiye's eyes. Xiao Chiye could only let go and moved back to evade it. Hasen swapped tactics and wrapped his arms around Xiao Chiye's arm, then he turned to the side and flung Xiao Chiye over his shoulder.

Hasen held down Xiao Chiye's face so that Xiao Chiye could not breathe in the fast-flowing river. He clasped his dagger and made to cut off Xiao Chiye's head. Xiao Chiye backhandedly grabbed hold of the dagger. At the same time the blade sank into his flesh, he arbitrarily straightened up and slammed into Hasen's jaw.

Hasen's eyes watered. In this split second of vulnerability, Xiao Chiye elbowed him in the chest. He did not manage to stop the spurt of blood from his mouth.

Xiao Chiye released the dagger, and clenching his bleeding hand into a fist, he once again punched Hasen over to the ground.

This one blow was too brutal.

Hasen was bleeding from his nose and mouth. He was even a little dizzy. The sound of combat and killing alternated close and far. The heavy downpour blurred the scenery. As he braced himself with his arms, he realized his leather sleeve had split, and the flower of Chiti in his sleeve pocket drifted away with the water. Hasen did not manage to catch the flower, and in the blink of an eye, hooves trampled the flower to a pulp.

Xiao Chiye pulled up Langli Blade again, both of his eyes wet. Hasen had seen such a wolf before. It was with such a gaze that Xiao Chiye had chased him for dozens of *li* in that heavy snow.

The Libei Armored Cavalry broke up the Biansha Cavalry, leaving them with no way to flee along the banks of the Chashi River. The river water of the shallows was thoroughly red, and floating corpses piled up

around the corner. The heavy rain soaked everyone's face white. Hasen never got to wait until the reinforcements he left at Gedale arrived.

As Hasen gasped for breath, he raised his head in the rain. He could not see over Xiao Chiye's shoulder at the opposite bank of the Chashi River. He dejectedly murmured to himself in silence. "May the gods bless—"

Langli Blade suddenly thrust into the shallows. Blood flowed down along the blade to disperse in the water. With a thud, Hasen's body fell to its knees in the rapid currents before falling face-first into the waters.

Xiao Chiye's chest heaved under the clamor of the rainstorm. The sounds of hooves behind him ceased. In the boundless expanse of heaven and earth, the Armored Cavalry all looked at him. Facing the Chashi River, Xiao Chiye raised his arm that was lifting the red hair.

Only the sound of the rapids could be heard in the long, endless silence.

Tantai Hu waded two steps through the water. He tossed his blade away and cried out straight ahead, "WE WON!"

"We..." The Armored Cavalry's throats let loose repressed chokes of sobs before they erupted in earth-shaking roars, "WE ARE WOLVES!"

The shadow of gloom hanging over them for as long as half a year finally ebbed away. Blood of countless people flowed in the Chashi River that ran through the north and south. In the torrential rainstorm, Libei reclaimed its dignity.

Xiao Chiye clenched his fists tight, his eyes silently reddening.



## CHAPTER 252: FRONTIER LIZARD



The rain subsided, and Xiao Chiye withdrew back to the city gate of Duanzhou. The garrison troops started to work nonstop cleaning up the battlefield. The water in the trench, having already overflowed, soaked the segment of the path before the gate into a soggy mess. Hooves treading past here were all covered in mud, and everyone was dirty through and through.

Shen Zechuan stood before the city gate and watched as Lang Tao Xue Jin galloped closer. Xiao Chiye leaned over from the back of his horse, and Shen Zechuan lifted his right arm to trade light bumps with him. Gazing at Shen Zechuan, Xiao Chiye did not retract his arm. Instead, he turned his hand over to lift it close to Shen Zechuan's chin. In the rain, and with his eyes lowered, he and Shen Zechuan mutually pressed their foreheads together.

The rain enveloped both men deep in its embrace.

Shen Zechuan closed his eyes. Rainwater trickled along his eyelashes and dripped onto the bridge of Xiao Chiye's nose. He slowly smiled and gradually laughed out loud.

Qiao Tianya rode his horse over. Midway through, he reined his horse to a stop. Leaning over to look at Ji Gang, he asked, "Where's *shifu* going?"

Ji Gang stood at the entrance of the passageway for a while before tossing the overcoat in his hands to Qiao Tianya. He looked at the curtain of rain.

Qiao Tianya draped the overcoat over himself. "*Shifu*, the Ji Clan Boxing Fist's name will once again spread far and wide after this battle. The

Old Senior Ji can rest in peace if he were to learn of it.”

Ji Gang looked up at the sky, and rainwater splashed into his eyes. After a long time, he said, “Duanzhou is going to have a bumper harvest this year.”

Qiao Tianya smiled.

Putting his hands behind his back, Ji Gang turned around and let loose a long sigh. Not looking at Shen Zechuan any further, he said, “Hurry and summon the physician over!”



The rain did not stop until the hour of mao the next day. The bamboo tubes in the courtyard kept up with its tapping against the mossy rocks. Wrapped in a short-lined jacket, Ding Tao stood guard with Li Xiong in the hallway and watched as the physicians entered and exited.

“I’m thirsty,” Li Xiong said.

Clutching his book, Ding Tao whispered, “Then go pour yourself some water to drink. I’m going to stand guard here.”

Li Xiong looked reluctant as he blocked the hallway and shook his head vigorously, unwilling to go alone.

Inside, Kong Ling lifted the hanging screen and led the physician out with a grave expression.

Fei Sheng had only just woken up and had come over to be on duty. Seeing them emerge, he immediately stepped forth to take over and had his subordinate lead the physician to the side hall. He asked Kong Ling, “Mister, how’s Master?”

Kong Ling shook his head and walked into the room again with him. He said in a hushed tone, “Don’t make a din when you enter later and disturb His Lordship. Second Master is on tenterhooks right now. He has been waiting inside the whole night without sleeping.”

Fei Sheng did not dare to say a word more and followed Kong Ling into the room, where he saw the bamboo blinds lowered in the inner chamber.

Xiao Chiye, who had removed his armor, was in the midst of reading the prescription. The physician who had yet to leave stood primly opposite the Second Master, bowing as he said in a soft voice, “... It’ll prove difficult for him to hold a blade again in the future... Those two fingers...”

Fei Sheng had an ill sense of foreboding when he heard these two sentences. His heart sank as he looked at Xiao Chiye's grave expression, so oppressively intimidating was it that those waiting in attendance inside were all as silent as cicadas in winter.

"His waist... and calf..."

And the right arm Hasen almost detached.

Shen Zechuan still looked fine when he had just returned yesterday. It was only when he washed his face clean that they could see just how ghastly pale his complexion was. The two fingers on his right hand were already swollen to begin with, and then he had fallen into the trench during his fight with Hasen, where he had further aggravated it from the grappling and soaking in the filthy water. His right hand could not move at all. In the end, he even had to use his left hand to lift Yang Shan Xue. He did not return to the city immediately; instead, he put on a carefree, laidback act. In truth, the wound on his waist had torn open when he straightened up, and getting on the horse proved to be too difficult for him, so he could only use all his willpower to hang on and pretend all was fine while letting Huo Lingyun lead the horse instead.

The instant Shen Zechuan's nerves that had been stretched taut with tension relaxed, the aftereffect of getting drenched in the rain kicked in. He thought he was asleep, but in fact, he was in a semi-coma. Last night's fever came raging with vehemence, and even now, it had yet to subside. He vomited everything he ate. His stomach was all stuffed with hard steamed buns, and after puking them all out, he regurgitated bile.

The lowered drapes were opaque. Xiao Chiye waited for the physician to leave before he opened up a slit to look at Lanzhou.

Lanzhou's hair spread out among the bedding. Unable to curl up, he half-laid on the side that was not injured, revealing a little of his side profile. The upturned corner of his eye did not have its usual seductive allure. He looked as if he was sleeping normally.

Xiao Chiye touched the corner of his eye. He did not move. As long as Xiao Chiye was by his side, he would dare to be this unguarded. He looked very, very small, completely enveloped by Xiao Chiye's figure.

Xiao Chiye had difficulty breathing. It hurt everywhere in his chest. He leaned over and kissed Lanzhou on his temple. His fingertips moved ever so lightly, as if he was caressing a baby cub that was still a fluff of fur.

The physicians in the courtyard came and went. They fed the Prefectural Lord a bowl of medicine, and Shen Zechuan puked it out again at the hour of si. Seeing that it did not work, Ji Gang hoisted the physician over to continue taking a look at Shen Zechuan. The side hall was crammed full of people. The joy of having survived a calamity had not even passed, and already the residence was shrouded in a cloud of gloom.

During the hour of shen, the military reports from the battle zone arrived. They were stacked together with the military reports from the Bianjun Commandery, pressing Xiao Chiye to read them. Xiao Chiye did not dare to leave Shen Zechuan, so he had it all sent to the side hall and took the time he used to drink water to stand in the side hall, where he read the military reports while listening to the physicians rattle off the prescriptions all at the same time.

Ding Tao did not dare to stir up any trouble at this moment. Leading Li Xiong by the sleeve, he said, "There's a water jar at the foot of the walkway. I'll pour you a cup."

Li Xiong did not move his feet. He rubbed his nose and nodded unhappily.

Unable to pull Li Xiong into moving, Ding Tao asked in puzzlement, "Why aren't you moving?"

Li Xiong did not make a sound as he looked at someone coming over from the moon gate. Fei Sheng was leading a newly arrived physician inside. They crossed the walkway in the blink of an eye, and with a lift of the hanging screen, they entered the room, where Kong Ling and the other gentlemen were keeping watch in the outer room.

This newly-arrived physician looked decent and had a Fanzhou accent as he said, "His Lordship mustn't get caught in the rain with this body of his. Given the way he's vomiting, he certainly won't be able to keep the medicine down." He shook his sleeves up and had the apprentice accompanying him open his medical chest. He then took out the kit of acupuncture needles and showed it to Gao Zhongxiong, who was standing at the side, "I'll use a few acupuncture needles on him."

Kong Ling stood up and said, "No hurry. Wait for the Second Master to come over before making a decision."

The physician spread his hands and said, "Saving a life is like putting out a fire. It cannot be delayed. How about this? You gentlemen hurry up

and send someone to urge the Second Master over. Meanwhile, I'll get everything ready."

Gao Zhongxiong repeatedly voiced his agreement and made his way out. But when he walked to the door, he found Li Xiong blocking the doorway.

The physician turned his back to them and lifted a portion of the hanging screen to walk into the inner chamber, at the same time still instructing the apprentice, "Lift the chest in—"

Fei Sheng sensed something the instant the apprentice collected the kit of acupuncture needles. He suddenly grasped hold of the hilt of his blade and bellowed, "Hold it!"

However, the apprentice instantly swung his hand, and cold glints from inside the kit flashed. Fei Sheng could dodge, but not the gentlemen, so he could only draw his blade to block the blow. Under a series of clinking and clanking sounds as the concealed weapon struck against his blade, he bumped Kong Ling away.

The table and chairs in the outer room overturned with a clatter. Kong Ling lost his balance, and as he fell onto the rug, he stretched out his hands and shouted with urgency, "Men! Come quick!"

The physician had already leaped into the inner room. The bamboo blinds fell with a swoosh, blocking everyone's line of sight. Fei Sheng was so alarmed he broke out in a cold sweat. He had only just taken a stride out when the apprentice swung a chair and blocked him.

Oh, no!

Fei Sheng cried out, "Protect His Lordship!"

It was too late for the guards in the hallway to break in through the windows. All of a sudden, Gao Zhongxiong was knocked over to the ground. Moving swiftly as if on winged feet, Li Xiong yelled as he charged into the inner room and lunged at the physician, knocking him over to the ground. Both of them crashed into the footrest before the bed, sending the lowered bed curtains fluttering. The steel needles clamped between the physician's fingers aimed right for Li Xiong's eyes. Li Xiong reached out to grasp hold of the physician's hand and slammed his own head into the physician's head, sending it slamming back onto the ground.

The knock made the physician's head swim with dizziness. He backhandedly wrapped his arms around Li Xiong's neck and twisted around to flip Li Xiong over to the ground, holding him in a chokehold. As they



tumbled, they bumped over the short table in the inner room. The teapot toppled over and shattered, and scalding hot tea splashed all over Li Xiong's face. Gasping hard for breath, Li Xiong swung a fist at the other man's face, but he struck at empty air.

The physician held down Li Xiong. The side of Li Xiong's face chafed against the broken porcelain fragments, stabbing him until it was all streaked with blood. He shouted, "Lizard! Lizard!"<sup>16</sup>

The physician lifted his steel needle, but unexpectedly, he felt a sudden weight to his back, and his entire person went crashing over to the ground where he tumbled. Covering half of his face, he said something at the top of his voice in the Biansha tongue and swiftly went groping for the steel needle that had dropped. Xiao Chiye abruptly hauled up the Lizard by the back of his collar and slammed him face-down to the ground.

Those in the outer chamber heard a few muffled "thuds", then all was silent within.

The guards held down the apprentice. Fei Sheng had not even caught his breath when the bamboo blinds swung wildly from being bumped into. The physician with his entire head all bloodied rolled onto the rug in the outer room, already devoid of life.

Xiao Chiye's expression was icy and piercing. He forcibly suppressed his fury and said in a frosty tone, "Seal the place from the courtyard to the main gate with one person every ten steps. Who screened them? Scram without needing me to tell you to!"

Everyone within and outside of the courtyard fell to their knees.

To think an entire residence of guards could let the other party openly enter the inner room. Fei Sheng's cold sweat never once stopped. He kowtowed, knocking his head on the ground, not daring to even utter a sound.



## CHAPTER 253: SICK FROM THE COLD



Once the hour of chen came around, the atmosphere in the city of Duanzhou underwent an abrupt change. Soldiers filled the streets and alleys, while the garrison troops and the Imperial Army took turns to patrol. The four gates remained tightly shut. Everywhere, the clicking sound of military boots and the clanking sound of blades abounded. The atmosphere in the residence was heavy. All the guards were on high alert and ready for combat. They no longer dared to slacken even the slightest.

Xiao Chiye squatted before Li Xiong and asked, “You know him?”

Ointment was being applied to Li Xiong’s injured face as he answered, “Yeah. He’s a Lizard. They drink Gedale’s milk. Very stinky.”

Xiao Chiye frowned. “Not a Scorpion?”

“Used, used to be a Scorpion.” Li Xiong spoke in such a hurry that he stumbled over his words a little. “But later, he became a ‘lizard’.”<sup>17</sup>

Ding Tao could not make head or tail of it. “What do you mean by he used to be but not later?”

“They are the Lizards.” Li Xiong patted his own arm. “My big bro spoke to them before. They are not the same as Hai, Hai...” He could not remember Hairigu’s name. “Not the same as Hai. They are not cattle and sheep.”

In the eyes of the Twelve Tribes, the Scorpions were the cattle and sheep of Gedale. Their status was low and humble.

Xiao Chiye remembered Zhuoli. Zhuoli was a Lizard too, but Zhuoli had clear Biansha characteristics, so it seemed that a Lizard was still a Scorpion, only that they had a change of name.

“Lizards.” Xiao Chiye looked up at Li Xiong and guessed, “The Lizards are Amu’er’s Scorpions. That’s why they have a higher status than Achi and Hairigu.”

Li Xiong gave him a thumbs up and said happily, “Right. They have lands, where they can ride horses.” As he spoke, he sulked again. “They are all super bad people who love beating others, and they don’t play with the Scorpions. They are more valuable than the Scorpions.”

Xiao Chiye pressed against his thumb ring and rotated it gently.

Hasen had not even died for three days, and already Amu’er’s Lizards had appeared in the courtyard. Did they come along with Zhuoli’s squad? Or were they originally here to begin with?

“You did well.” Xiao Chiye raised a hand and patted Li Xiong on the head. “Keep watch over His Lordship here. Second Master will give you sweets.”



“You’ve always been meticulous when it comes to this kind of matter.” Qiao Tianya’s hair was not even thoroughly dry when he arrived at the prison. “How could you make such an oversight today?”

Fei Sheng, who was scrutinizing the corpse, shook his head on hearing him. “The assassins had Dazhou faces, and they spoke the local language even more smoothly than you and I do.” He turned his head to the side. “They even had proof of household registration.”

Qiao Tianya turned the corpse to look it over.

Shen Zechuan established the Zhongbo census register,<sup>18</sup> so every family’s and every household’s records could be traced and checked. If these assassins even had household registrations, that meant that they had very likely laid in ambush in Zhongbo even earlier than Shen Zechuan.

“This makes it a tough one to handle,” Qiao Tianya said in a quiet voice. “There’s no way to tell them apart if they are hiding among the people.”

“If we were to speak of flaws, there’s only one.” Fei Sheng pointed at the corpse’s arm.

“Tattoo.”

Qiao Tianya’s gaze shifted down. Sure enough, he saw a lizard tattoo on the side of the corpse’s arm.

“Back then, to investigate the Scorpions, Master had the various *yamen* record down the names of those who had tattoos.” Fei Sheng folded his

arms. "I've already sent a letter to Yu Xiaozai in Dunzhou. If there are no records of these two men's names, then they snuck their way in when the city was breached."

Qiao Tianya nodded. As he retracted his hand, he looked at Fei Sheng. There was no smile on his face as he said, "Have you ever considered why they would have such obvious marks on them despite being assassins who sneaked their way in?"

They were all Imperial Bodyguards, and they knew very well the necessity of disguise and camouflage. The Scorpions had a reason for having tattoos, but what need was there for the Lizards, who were of even higher status than the Scorpions?

The expression in Fei Sheng's eyes was grave as he lightly clicked his tongue.

"Tsk."



Shen Zechuan woke up once at the hour of shen, and Xiao Chiye fed him the medicine. Shen Zechuan was so feverish he was in a daze. He could hear Xiao Chiye talking, but Xiao Chiye's voice kept fading in and out.

"Lanzhou..." Xiao Chiye said something as he brushed aside the hair by Shen Zechuan's cheek.

Shen Zechuan gasped lightly as if he could not breathe. Taking the spoon into his mouth, he swallowed the last mouthful of medicine. Xiao Chiye wiped Shen Zechuan's sweat with a soaked handkerchief. He tilted his head, and the tip of his nose rubbed against Xiao Chiye's bandaged palm. His lips opened and closed.

Xiao Chiye lowered his head to listen.

"Handkerchief." Shen Zechuan's words were all over the place. "Mine."

"It's with me." Xiao Chiye covered Shen Zechuan's soaked palm with his free hand. "Once you recover, I'll give it to you."

Shen Zechuan was so ill he was barely conscious. In his pain, he indistinctly whimpered twice.

Xiao Chiye's entire person leaned over on his stomach beside the pillow and coaxed him, "I'll really give it to you."

Shen Zechuan did not believe him. He frowned, as if he was struggling, his partially closed eyes betraying just how sad he was as he buried them into Xiao Chiye's palm. It was in this way he tugged at Xiao Chiye's

heartstrings. Xiao Chiye lowered his head and pressed up against Shen Zechuan's temple, against his sweat.

The taste of bitterness saturated the tip of Shen Zechuan's tongue. All his half-opened eyes saw was a mosaic of bizarre, surreal scenes. Only Xiao Chiye's scent surrounded him, making him seem to float among the waves of grass.

In a very, very small voice, he called out, "Xiao'er."

Xiao Chiye kissed him and answered with a deep nasal twang, "Mm."

Shen Zechuan frowned several times and said with his voice breaking up, "I want to... eat sweets..."

Xiao Chiye's heart that had been on tenterhooks relaxed some. He got up to mix him some honeyed water. Shen Zechuan only drank two spoonfuls of it, only needing the tip of his tongue to get a taste of the sweetness. Once again, Xiao Chiye rinsed the handkerchief and wiped down the sweat on Shen Zechuan's neck. From the feel of it, his fever seemed to have subsided some.



The gentlemen in the side hall were all restless with anxiety. The suffocating smell of smoking pipes permeated the room, and no one made to get up even when the hour of hai came around. They had even forgotten about their meals, as concerned as they were about the prefectural lord.

"All these physicians are useless," Tantai Hu sat on the chair and said to Kong Ling. "Look, Mister, what if I immediately headed out of the city on my horse and search again in Dunzhou?"

Gao Zhongxiong's face paled at the mere mention of this. He hurriedly waved his hands. "That won't do. The assassins today had clear origins that could stand up to scrutiny. If there really are spies, no one will be able to tell them apart!"

Kong Ling's frown did not let up.

The entire room of people fell silent once again. Not long after, they heard the sound of rain falling again outside. The guards braved the rain and took turns to be on duty. Lanterns that had been lit up late in the night brightly illuminated the various paths within the residence, leaving no blind spots for anyone to take advantage of.

Everyone did not get to rest much after the battle, and by the time the hour of chou had come and gone, those with weaker constitutions could no longer take it. They reclined against the chairs to doze off, drifting between

nodding off and staying awake because they did not dare to sleep, and so it was in this way they hung in there.

Yao Wenyu took off his fur collar when he entered the room. The sound of the wheelchair startled quite a number of people awake. He placed the fur collar on his lap and said in a mild tone, "Second Master is here, so His Lordship is certain to be fine. I know that all of you here are burning with anxiety, but now the battle has just stopped, the documents from the *yamen* of the various prefectures are piling up. It would be inappropriate to wait until His Lordship wakes up to deal with them. It's enough for Chengfeng and Shenwei to keep watch here. The rest of you can go back and rest first. Tomorrow morning, all matters are to be handled normally. Act at your own discretion for trivial matters, whereas for major affairs you are uncertain about, present them to the side hall, and we will discuss and come to a resolution together."

Kong Ling also got to his feet and said, "His Lordship is presently ill. It is indeed inadvisable for us to pile him with pressing work. Everyone, please head back first."

Everyone stood up and responded in the affirmative, then filed out of the room one after the other.

Gao Zhongxiong poured tea for Yao Wenyu and said, "Yuanzhuo is sensitive to the cold. You should ask someone to accompany you."

Yao Wenyu took the tea and said his thanks. "I have the fur collar and overcoat, so it's fine. It has been raining non-stop these few days. I see that the drainage of the public ditches in the city is going along smoothly. There has been no incident."

"The beginning of the new year." Tantai Hu roused himself up and rubbed his eye with the blade scar. "Everyone was here at the beginning of the year, fearing that the melted snow would cause a blockage, so they went out of the way to dredge it once."

"The ones in Dengzhou are clogged, but it's not a big issue. His Excellency Yu watched them being dredged during his tour of inspection," Gao Zhongxiong said. "There have been plenty of updates coming in from Cizhou these two days. Other than the letter in which His Excellency Zhou asked after His Lordship, there are also those discussing the Eight Cities."

The properties of the Pan clan had been confiscated, and the city of Dancheng missed the spring plowing. This was already the sixth month.

Once the autumn harvest that was just around the corner came calling, the meals of the commoners of Dancheng would be a matter of worry.

“We are fighting a battle here, and so is Qudu,” Kong Ling said. “I heard the news that the Grand Secretariat has already instructed the Ministry of Rites to begin preparation for the enthronement ceremony.”

Han Cheng was dead, and while Empress Dowager counted on her connection to Hua Xiangyi to preserve her life, she was completely imprisoned in the inner court where the harem resided. The authority to deploy the Eight Great Training Divisions of the Capital Command Troops returned into the Heir Apparent’s hands. Li Jianting had the Qidong Garrison Troops to act as surety too, so how could the noble clans who could not even fend for themselves stop her?

“We are besieged with external foes. If everyone works as one to assist His Lordship, Biansha will not pose a difficult problem. But Qudu of now is torn apart by disunity. Xue Yanqing’s confiscation and sealing off of the Pan clan’s properties has already caused the eight cities to stir with restlessness.” Yao Wenyu said in a soft voice, “The enthronement of the Heir Apparent will prove to come bearing down even more menacingly.”

“Speaking of which,” Kong Ling looked at Chen Yang, “we still don’t know what happened in the Bianjun Commandery. Has an agreement been reached with the Youxiong Tribe?”

Straightening out the military affairs, Chen Yang said, “Had that been the case, Second Master wouldn’t have been late. Dalantai of the Youxiong Tribe agreed to our request and promised not to obstruct Commander-in-chief Qi from moving north. He took Hasen’s thank-you gift and indeed kept his words not to obstruct Commander-in-chief Qi from mobilizing troops to Gedale, but he violated the oath of allegiance and mounted a surprise attack on the Bianjun Commandery just when Second Master was preparing to deploy troops to Duanzhou.”

Just as Qi Zhuyin predicted, Dalantai did not take sides with anyone. He did not want to submit to Amu’er at all, nor did he want to place himself at Shen Zechuan’s disposal. He saw his opportunity from Hasen’s and Shen Zechuan’s requests. He wanted to pass through the Bianjun Commandery to occupy Suotian Pass to the south, which had no other strong and capable general stationed there after their loss of Feng Yisheng.

The Youxiong Tribe lived on the grasslands in the south. When Dalantai roamed the desert, he came to understand that there was no room

for the bears<sup>19</sup> there. They endured the rigors of an arduous journey, trekking through difficult terrains and rivers, to return to a place near their homeland, all to seek a new place to live. For this, they were willing to risk their lives and take up their blades to fight with everything they had.

It was on the yellow sands in the desert that Xiao Chiye's armored cavalry crossed paths with the "bear horses".<sup>20</sup>

The Bianjun Commandery fought for two days, and Dalantai died there in battle. The Youxiong Tribe seemed to be forever unable to cross over that threshold, and they could only, once again, retreat to the desert.

"The reinforcements Hasen left behind in Gedale were handed over to Commander-in-chief Qi." Chen Yang raised the military report in his hand. "And going by last night's urgent report, Commander-in-chief Qi found out on her return journey that Amu'er is in the midst of deploying his troops."

At these words, the entire hall promptly grew tense.

Gao Zhongxiong stammered, "Then, then, we are going to fight, fight again..."

Chen Yang gestured for him to relax. "It's just a transfer of troops. After all, the commanding general in the battle zone is gone. Amu'er has to send someone who can take over Hasen... I feel this person might very well be himself."

Because Xiao Chiye did not return Hasen's head.<sup>21</sup>

"The specific arrangements for military affairs will have to depend on Second Master's instructions." Tantai Hu reassured the various gentlemen. "No matter what, they won't fight their way to the base of the city anymore. At the moment, we have the upper hand. Even if Amu'er heads into battle himself, he might not necessarily be more formidable than Hasen. Besides, if he wants to cross the Chashi River, he has to ask Second Master for permission."

Only then did the atmosphere in the side hall ease off a little. As they were discussing, they suddenly heard a huge commotion in the hallway. Chen Yang lifted the hanging screen and poked his head out for a look.

Ding Tao cried so hard a snot bubble popped out of his nose. Tugging at Chen Yang, he shouted, "Ge! Call the physicians in quickly! His Lordship is burning up again!"

The physicians were trembling with trepidation as they gathered in the walkway and discussed the prescriptions in whispers. The rain washed



down upon the jasmine orange in the courtyard, covering the ground all over with petals.

Qiao Tianya and Fei Sheng braved the rain as they returned, stepping across the flower petals before swiftly wiping the water off their bodies under the eaves.

“The physicians who saw Yuanzhuo before are all here,” Qiao Tianya threw the handkerchief back, “as are the physicians Ge Qingqing transferred over from Juexi, and not one of them can treat the illness?”

“This fever keeps relapsing.” Chen Yang did not dare to speak facing the window. He turned to the side and said in a whisper, “They said his constitution is a gone case. He’s just like porcelain. Few dare to prescribe medicine.”

“That’s what they said about Yuanzhuo the last time.” Qiao Tianya did not raise his voice at the physicians. After a moment’s pause, he continued, “It’s true that His Lordship ruined his body in his early years consuming that medication, but these days, he has been recuperating at home, so that shouldn’t be the case at all.”

“Master also wants to be cured deep down in his heart, and he has been taking his medicine on schedule.” Fei Sheng clutched the handkerchief he used to wipe away the water. He was worried sick. “... I suppose he must have been too badly injured that day.”

They were going to disperse the smell of medicine in the room, and no one wanted to provoke the Second Master at this moment, so they stood under the eaves and waited to be summoned. But within a few moments of the servant carrying the medicine entering, they heard Shen Zechuan vomiting.

Xiao Chiye, who was partially hugging Shen Zechuan, touched Shen Zechuan’s back, which was already soaked in sweat. The medicine was all spilled over the ground. Shen Zechuan could not throw up a thing, and after puking out bile, he dry-heaved. His stomach was in a twist at present, and his bouts of vomiting were so bad he retched himself awake.

Fog started to materialize in the middle of the night. Deathly white lantern lights swayed in the rain. The sound of footsteps in the courtyard never once stopped. Rain soaked the courtyard damp, and the bedding had already been changed once.

Fei Sheng apprehensively said, “Prepare a charcoal brazier and keep the fire going to dry it up a little.”

Chen Yang saw that the bandages being taken out were all soaked in blood. He did not know if it was Xiao Chiye's or Shen Zechuan's.

Li Xiong sat cross-legged by the door and slept for a while, waking up when the hour of yin came around. Fei Sheng had the kitchen give Li Xiong rice. Li Xiong buried his head in the large bowl and gobbled it down. Once he had eaten his fill, he continued to sit and stare at the people entering and exiting.

"Persuade the Second Master to sleep for a moment at the hour of mao." Qiao Tianya squatted beside the pillar and struck up a fire to light up his pipe. "Even someone forged in iron like him can't take it and just make do and sleep inside. Those of us who guard the door..."

He had yet to finish his words when a hand reached out from the side and gently nudged aside his smoking pipe.

Qiao Tianya turned back and looked at Yao Wenyu.

"It's rather suffocating." Yao Wenyu turned his wheelchair to face the principal room.

Willowy wisps of smoke spiraled, turning into the tiny bit of invisible tenderness in the dripping wet rainy night. With hands on knees, Qiao Tianya stood up and extinguished the smoking pipe.

It was all silent in the courtyard during the hour of mao. Night fell, and day broke again. The guards who had been successively taking the night watch were all wearing out, as passive as they were in their wait. Fei Sheng was leaning against the pillar with his eyes closed to catch a breather when his ears suddenly twitched. He opened his eyes, and it was a long while later when there was movement in the doorway.

"He's back." Fei Sheng quickly leaped down the steps. "Gu Jin is back!"

One of the lanterns under the eaves went out. Xiao Chiye heard activity, and after a moment, the hanging drapes lifted slightly.

"Second Master." Gu Jin, who had braved the elements and hardships the entire arduous journey, knelt on one knee in the outer room. "I'm back late! I was midway through my journey when I heard the Biansha Cavalry besieged the city of Duanzhou. Even when I rushed through the bridgeway, I couldn't make it in time."

Xiao Chiye suddenly jolted to his feet and came out of the inner chamber. The few people under the eaves listened with bated breath and rapt attention.

Without wiping the rainwater off his face, Gu Jin met Xiao Chiye's gaze and, not daring to hesitate, reported, "Second Master, the Venerable Master... is indeed dead."





## CHAPTER 254: JIRAN



Raindrops pelted the fallen flowers into the mud, then pounded its fragile petals to pieces. The wind swept across the bamboo blinds, causing the scene inside the room to flutter slightly, making it hard to get a clear look within.

“I went to Hezhou and found the Venerable Master’s layman family. They confirmed that after the Venerable Master returned to Hezhou, he was taken away by the Yan clan under the pretext of consulting for an illness.” Gu Jin changed his tone. “But heaven never leaves one in the lurch. Jiran!”

The hearts of the guards at the door all leaped to their mouth at this one word of “*Jiran*” from Gu Jin, but then, he did not continue.

*Jiran?* Since what?<sup>22</sup>

Li Xiong was in the midst of picking up the candied fruit in the jar to eat when he suddenly saw a smooth egg popping out from the end of the walkway. All wrapped up in a large and roomy monk cassock, that egg lifted two long trails of sleeves and trotted over. As he passed by Li Xiong, he did not forget to cast a glance at the candied fruits, and with this one look, he did not pay attention to where he was going and tripped over himself and fell into the bamboo blinds with a “thud”.

“Oops!” The sprawling egg lifted his head and said, “Greetings to Second Master!”

The crowd fixed their eyes on him—turned out he was a fourteen or fifteen years old monk, even younger than Ding Tao. Dragging his sleeves, the little monk put his palms together and recited with a solemn and respectful expression, “Amitabha!”

He had a Hezhou accent and could not pronounce the “*mi*” clearly, so it sounded like “*anitabha*”.

“Second Master,” Gu Jin said. “It was precisely for this lad that the Venerable Master had been willing to return to Hezhou.”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh.” Jiran nodded his head as though that was indeed the case. “It’s precisely for this humble monk.”

“The Venerable Master was getting up in the years, and was well aware that he did not have much time left before he would soon leave this world. But Jiran was too young, so the Venerable Master headed back to Hezhou and placed him under the care of his distant layman relatives. Unexpectedly, it was at that time he crossed paths with the Yan Clan there.”

“Young Master Yan said that he wanted to bring this humble monk out to play,” Blinking his clear and round eyes, Jiran continued, “This humble monk had to fetch the water. He got impatient waiting and invited Master away first.”

Xiao Chiye noted Jiran’s young age, and his remaining hope that had just been ignited was thoroughly extinguished.

Gu Jin seemed to read what Xiao Chiye was thinking and continued. “Even though Jiran is young, he has acquired the Venerable Master’s legacy, and his medical skills are consummate. With him consulting for the Prefectural Lord, Second Master...”

“Eh, eh,” Jiran shook his head hard. “No way. How can the light from a firefly even begin to compare with the brilliance of the moon? This humble monk and shifu are like the small creek and boundless ocean—there’s no comparison!”

He still had baby fat on his face. Not only did he look innocent, but even his words had an air of naivety.

Li Xiong forgot to eat his candied fruit as he tilted his head out from the side of the door with Ding Tao to size up this soft-boiled egg.

Gu Jin lifted Jiran up by his back collar and said. “Go take a look first!”



Jiran took Shen Zechuan’s pulse, frowning at times and mumbling to himself at times.

Xiao Chiye lowered his voice to ask, “How is he?”

Jiran lowered his gaze to look at Shen Zechuan’s wrist. After a long time, he replied to Xiao Chiye, “His Lordship really is fair.”

There was no trace of probing on Jiran's fair, tender face. His compliment of Shen Zechuan with those bright, clear eyes of his was just as natural as if he was complimenting a clear spring or a white cloud. Xiao Chiye's terrifying possessiveness found no footing on which to flare.

"His Lordship's body is weak due to the adverse effect of the medication he was consuming, but fortunately, he has been meticulously nursed these past six months, and his primordial *qi*<sup>23</sup> still remains." Jiran rolled up his sleeves, holding onto his brush as he thought long and hard before writing a prescription down onto the white sheet of paper.

Xiao Chiye dared not to rest assured just yet, and continued to probe. "He just needs to continue with the prescription?"

"Of course not. External injuries are still injuries, no less. His waist was even stabbed. If His Lordship happens to fall into a coma or stop breathing temporarily tonight, Second Master doesn't have to fret." Jiran regretfully continued. "This humble monk must advise the Second Master not to allow His Lordship to use martial arts again in the future. His Lordship's body is simply not suited to use such a forceful and hard-hitting boxing style. He throws a punch out—yes, the other person will hurt, but His Lordship will feel the pain too. It's so not worth it. After he gets through these two nights and his fever subsides, he will have to convalesce for quite several years."

Jiran handed the prescription over to Xiao Chiye.

"It is best that His Lordship writes with his left hand these six months."

Jiran took the opportunity to look at Xiao Chiye's palm. He said, "Even though Second Master is fit and healthy, you have to remember to rest as well. This injury must not be soaked in water."

Xiao Chiye asked, "How long is 'several years'?"

Jiran rubbed his head. "I'm not sure myself... but you can't go wrong with convalescing."

Xiao Chiye tightened his grip on the prescription and looked towards the lowered drapes. Shen Zechuan's breathing was even as he lay unconscious. His extended wrist exposed in the slightly dimmed room was just as fair as Jiran had said, so fair that it seemed as though he would melt at a single touch.



In his drowsy state, Shen Zechuan had a dream. He dreamed he stood before the gate of Qudu at age fifteen, waiting for his shifu, shiniang, and Ji

Mu to take him home. Dressed in the short padded coat Hua Pingting made, he watched the fine snow stream down along the city walls.

Ji Mu leaned over the top of the wall and shouted at him. "Chuan-er, where are you going?"

Grasping his new coat, Shen Zechuan said in a daze, "I'm going home."

Ji Mu raised his head and gazed in the direction of Duanzhou together with him. "Then wait for a little longer. Father is about to come."

Shen Zechuan could not remember why he had to stand here. He waited from dawn till dusk, and even though it was snowing, he felt very warm.

Ji Mu rubbed his arms and asked, "Ge is a little cold. Want to come up to warm yourself by the fire?"

Shen Zechuan shook his head. "I feel very warm."

And so Ji Mu started a fire at the top of the city wall. He extended both his hands out for warmth as he chatted with Shen Zechuan. "When we go back this time, Ge will be able to get married. Mother has been nagging about it for years."

They waited for a very long time. Shen Zechuan's waist was aching, as were his calves. Every part of him hurt. He wiped his sweat, looking into the horizon ahead throughout.

Seeing as the sky had darkened, Ji Mu suddenly murmured, "Father isn't coming anymore." His fire burned out. He got up to put on the military coat set at the side and leaned over the top of the wall to flash a grin at Shen Zechuan. "Chuan-er."

Shen Zechuan raised his head and took a few steps, looking at him.

Ji Mu said, "Ge's whistle call is sounding. I can't wait anymore. I have to go."

Shen Zechuan nodded, already accustomed to it. "Then go. I'll tell *shiniang*." <sup>24</sup>

Ji Mu revealed a troubled expression, as if he was having a headache, and said with a sigh, "Ge's worried. You..."

"I'll walk back from here." Shen Zechuan raised a finger and pointed into the distance. "It's nearby."

Ji Mu looked at Shen Zechuan, the expression in his eyes gentle. "What am I to do about my little brother?"

Shen Zechuan heard the sound of hooves and leaped a little as he yelled, "Ge, *shifu* is here!"



Ji Mu said nothing and merely remained that way with his head propped in his hands as he smiled.

Shen Zechuan turned his head and saw a gyrfalcon with its wings spread flying out from the horizon, followed by a galloping horse that was black all over with a patch of white on its front chest.

He stopped in his tracks and watched that horse running over to him.

Sitting on the back of the horse was a youth wearing a helmet. The gyrfalcon landed on his shoulder. He removed his helmet, revealing his rather displeased face, and bent over to scrutinize Shen Zechuan. "What are you standing there for? Get on the horse. Second Young Master will take you away."

Shen Zechuan ignored him, so he dismounted his horse, knocked his helmet on Shen Zechuan's head, and hoisted up Shen Zechuan.

"Ah," Shen Zechuan said, smothered in the helmet. "I want to go home."

Xiao Chiye flicked a finger at Shen Zechuan, unreasonably impervious to reason. "You're leaving with me."

He walked a few steps, then asked, as if angry, "Don't you recognize me?"

"I don't," Shen Zechuan answered.

Xiao Chiye made to toss Shen Zechuan into the snow. He threw Shen Zechuan up, and when Shen Zechuan panicked, caught him again with steady hands. The gyrfalcon landed on his shoulder, and he burst out laughing as he looked at Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan lifted the helmet and looked at him, baffled.

The originally darkening sky abruptly lit up. Wind tousled Xiao Chiye's hair, and the surrounding wall that blocked his line of sight all disappeared to reveal a boundless expanse of grassland paved beneath his feet. It was in this way he hugged Shen Zechuan and greedily stroked Shen Zechuan's cheek.

"I want to hide you away," Xiao Chiye said aloud in the wind, "or perhaps put you into the pocket in my bosom."

Shen Zechuan could not hear him clearly. He tilted his head up and asked, "What did you say?"

Xiao Chiye looked at him and kissed him hard on the cheek.

"I said you're really good-looking," he answered. "Too damn good-looking. No one will ever surpass you in looks, I swear!"

Shen Zechuan covered his cheek and replied loudly, "You're lying!"

Paying no heed to his struggle, Xiao Chiye hugged him tight and said in his ear, "My bad."

The wind stopped, and Xiao Chiye swiftly grew up. His broad shoulders blocked out the light as he embraced Shen Zechuan, looking as if he had just woken up, and at the same time, still in dreamland. His unraveled hair weaved together with Shen Zechuan's, spreading out among the bedding. A tiny little braid lay across in the middle.

Shen Zechuan opened his bleary eyes and zoned out for a while. Tiredly, he said, "It's all bound together."

"Mm." Xiao Chiye lifted the little braid with his long finger. "As they say, they who bind their hair together become husband and wife."<sup>25</sup>

Shen Zechuan had only just woken up and he was still coming around and getting his bearings.

Xiao Chiye rubbed his back for him and said, "Time to get up."

He rubbed Shen Zechuan until Shen Zechuan turned slightly aside and was now lying on Xiao Chiye's chest. Xiao Chiye had calluses on his hands, and his rubs felt very comfortable. Shen Zechuan's eyes were almost about to narrow. Still, he did not forget to say angrily to Xiao Chiye, "You're so noisy."

Xiao Chiye nuzzled him hard with his stubbled chin and said, "You're going to be the death of me, Shen Lanzhou."

Shen Zechuan poked Xiao Chiye's cheek with his right hand that had been wrapped into a dumpling. Very naturally, both of them shared a tired, listless kiss.

The spell of rain over several days came to a cease, and sunny days took over in Duanzhou.

Jiran might have been a very modest one, but three days later, Shen Zechuan was able to consume congee on schedule. The little monk stood by the window, piously reciting "*anitabha*". When Xiao Chiye asked what he wanted as a reward, he pointed to Li Xiong's candy jar without hesitation.

Everyone heaved a sigh of relief and handed the candy jar over to him before Li Xiong could protest.



The window in the room was opened. Shen Zechuan rested against the back cushion and listened to Fei Sheng finish his report.

“If they were spies, there was indeed no need for them to leave such obvious tattoos on their bodies.” Shen Zechuan held the report Yuanzhuo wrote in his left hand. It covered all the important matters these few days which the advisers were in no position to take the decision into their own hands. “You mean, the reason they still had the lizard tattoo on them was to distinguish themselves from the ordinary Scorpions?”

“The Lizards all belonged under Amu’er, and they pride themselves on being a branch of the Hanshe Tribe,” Qiao Tianya said. “Zhuoli has to step onto the battlefield, so it’s not surprising for him to have the tattoo, but the only possibility for infiltrating Lizards to still have their tattoos could only be that they are worried about getting confused by others.”

“What did Youjing say?” Xiao Chiye asked.

“The household registrations the assassins used are legitimate. There are indeed these two people in Fanzhou, but it’s very likely that they have been replaced,” Fei Sheng said. “After all, we only know their names, but not their appearances.”

“That can’t be helped,” Kong Ling said in a steady voice. “The census register has to be filled in and reported every year. Even if the various prefectural *yamen* take down their portraits during the verification process, they can’t be kept for long.”

But Qiao Tianya was right in his conjecture. Why did the infiltrating Lizards need to have tattoos on them? That way, there would be no escape for them once they were found out. Amu’er treated them as his own private soldiers. Even Zhuoli was “loaned” to Hasen, which showed just how highly Amu’er regarded these Lizards. If it was really to differentiate themselves from the Scorpions, then it had to do with the Scorpions who roamed Zhongbo’s territories all year round.

“Duanzhou isn’t close to Gedale, and it’s even further away from Amu’er. Even the fastest horses can’t get the news there instantly.” Xiao Chiye knew the military map to the east like the back of his hand. “Even Hasen’s saker falcons didn’t manage to fly back. These two Lizards were not sent by Amu’er.”

Amu’er’s deployment of troops was his contingency plan for the worst-case scenario where Qi Zhuyin attacked Gedale and Hasen did not return to provide reinforcements. His confirmation of Hasen’s death could only happen within these two days. This was because the Chashi River was not

easy to cross, so he had no way of giving orders to the Lizards a few days prior. There was simply no time.

Understanding flashed across Yao Wenyu's expression. "Since the Lizards are Amu'er's private soldiers, they would not easily heed the deployment commands of another person. If Amu'er was not the one who gave them the order to assassinate, then the only possibility left is that someone gave them the orders under Amu'er's name."

Fei Sheng furrowed his brows. "If so, that means there is still a Scorpion or a Lizard by our side, and he knows the movements in Duanzhou."

Always the one who would immediately get nervous, Gao Zhongxiong said, "Then isn't that terrible? This person is very familiar with matters concerning Zhongbo!"

"If these Lizards were long-time residents in the territory, then even if they had proof of household registration, they would also have been recorded down in the book due to their tattoo," Qiao Tianya said, "which means they have only just sneaked their way in."

"The *yamen*'s checks are so strict," Kong Ling said. "It's too hard for them to sneak into the city unnoticed. They have to be able to evade the guards' inspections."

"Then there's really a place where they can do that." Chen Yang bowed slightly to the Prefectural Lord. "The Scorpions of Cizhou are not subjected to questioning within the territory. They can move freely following Hairigu."

Hairigu's Scorpions originally could only remain at the Beiyuan Hunting Grounds under the strict watch of the garrison troops. It was only until they rendered meritorious services at the Chashi Sinkhole accompanying the Libei Armored Cavalry that Zhongbo undid their shackles. If the Lizards were with him, then the issue about the tattoo would make sense.

Fei Sheng promptly said, "Hairigu's negotiation with the Youxiong Tribe did not work out too. Master, why not I..."

"What's the hurry? With the Youxiong Tribe retreating in defeat, the Qingshu Tribe's territory has been completely vacated." Shen Zechuan set down the report and said to Xiao Chiye, "Let's give this piece of land to Hairigu."

Xiao Chiye lifted his brows slightly.

“Hairigu signed an oath of alliance with the Youxiong Tribe on my behalf, but the Youxiong Tribe reneged on the agreement.” An undercurrent of ruthlessness coursed through Shen Zechuan’s tired eyes. “There is a price to be paid for betrayal. Let Hairigu collect this debt on my behalf.”

The reason Hairigu wanted to instigate the Lizards hiding in his own nest of Scorpions was to ignite the flames of war as soon as possible. He wanted lands, and just like Dalantai, they all seemed to be wavering, but in truth, they were all working for their own benefits.

Xiao Chiye killed Achi over at the Chashi Sinkhole, so the Biansha Scorpions were now without a leader, and Hairigu had no more rival to vie with him. If he returned to the desert at this time, he would be the one and only leader of the remaining Scorpions. He even dared to do Yan Heru’s business, so he could also turn around and work with Amu’er again owing to the change in the situation.

If Shen Zechuan killed off Hairigu, he would merely be killing off an exposed Scorpion. Amu’er had no lack of this kind of Scorpions, so Shen Zechuan would not only spare Hairigu but also give Hairigu the land he yearned for so much. He wanted Hairigu to stand here and firmly occupy the Zhongbo battlefield, controlling the flow of Scorpions, thereby becoming the thorn in Amu’er’s side.

But at the same time, Shen Zechuan also wanted to teach Hairigu a hard lesson.

If Hairigu wanted that piece of Qingshu Tribe’s land, he had to first go and deal with the Youxiong Tribe. As long as he did so, the Twelve Tribes would no longer accept him easily, and Amu’er would no longer trust him. He would also have to shoulder the Youxiong’s Tribe’s hatred, for he was the blade-wielding executioner who carried out the punishment.

The Prefectural Lord wanted to use his resources to the fullest.

Shen Zechuan grew tired from sitting, and as the others were about to retreat, he said, “There’s no hurry for Yuanzhuo to retire for a rest upon heading back. Jiran will be going over in a while to take a look at you.”



Jiran was still a child at heart, jumping across water puddles as he followed after Gu Jin. Seeing his smooth, bald head reflected in the water, he could not help but double up with laughter.

Qiao Tianya met them at the entrance. Putting his palms together too, he said to Jiran, “Little Master,<sup>26</sup> please enter.”

Jiran returned the greeting. At this time, the birds were chirping among the trees, and the weather was pleasantly warm. Dressed in monk robes, he stood in the water puddles of varying sizes that reflected the blue sky and white clouds, a sight that so entranced one it was hard to distinguish between heaven and earth.

“Benefactor,”<sup>27</sup> Jiran imitated his *shifu*’s<sup>28</sup> example and nodded slowly to Qiao Tianya. “You have an affinity with Buddha.”

Qiao Tianya found it interesting and said, “When I was young, there was a monk who said the same thing to me too. But then, to date, I still have yet to renounce the world and become a monk.”

Jiran looked at Qiao Tianya. When he was quiet, he had a kind of otherworldly aura. However, that was not the so-called detachment far removed from the mundane world, but a natural transcendence. Such was the little monk, pure and untainted, observing the secular world with his own pair of eyes.

“Worryfree are the clear waters, that creased in a frown because of the wind; Ageless are the emerald hills, that sport a crown of white because of the snow.<sup>29</sup> Benefactor’s ‘cause’ already exists, so would the ‘catalyst’ still be far along?”<sup>30</sup> The refreshing breeze blew up Jiran’s monk robe, and the hem of his clothes drooped into the water. He clapped his palms gently, looking in all seriousness in his naivety, as if already certain of Qiao Tianya’s future path.

Qiao Tianya heard the wind chimes under the eaves swaying in the breeze. He turned his head and saw Yao Wenyu sitting there. Yao Wenyu’s sleeves instantly swayed with the wind. Unexpectedly enough, he gave off the same vibe as Jiran strolling among the white clouds in the water puddles.

Jiran walked to the front of the steps, but did not bow to Yao Wenyu. Under the tinkling of the wind chimes, he scrutinized Yao Wenyu. Eventually, he shook his head. “I can’t heal your legs. Even if my *shifu* were alive, he wouldn’t be able to heal your legs either.”

Yao Wenyu covered Hunu on his lap with his fingers. “All conditioned phenomena are like a dream, an illusion, a bubble, a shadow, like the dew and a flash of lightning. And thus, it is so we shall perceive them.”<sup>31</sup>

The confluence of causes and conditions of this world was in a constant flux of change. Yao Wenyu was no longer obsessing over this pair of legs. Long when he answered, “*I’m still standing*”,<sup>32</sup> he had already extricated

himself from it all. It made no difference whether he stood or sat. He was still himself. He was him.

Jiran sighed. “Others want me to speak of the sayings of Buddha, yet you speak of them to me. Existing in the existential view of your own mortality,<sup>33</sup> you’ve seen the end, so why stop and linger here? Come with me to the mountains.”

Yao Wenyu said, “I still have the forms of all things<sup>34</sup> in my heart.”

Looking at Yao Wenyu, Jiran raised a finger to point at Qiao Tianya. “You also have the form of him in your heart.”

The wind blew against Yao Wenyu’s sleeves, and the red thread on his wrist slid gently. He said, “That is why I’m still an ordinary mortal.”

The chain of cause and effect, of predestined relationships, was beyond intriguing. When exactly were its wheels set into motion? Perhaps it was that night when the red thread was bound, or perhaps it was that one utterance of “*I hate you to the core*”<sup>35</sup>, or perhaps even earlier, during the third month when spring was budding in the air.

Qiao Tianya, Qiao Songyue—he was the swallow that left his mark.

Yao Wenyu understood that all that existed in the world was but mere illusions. Everything he did today was like the snap of the finger that would swiftly vanish into the long, never-ending river.

Yao Wenyu, Yao Yuanzhuo—he was the leaf that turned to mud.

“I have nothing to give to you.” Jiran tilted his head slightly.

Yao Wenyu looked at Shen Zechuan’s courtyard and smiled. “You have already given me what I want.”



The yellow sand of the Bianjun Commandery brushed past the military banner, sending it fluttering. Qi Zhuyin removed her helmet. Her mouth was all mixed with gravel and grit. Qi Wei handed her a handkerchief. She could not strip off her armor and wipe herself down as the male generals did, so she could only bear the scorching heat and wipe her face with restraint.

“Duanzhou has sent several military reports,” Qi Wei said. “The report from the battle zone is here too.”

“The one from the battle zone is from Lu Guangbai. What else can it be but the retreat of the Biansha Cavalry soldiers?” Qi Zhuyin set down Zhujiu and moved behind the wall to cool off. “Duanzhou is from Xiao Chiye. Go ahead and read it out.”

Only then did Qi Wei open the private letter and read it out to Qi Zhuyin.

Qi Zhuyin's hands, which had initially been folding the handkerchief, paused. She looked at Qi Wei and repeated, "Give the Qingshu Tribe's territory to the Scorpions?"

Qi Wei carefully looked it over again and ensured there was no mistake before he nodded.

That bit of nonchalance Qi Zhuyin had gradually ebbed away. The armor on her shoulders was already considered light, but wear it for a long time, and it would still be heavy enough to make the shoulders sore.

"Get a brush," she said, "and reply to Xiao Chiye now. I do not agree."

The Qingshu Tribe was taken down and captured by the Qidong Garrison Troops. Qi Zhuyin had no use for this place, so she could give it to Libei or Zhongbo, but she had no wish to hand it over to the Scorpions. What did Hairigu's occupation of the Qingshu Tribe's territory imply? It implied that there would be the Scorpions keeping watch at her door from then on, one who could turn around and bite them back anytime.

It was exactly as Xiao Chiye expected when he received Qi Zhuyin's reply. He pillowed his head on his arms and said to Shen Zechuan beside him, "Qidong's terrains are what give it an advantage. Expanding eastward would weaken the importance of the Bianjun Commandery. The two 'door shutters' that are Tianfei Watchtower and Suotian Pass would also lose their purpose. It's tough to get Commander-in-chief Qi's nod regarding this matter."

Shen Zechuan was already about to fall asleep. "Libei is willing to establish a relationship of subordination with the Huiyan Tribe, and the Armored Cavalry subsequently receives the perks tea brought them. To Qidong, the advantage of increasing the territory outward from the Bianjun Commandery will far outweigh the disadvantages. It will also reduce the burden of military expenses placed on Commander-in-chief Qi in the future."

More than half of the tea the traveling merchants sold at the harbor from the mutual trade market came from the Huiyan Tribe. Shen Zechuan gave all this sum of money back to the Libei Armored Cavalry. It had to be known that the speed at which the Armored Cavalry depleted their equipment could be said to be ranked first in the world.



Thinking to this point, Shen Zechuan's drowsiness eased. He could not turn over as he pleased, so all he could do was to lean back like Xiao Chiye was doing as he continued, "The war can last a lifetime, then what about the next life?"

"Next life." Xiao Chiye covered his face with the letter and sighed. "I'd still want to be born in Libei."

As both of them lay, Ding Tao and Li Xiong smashed walnuts in the walkway with Jiran, the boys laughing merrily as they did so. Insects chirped up a ruckus under the blazing sun, one sound after another.

"Amu'er spent his whole life attempting in vain to unify the Twelve Tribes," after a while, Xiao Chiye said. "My father thought he could become the great ruler."

"You don't understand the reason Amu'er didn't become the great ruler of the desert." Shen Zechuan turned his head to the side. "I can tell you on the sly."

Xiao Chiye took away the letter and turned aside. It was so warm he was feeling lazy.

All he said was, "Hm?"

"Because Libei has Xiao Ce'an." Shen Zechuan raised his eyes and gazed at him. "You want to cross the river and advance eastward to go looking for Amu'er."

Xiao Chiye suddenly covered Shen Zechuan's eyes. The weather was so, so hot. He inched closer and whispered back, "My wife does understand me so."

The corners of Shen Zechuan's lips curved up slightly with a little smugness.

Xiao Chiye loved looking at Shen Zechuan this way. Lowering his eyes, he could not help but kiss him.



## CHAPTER 255: QINGSHAN



The gardens in Qudu were all a lush shade of emerald green. Potted plants decorated both sides of Mingli Hall's open space. The eunuchs carried basins filled to the brim with ice pieces and placed them in all corners of the hall to dispel the heat. Meanwhile, the court officials under the eaves waiting for themselves to be summoned were all so hot they were sweating, yet they could not breach decorum, and so could only force themselves to endure it and let their sweat soak through their robes.

The bamboo blinds to Mingli Hall lifted, and Fengquan, with a horsetail whisk in hand, walked out and bowed in greeting to the ministers. Softly, he said, "The sweltering heat is unbearable, and it has been hard on the various excellencies attending to official duties. Her Highness has specially instructed this humble slave to prepare green bean soup."

The junior eunuchs swiftly came carrying the bowls of soup; the napkin flowers had all been prepared in advance. Fengquan bowed once more and retreated into Mingli Hall.

"Her Highness shows such consideration to us humble ones." An official who had come from a local region said as he sipped the soup, "And for that, we are truly grateful."

Soup spoons knocked lightly against porcelain bowls. An official from the capital asked Jiang Qingshan, who was at the side, "Is Wanxiao used to staying at the relay station?"

Jiang Qingshan finished his soup and gave a slight nod of his head. He seemed rather at odds with his swift and resolute reputation that was the stuff of rumors. His manner was tepid and lukewarm, as if he was also very

perfunctory and not that attentive when it came to other matters. After an hour, a eunuch called out his name, and Jiang Qingshan lifted the hem of his robe and entered the hall, where he kneeled and bowed to pay his respect.

“This humble subject, the Provincial Administration Commissioner of Juexi, Jiang Qingshan, pays his respects to Your Highness.”

“Wanxiao, please rise,” Li Jianting said. “The weather is hot today, and I’ve made you stand outside long enough. The Grand Secretary and I were just discussing Juexi’s governmental affairs, and I saw from your memorial that the City of Yongcheng has gone without rain for more than a month. The local granaries are in short supply, so you wish to borrow grains from Huaizhou?”

“The grains requisitioned by the imperial court last year were borne by Juexi. The thirteen cities’ granaries are already depleted.” Jiang Qingshan did not raise his head. “I never expected a drought to hit.”

Kong Qiu said to Li Jianting from the side, “The City of Yongcheng is also the granary of the southwest. If this drought is severe, I fear it would be hard to sustain just by depending on Wanxiao to borrow grains. It’s still necessary to rely on the imperial court to transfer the aid relief grains down.”

The flower embellishment on Li Jianting’s forehead was brilliant red. She pondered it for a moment, then said, “During the reign of Xiande, you offended the local merchants in order to provide relief to the disaster victims, causing them to crowd the *yamen* to make things difficult for you. This year, you are negotiating with Huaizhou with every means possible for the sake of borrowing grains. It has been hard on you. The City of Yongcheng being hit by disaster is no small matter, but there is no need to worry either. The Grand Secretary and I will give you a solution as soon as possible. The grains will definitely be transferred.”

Jiang Qingshan was already used to hearing words of excuses whenever he entered the capital. Even the former Emperor Tianchen and Emperor Xiande did not possess such a decisive and straightforward attitude. Thus, on hearing Li Jianting saying so, he could not help but put on a solemn countenance and kowtow to pay his obeisances. “This humble subject knows that the imperial court also has to give consideration to the war in Qidong this year. The military provisions have priority. Juexi is willing to use natural silk to offset the debt and exchange it for food with Huaizhou.”

Kong Qiu lost a little of his temper when this was brought up. “The official transfer of public grains can be implemented right after Her Highness endorses it. Why must the Prefectural Prefect of Huaizhou, Tao Ming, defy the edict? Huaizhou had a bumper harvest last year. According to the memorial Tao Ming presented at the beginning of the year, he can afford to give relief grains.”

“The imperial edict was issued several days ago,” Li Jianting said. “Fengquan, go out there and ask if the Prefectural Prefect of Huaizhou, Tao Ming, has arrived. If so, summon him into the hall to give us an explanation.”

Before Fengquan had even stepped out of the hall, Fuman anxiously came to the door and said, “Your Highness, a letter arrived from the postal relay station, saying that the Prefectural Prefect of Huaizhou, Tao Ming, has fled with his entire family!”

Li Jianting was taken aback. “Where did he flee to? The imperial court is summoning him over for a discussion. Why did he flee?”

Fuman stomped his leg lightly. “He defected to Shen Zechuan of Zhongbo!”

Murmurs of discussions promptly filled the hall.

Chen Zhen frowned. “Borrowing grains is a commonplace matter. Why did he run? There has to be a reason!”

“Your Highness is not aware, but,” Fuman said with urgency, “the official who went to summon him opened up the granary in Huaizhou and found that there was not much grain left. It’s not enough to serve as relief grains. Tao Ming acted in collusion with Shen Zechuan and sold the grains all to Cizhou a long time back. The moment he heard that Juexi wanted to borrow grains, he was so frightened that he fled on the very same night!”

An uproar broke out in the hall. Cen Yu stood up. “This... why didn’t the local investigating censor say a word?!”

Huaizhou had no grains, and Hezhou was empty too. They could not count on the Eight Great Cities either. Then, what about the City of Yongcheng? In the end, Juexi still had to tighten their belt to save up the money by the skin of their teeth!

The atmosphere in the hall abruptly plummeted. Air so chilly pervaded the hall from the ice basins in the four corners that Kong Qiu felt a sharp pain in the middle of his back. Covering his nose and mouth, he coughed for a moment, then stood up when his coughing subsided and bowed to Li

Jianting. "Disaster relief is of top priority and cannot be delayed. The monthly salaries of the officials in the capital can be reduced accordingly. This humble subject shall get the ball rolling. We must not let the commoners starve to death!"

The officials in the outer area all looked at each other, then kneeled and echoed, "We humble subjects are willing to do so. We ask of Your Highness to agree to it."

The cicadas among the trees were pried off by the eunuchs. Li Jianting rose to her feet too, and in that brief silence, lamented, "How can I stop all of you when you are going to such an extent? Since it's for the sake of Yongcheng's common folks, the palace should also appropriately cut its spending. Wanxiao, you are the one who asks for the grains, so you shall be the one to make arrangements for the aid relief."

Jiang Qingshan kowtowed and said his thanks.



At night, flower lanterns and sheer gauze curtains decorated the courtyard, where a spread of dishes and chopsticks had been laid out. Only Ya'er<sup>36</sup> was waiting in attendance at the side.

Xue Xiuzhuo, dressed in his regular clothes, poured tea for Jiang Qingshan. "Apologies for being the poor host by having you come to my residence."

Jiang Qingshan took the tea and said with a sigh, "There have been so many social engagements since my entry into the capital. All those delicacies cannot compare to your homely fare."

"The life of the poor." Xue Xiuzhuo set down the teapot and, in a rare moment, teased, "Which Provincial Governor is like you? You don't even use a decent horse carriage when you venture out."

"I am truly poor, while you are pseudo-poor," Jiang Qingshan said, "but we are two of a kind who reek of poverty from head to toe!"

Both men clinked their teacup and burst into laughter.

"I can see that the Heir Apparent is intelligent. She treats those under her with decency, and she is straightforward in her handling of matters. She takes after the style of Emperor Guangcheng." Jiang Qingshan picked up the chopsticks and ate the beancurd with shallot. "It's just that she's rather a tad prim and proper, and her manner of speaking is too mature."

"She had a rough time in her youth, so naturally, she's unlike the average girl." Xue Xiuzhuo watched Jiang Qingshan eat his meal. "I saw

your letter at the beginning of the year. Liu-niang is pregnant?”

Jiang Qingshan slowed down his speed of swallowing and cast a glance at Xue Xiuzhuo. His smile faded. “The usual.”

So Xue Xiuzhuo did not probe further.

Jiang Qingshan had a wife, but no children. His wife was from the Liu clan in the Prefecture of Baimazhou, and it was not really considered a rich household. She was on good terms with Jiang Qingshan, but to date, both of them had still yet to beget a child. Liu-niang was in poor health. Their firstborn was conceived during the fourth year of Xiande, when Jiang Qingshan was running all over outside to borrow grains. The merchants who came to their doorstep to demand repayments gave Liu-niang such a fright that she miscarried. After that, it had been hard for her to conceive again.

“Why are you so dejected?” Jiang Qingshan set down his chopsticks. “If I’m destined to have no son, then so be it. I won’t force it.” As he spoke, he looked to the cluster of flowers at the side, pausing for a moment. “It’s just that my mother has been pushing us pretty hard, and it’s inevitable that she treats Liu-niang rather... alas.”

Jiang Qingshan’s mother, in her anxiousness to gain a grandson,<sup>37</sup> was rather harsh on her daughter-in-law.

“My mother is advanced in age, and she’s strong-minded by nature. It has been aggravating for Liu-niang to be attending to her. I’ve been busy with government affairs all these years and neglected domestic affairs. In the end, I’ve failed to live up to the vow I made to her back then.” Jiang Qingshan always felt emotional to mention his family affairs. “At the beginning of the year, my mother had some distant niece stay over at our residence, saying that it was only for the time being, but even until now, she’s still there. Several times I went back to see Liu-niang standing primly under the eaves, and yet my mother still wants to match-make me with that woman...”

“If you’re unwilling, it’d be better to turn it down outright,” Xue Xiuzhuo poured more tea for him, “lest the Old Madam thinks it’s feasible and it ends up breaking Liu-niang’s heart.”

Jiang Qingshan stayed Xue Xiuzhuo’s hand. “Let’s have wine instead.”

“I still have to attend to official duties tomorrow morning.” As Xue Xiuzhuo spoke, he looked at Ya’er and motioned for him to get the wine.

“You live alone in this residence. It’s so empty.” Jiang Qingshan raised an arm and waved it. “It’s time for you to settle down with someone too.”

“Han Cheng has only just been eliminated, and the investigation of the field taxes has yet to conclude.” Xue Xiuzhuo took over the wine and poured only for Jiang Qingshan. “If I marry a wife, I’d be leaving her alone in this empty residence, where she’d be wasting away her youth. Why sin thus?”

“There is no end to official business,” Jiang Qingshan said. “Don’t tell me you’re going to carry on like this until you grow old and die?”

Xue Xiuzhuo nodded in all seriousness and started to discuss official matters. “The drought in the City of Yongcheng is not as serious compared to the one during the reign of Xiande, but it has already put you in a terrible fix. Qudu’s reduction of salaries alone is useless if this rain still doesn’t fall after the seventh month, or if a drought hits the rest of the twelve cities. There will still be fatal casualties in Juexi.”

Jiang Qingshan sipped the wine. “The Grand Secretariat is willing in spirit but lacking in power. If there is really a surplus of grains, the Grand Secretary will not make such an unwise move. I’ve been meaning to ask you too. Are the eight cities really empty?”

“Yes. The grains confiscated from the Pan clan of Dancheng,” Xue Xiuzhuo raised a hand and pointed to the side, “are not even enough to feed the people in this palace.”

“We used to lack money in the past.” Jiang Qingshan shook his head. “And now, we lack grains. If we had been able to issue the personnel transfer order earlier to reorganize the Six Prefectures of Zhongbo and recover the vast expanse of fertile lands, Shen Zechuan would not have gone on to become the local overlord, and Dazhou would not be in the predicament it is in today.”

Xue Xiuzhuo said at a slow pace, “The most abundant granaries in the world are now in Zhongbo. If the drought in Juexi worsens after the seventh month, I’ll have to consider buying grains from Shen Zechuan.”

“I fear that will be tough,” Jiang Qingshan said. “Who would have imagined Shen the Eighth would be able to bring the six prefectures under his control? The battle in Duanzhou won him the hearts of the people. This man bears grudges. He will not sell grains to you that easily.”

Xue Xiuzhuo set the wine jar to the side. “If he wants to walk among the world in the name of benevolence and righteousness, he cannot simply

sit back and watch the drought ravage Juexi.”

They discussed some more official business. When it was almost time, Xue Xiuzhuo had Ya’er help Jiang Qingshan back to rest. As Jiang Qingshan was leaving, he pointed at the front hall and said, “I met your eldest brother when I arrived at the relay station. He went there to offer offerings to Chengzhi. I see he has been promoted, presumably benefitting from his association with you. Yanqing, he used to make things difficult for you in all kinds of ways possible because he shares the same family name as you. In the end, he still has to survive relying on his connection with you, yet he’s not even willing to say a good word about you.”

Jiang Qingshan was a little drunk, and so a little unsteady on his feet.

“Seeing how smug he is, I fear he will implicate you in the future... You should watch out for him.”

Xue Xiuzhuo responded in acknowledgment.



Ge Qingqing stepped on a stool and shook out the dice as if he was performing magic tricks and said, “My lord, you lost!”

Xue the Eldest drank until his face was all flushed. He touched his pocket and said, “Oh dear me, I forgot to bring my money pouch before I left home! Qingqing, put it on the account!”

Ge Qingqing blew on the dice and looked at Xue the Eldest, saying with a laugh, “My lord, why stand on ceremony with me? It ought to be on my account to begin with. Is the scented tea sent to your residences a few days ago still acceptable? The goods from Qinzhou have also just arrived recently. If there’s anything you have your eyes on, don’t hesitate to let me know.”

“No, no, that won’t do.” Although that was what Xue the Eldest said, he still sat to the side and lit up the pipe. “My residence has everything and does not lack small playthings like this. It’s just that the Ministry of Personnel wants to swap around the assignments in the imperial court of late, and going by what the *gonggong* said, there’s a lucrative post.”

Ge Qingqing shifted his feet and sat down beside Xue the Eldest. “Then our lord is going to receive a promotion. Congratulations.”

“But the *gonggong* in this palace all serve the emperor. They have seen a lot and so they turn their noses up at common objects.” Xue the Eldest appeared somewhat hesitant. “Do you have any imported merchandise?”



“Yes, I do. Lots of them. I’ll get Xiaowu to bring the book over later for you to look over and choose.” Ge Qingqing leaned closer. “Whatever you choose, I’ll give it to you. No need to stand on ceremony!”

“You’re truly my buddy!” Xue the Eldest promptly burst into laughter. He pointed at Ge Qingqing. “If this official post really falls into my hands, I’ll make sure to return you double the gift in the future.”

When Ge Qingqing threw the dice, he knocked against the low table at the side, seemingly by accident. The Imperial Bodyguard at the side in disguise as a servant gave a slight nod of his head and prepared the stuff for Xue the Eldest, even remembering to lay out a layer of gold underneath.

It grew even later outside, but Xue the Eldest had long since been having such a good time that he did not even notice it.

## CHAPTER 256: ZUZONG (ANCESTOR)



During the hour of you, Li Jianting went for a walk in the garden, her only time for leisure for the entire day. With Fengquan accompanying her at the side, the Heir Apparent strolled along the stone path, still thinking about the government affairs discussed in the hall.

“A few days later, there’s going to be a worshipping ceremony held to pray for rain.” Li Jianting raised her fingers to brush aside the flower branch by her cheek. “This is a matter of importance. Nothing must go wrong on that day.”

Fengquan shifted away the flower branch for Li Jianting and said deferentially, “This humble slave will definitely do his best.”

Li Jianting stood at the edge of the pond and sprinkled fish bait into it. Watching the carps fighting among themselves, she said, “You used to serve Imperial Concubine Mu in the past and you were an arrogant and impudent one who did not know to exercise forbearance, which earned you the censure of the imperial court ministers. Now that you had a close encounter with death, you are a lot more restrained.”

The Heir Apparent certainly did not bring up this matter in the midst of discussing political affairs on a whim. There was something else in those words. Fengquan’s gaze flickered, and as he bowed, he hazarded a guess as to the Heir Apparent’s intent. In a soft voice, he said, “The servant takes after the disposition of his master. Your Highness treats the others with tolerance and magnanimity, and this humble slave, having received Your Highness’s guidance, naturally dare not be as presumptuous as I had been

before. I'm ashamed to say that I've been impertinent in the past when I met the various excellencies from the Grand Secretariat, and now that I have been graced with the favor of my lord, I ought to take the past as a cautionary tale and draw my lesson from it."

Li Jianting glanced at Fengquan. "You're a fine one."

Fengquan had served Emperor Tianchen before. Li Jianheng was simple-minded, and his emotions were all clearly written on his face. But ever since Li Jianting entered the palace, she indistinctly began to exude the regal might of a sovereign that made her hard to predict. She had no preference when she had her meals here. No matter how delicious the food was, she would not put her chopsticks to it over three times. Even the delight and fury in her words were tough to differentiate.

"I heard just how harsh Fuman was on you when you were in prison before, and now you're both working together in Mingli Hall," Li Jianting said, "do you harbor any displeasure?"

Fengquan lifted the hem of his robe and kneeled. "This humble slave is Your Highness's slave, and this humble slave is aware that there must be some deeper meaning to Your Majesty's arrangement. Although this humble slave and Fuman used to fall foul of one another, he was also doing his job that time, so this humble slave dare not harbor resentment."

"He nearly broke your leg." Li Jianting looked at the carps that were still fighting for food.

Fengquan kowtowed and choked with sobs. In a thin voice, he said, "The *gonggong* wielding the flogging rods are all old hands from the Eastern Depot. They know not to go too far."

Li Jianting focused on watching the fishes and said as if nonchalantly, "Although Fuman is a long-time eunuch from the former emperor's reign, he only began to move around in the emperor's presence after the Eastern Depot was left idle." She smiled. "I've never heard of the former emperor ordering him to manage the affairs of the Eastern Depot, and I didn't expect him to be that familiar with the old-timers of the Eastern Depot too. Looks like he's also well-acquainted with the random dogs and cats<sup>38</sup> in my palace too."

Fengquan made use of the action of wiping his tears to wipe his sweat. He instantly understood what the Heir Apparent meant. Li Jianting was poisoned in the palace. All her people in the palace were selected by Xue Xiuzhuo, and even so, they failed to thwart the Empress Dowager, so the

perpetrator must have had the help of someone who was familiar with the ins and outs of her palace. Li Jianting used Fuman when she hosted a banquet to kill Han Cheng, and now that the thorn in her side, Han Cheng, had been eliminated, she ought to settle the score.

Fengquan felt a little more settled when he thought to this point. “Since Fuman is an old hand from the reign of the former emperor, he differs from the others in the inner court and *yamen*. He has vast experience, and he’s in the good books of the various excellencies from the Grand Secretariat, so the number of people he is well-acquainted with is naturally more than this humble slave. Although he has plenty of ‘descendants’,<sup>39</sup> he is cordial to people, attentive to his work, and stays within the confines of propriety.”

“You’re leaving your words unfinished. Stay within the confines of propriety? He seemed to me to be a very ambitious one; A *lao-zuzong* he is.” Li Jianting took the handkerchief to wipe her hands. “He is but a mere eunuch who has neither the merit in maintaining state stability nor the courage to remonstrate with his sovereign. Yet he can be a ‘*lao-zuzong*’ just because he has been in the emperor’s presence for long. Whose ancestor?”<sup>40</sup> She looked askance at Fengquan. “Mine?”

Fengquan only felt this breezily-spoken word to be as heavy as the lofty mountains, crushing down on him such that he dared not raise his head. He hurriedly kowtowed, “Your Highness is the noble descendant of the royal family! The glorious legacy of the Great Ancestor<sup>41</sup> is all handed into the hands of Your Highness. Your Highness is the supreme ruler of the world!”

“The eunuch faction threw court politics into a mess during the reign of Emperor Xiande. They killed off a *lao-zuzong*,<sup>42</sup> but never in my imagination would I expect to come across another one. Evidently, human greed has no limits, like a snake trying to swallow an elephant. All the kind treatment in the world can’t get you loyalty. Favoring and trusting someone too much is bound to lead to disaster.” Li Jianting handed the handkerchief to the palace maid at the side and said, self-mockingly, “However, he does indeed have the capability to really be my ancestor for no rhyme or reason.”

Fuman had “children” and “grandchildren” all over, and he also had contacts with the imperial court officials with the opportunity his working in Mingli Hall accorded him. However, he was cleverer than Pan Rugui here. He did not dare to mess with the etiquettes when he came face to face with the Grand Secretariat officials; in fact, he would not even rule out

kowtowing to them once every ten steps if he could. Kong Qiu was previously in ill health, and he had pushed himself through his illness to go about his official duties. Fuman, who was waiting in attendance in Mingli Hall, personally tested Kong Qiu's medicine and meticulously took care of the Grand Secretary, all to build up a good reputation for Li Jianting. Fuman went to such an extent to win imperial favor, but he also just so happened to commit a big taboo. He took it upon himself to curry favor with the imperial censors—but he was a eunuch of the inner palace, so what was he doing trying to win over the outer court officials? He wanted to be both a *lao-zuzong* in the palace and a decent eunuch outside of it. Now that he had garnered himself quite the prestige inside and outside, it instead held him back from his official duties.

Eunuchs were the slaves of the Son of Heaven, and serving the Son of Heaven was their duty. If Pan Rugui had not set the precedent of undermining court politics, the rights to endorse memorials would not have been reduced to a common-use iron plague<sup>43</sup> for the eunuchs to line their own pockets. But Fuman was respectful and modest to those on the outside while accumulating power on the inside. If Li Jianting wanted to take down Fuman, she needed a reason that could convince the others.

At this time, the sky was inching toward darkness. A line of people bearing lanterns walked from the other end of the garden. Fuman had been doing a good job in his work recently, so his complexion was naturally rosy. From afar, he saw Li Jianting standing by the pond, and the junior eunuch following by his side whispered into his ear, “Zuzong, Fengquan is kneeling!”

Fuman flicked his horsetail whisk. “He has rendered meritorious service earlier during the banquet. If he has been willing to know and keep his place, Her Highness will naturally not make things difficult for him. But that temper of his really leaves much to be desired. It comes as no surprise if he angered Her Highness over some trivial matters.”

With that, he harrumphed slightly, but he was all smiles as he walked over to greet them and bowed to Li Jianting.

“You’re here.” Li Jianting smiled. “Is there a matter of importance?”

“This humble slave thinks of Your Highness all the time.” Fuman passed by Fengquan. Knowing that Li Jianting did not like to be touched, he escorted her down the steps without actually holding her. “So I grew anxious when I didn’t hear any news while waiting in the hall! This humble

slave saw the clouds gathering on the horizon, and fearing it would rain later, hurried over to bring an umbrella to Your Highness.”

“You’re indeed a thoughtful one,” Li Jianting said. “Thorough as ever in every matter.”

As if he had only just seen Fengquan, Fuman exclaimed in surprise. “Oh, my, what happened here?”

The sky was silent and still. Amidst the flickering shadows of the light, Li Jianting suddenly hit on a brainwave. Her expression gradually grew frostier. “Arrogant and conceited thing. I heard he was disrespectful to the various excellencies while on duty in the hall, so I had him kneel here as a punishment.”

On hearing this, Fengquan sobbed and prostrated himself over the ground, looking precisely like someone who had just been reproved. He said, “This humble slave was not discerning enough and offended the excellencies. I really deserve death for my sins, Your Highness...”

“I know you served as the Brush-holding Director during the reign of the former emperor, but how can eunuchs be on par with the officials of the previous court? Those local officials who entered the palace to submit their reports are all tiring themselves out working hard for the sake of the local civil administration. Who do you think you are to be showing them the attitude?”

The local officials.

Understanding dawned on Fuman. No wonder Li Jianting was angry. The drought in the City of Yongcheng these days had given the Heir Apparent sleepless nights. Expenditures inside and outside the palace were all being cut back; even the Heir Apparent herself was eating round-grained rice every meal, saying that it was not to forget the hardship of the common folks. She also thought highly of the local officials.

“Your Highness works hard on government affairs in the hall. Coming out to take a stroll in the garden is a rare moment to relax and destress. You mustn’t let this put a damper on your mood.” Fuman guided Li Jianting away and said with an apologetic smile, “His Excellency Xue has also just arrived and is waiting in the hall for Your Highness.”

Fuman cast several glances at Fengquan and said nothing to intercede on his behalf. Li Jianting did not look at Fengquan again and made a beeline back. He served the tea after Li Jianting returned to Mingli Hall and

withdrew, and as he waited under the eaves, he asked the junior eunuch in a hushed tone, “Still kneeling?”

The junior eunuch snickered. “Still kneeling.”

“Tell him to get up.”

“*Zuzong*,” the junior eunuch asked out of curiosity. “Doesn’t he always act all high and mighty? And he’s so smart-mouthed, too. Why is *Zuzong* helping him? Just let him kneel until Her Highness is done discussing government affairs.”

“As slaves, we have to be of the same mind as our sovereign and relieve our sovereign’s worries,” Fuman said. “He has forged a bond with Her Highness from serving her while she is still the Heir Apparent. Her Highness only told him to kneel without really punishing him, which means she’s treating him with leniency. Her Highness forgot about it at this point in time, but when she remembers it later, and he ends up crying again, then her heart will soften towards him on account of their old ties. I didn’t plead for mercy for him earlier. If I let him kneel any longer, Her Highness is going to reproach us slaves for not knowing any better.”

“*Zuzong* really does think it through.” The junior eunuch said in admiration. “You’re always reading the master’s mind. Truly brilliant! I’ll go now and get him to stand up.”

Fuman looked back at the dim yellowish candlelight emanating from within Mingli Hall and subconsciously smiled.

Without that old son of a bitch, Han Cheng, he would no longer have a handle out there that others could use against him. He only had to serve the Heir Apparent well, then obtain the Grand Secretariat’s recommendation, and he would enjoy a meteoric rise. Whatever Pan Rugui could do, so could he, except that he wanted to do an even better and an even more beautiful job of it.

Fuman turned his gaze. The only thing was that the Empress Dowager was still around, and that made him unable to rest easy. To eliminate future trouble, he would have to make his move as soon as possible.





## CHAPTER 257: TEA-TALK



Shen Zechuan lay in bed, finding it tough to get up. Xiao Chiye had not left and was still in Duanzhou. After the twentieth of the month, the Biansha Cavalry's attacks in the north abated, and Lu Guangbai personally made a trip to Duanzhou.

"The battle in Duanzhou was perilous. Seems like it will take time to repair this city wall." Lu Guangbai dismounted the horse. "Jiming has dispatched military craftsmen over."

Dressed in his regular wear, Xiao Chiye said, "Eldest Brother is indeed thorough in his thinking..." He paused and looked at the horse carriage at the back with a surprised expression, "Eldest sister-in-law is here!"

The maidservant lifted the carriage screen, and Lu Yizhi, clutching her handkerchief in hand, poked her head out.

With a smile on his face, Lu Guangbai announced, "Xun-er is here too."

"I've been missing Lanzhou back at home," Lu Yizhi got off the carriage with the help of her maidservant and said to Xiao Chiye, who had gone over to receive her, "and so I came over for a look."

Xiao Chiye turned aside and said, "Lanzhou misses Eldest Sister-in-law too."

Looking at the city walls of Duanzhou, Lu Yizhi continued, "Now that Zhongbo's victory is already cast in stone, Lanzhou ought to nurse his injuries." She turned her head to the side and pursed her lips into a smile. "I specially brought Xun-er along to relieve Lanzhou's boredom."

Xiao Xun followed behind his mother without needing anyone to lead him by the hand. He bowed to Xiao Chiye, "Second Uncle—"

Xiao Chiye picked up Xiao Xun and hoisted him up mid-air for a closer look. "The little lad has grown taller."

"He's just like you when you were a child." Lu Guangbai handed the horsewhip over to Chen Yang. "He worries all day long that he can't grow taller, and he drinks his milk on time. I asked him what wish he made during the Spring Festival, and he said he wants to grow as tall as his Second Uncle." As he said so, he pinched Xiao Xun's expressionless's cheek. "The nephew is just like his uncle. Well, you can stop thinking about it and just take after me."

"Uncle is good too." Xiao Xun held on to Xiao Chiye's arm for support and said in a childlike voice, "Magnanimous of heart, and not given to embellishment. Uncle is a general who is an equally accomplished man of letters."

The trio laughed, and Lu Guangbai sighed. "Although you're talking about your uncle, it sounds more like you're complimenting your father."

There were now many children in the residence. Ding Tao and Li Xiong still had Jiran with them. Xiao Chiye carried Xiao Xun back, but he struggled, saying he wanted to see Shen Zechuan. Xiao Xun liked Shen Zechuan, so much that he only wanted Shen Zechuan to hold his hand and lead him during the Spring Festival. Shen Zechuan's calves were injured, so he received them before the steps. After entering the house, the few of them exchanged some pleasantries, and Lu Yizhi later asked to bring Xiao Xun along to visit and pay their respects to Ji Gang.

After Lu Yizhi left, Shen Zechuan said, "The war in the north has eased up some. In coming here, General Lu has something to discuss with me on Eldest Brother's behalf."

Lu Guangbai picked up his teacup and smiled as he lifted the lid. He cast a glance at Xiao Chiye, then at Shen Zechuan. "Your Lordship is a heroic man who never forgets about military affairs for even a moment. That's right. Jiming indeed has a message for me to bring to you. Now that Hasen is dead, the crisis in Duanzhou has been averted, and the Youxiong Tribe in the south has been defeated. It's just the perfect time to resume the war."

"With Hasen dead, the status of the 'Great Hero' Amu'er remains to be seen," Xiao Chiye said. "Eldest Brother wants to seize the opportunity to

launch a counterattack and seal our victory with this one move.”

“Brothers of the same mind.” Lu Guangbai sipped his tea. “You were thinking that, too.”

Xiao Chiye’s position was close to the window. As he turned his thumb ring, his slightly tilted nape exposed his Adam’s apple under the dim light. “Amu’er could maintain the stability of the various tribes because the Hanshe Tribe’s cavalry is brave and capable warriors, but last year, the Hanshe Tribe’s elites were all sent into the battlefields, where the fighting went on for a year. The Hanshe Tribe has long run out of ammunition and food, and they are not as much of an intimidating deterrent to the other tribes as they were before. With Hasen’s death, Amu’er lost his right arm. If we don’t strike now, then when?”

“If you want to enter the desert from the east, you will need the cooperation of the three armies,” Lu Guangbai said. “Commander-in-chief Qi is still subjected to Qudu’s deployment orders, so this is no easy feat to carry out.”

Xiao Jiming and Lu Guangbai both had a personal relationship with Qi Zhuyin, but this matter had to be directly discussed with Shen Zechuan in Duanzhou, and that was something a personal relationship could not resolve. Qi Zhuyin’s successive deployments of troops were all to assist Libei, but more than half of the Biansha Cavalry had already retreated, and the Youxiong Tribe in the south had been driven back into the desert. She had no reason to make another trip here with Libei.

“The Ministry of War agreed to let Commander-in-chief Qi deploy troops to Gedale because Chen Zhen and the other important, long-time ministers of the state are keenly aware that Libei’s crisis has a bearing on Qudu. Now that Gedale has been fought and beaten,” Lu Guangbai set down his teacup, “it’s a different story altogether.”

Qi Zhuyin did not agree to hand over the Qingshu Tribe’s territory to Hairigu, and she also had the intent to call a temporary halt to the war. It had not been easy for her to borrow grains, and all the grains from Shen Zechuan had to be returned. Let it fester over time, and it would sooner or later leave a bad taste in her mouth. Qidong was fatigued from the war this year, and half of the fields their military troops worked on<sup>44</sup> had been neglected. They had to depend on the imperial court and Shen Zechuan for even the grains needed to survive through the winter, let alone talk about the military grains. It would not have been such a big deal if Qidong was

like Hezhou, but Qidong still had the garrison troops, and Qi Zhuyin held military power in her hands. She could not afford to be so slipshod here.

“Commander-in-chief Qi is the Li clan’s commander-in-chief. If she hangs around the rebels, she will be suspected of conspiring against the state.” Shen Zechuan caressed the frame of his fan. “When Qidong dispatched troops against the Qingshu Tribe, there were already impeachment memorials being submitted in the court. If Commander-in-chief Qi attacks the desert together with Libei again, Qudu will be able to dismiss her from her post as the commander-in-chief.”

Qi Zhuyin’s refusal to return Lu Pingyan back then had already earned her censures from the imperial court. She was not well-liked by the imperial censors to begin with. Qi Shiyu married Hua Xiangyi to preserve Qidong’s military power. The Empress Dowager might have fallen from power again, but this layer of connection still remained. Qi Zhuyin killed Han Cheng for Li Jianting when she was in Qudu, and this matter could be both interpreted as loyalty and treachery.

Shen Zechuan’s eyes were mild and gentle in his sickness, as if all his sharp edges had been completely eradicated. “The Heir Apparent is about to ascend to the throne, and going by Xue Xiuzhuo’s intent, she has to confer a reward upon Commander-in-chief Qi.” He drank his tea, looking as if he was conversing about an anecdote from the countryside. “Then we shall wait and see. If the Heir Apparent really does not begrudge it, she’ll be doing us a great favor.”



## CHAPTER 258: SMALL FISH (NOT CANG JI)



The Heir Apparent led all the officials to pray for rain, but rain never did fall upon the City of Yongcheng. Jiang Qingshan traversed all over trying to raise grains, while Liang Cuishan was still auditing the accounts of the City of Chuancheng. Marquis of Helian, meanwhile, was so scared witless that he fell seriously ill after Han Cheng's death and did not dare to step out of his residence these few days.

"We can't give them the run-around on this account," Marquis of Helian sighed with distress as he lay on the bed, "and Her Majesty is being confined in the forbidden palace. Heaven wants my Fei clan to perish!"

The junior marquis had also gotten quite the fright from Li Jianting during the banquet that day, so he did not dare to wander all over town either. Keeping watch by his father's side, he reproached, "Why did you have to be that greedy? It's such a large sum of money. We can't even make up for the deficit even if we want to."

"How can you blame me? Who am I doing it for?" Marquis of Helian was in tears. With some difficulty, he propped himself up and pointed at Fei Shi. "Had you not fallen so short on expectations, would I need to plead with the others to such an extent? Look at yourself. You're neither accomplished in literary pursuits nor martial arts. Even if you inherit the marquis title, you'd be just idling around waiting for death. If I don't pull strings, what's going to happen to our Fei clan in the future?"

"Yes, yes, you're right." Fei Shi heard his father gasping urgently for breath and helped him to lie down again. "I'm a rascal, and I'm stupid."

Don't you go making yourself faint from anger."

Marquis of Helian clutched his chest to compose himself as he lay with his tears streaming. "If our properties were to be confiscated... I don't even dare to think about it..."

Commandery Princess Zhaoyue, wearing a white flower behind one of her ears, was holding her child in her arms. She had been staying at home after her divorce, having grown a lot more haggard after hearing of the demise of the Pan clan. She handed the baby over to the wet nurse and motioned for the attendants to leave.

"Had you known it would come to this, would you have acted so—It's too late for regrets now." Commandery Princess Zhaoyue's almond-shaped eyes<sup>45</sup> were slightly reddened. "This account has caused the death of so many people."

"That's right. This account has indeed caused deaths," Marquis of Helian lamented mournfully, "but without this account, how could you have been able to marry into the Pan clan? This prestige and honor of yours were all given to you by this account. When the Hua clan was at the height of their power, Hua Siqian held sway over the court and the common folks. We were under their thumbs and had no choice but to board their boat and throw in our lot with them. After Hua Siqian's death, I was hoping that Shi-er would be able to get an official post and, at the very least, have a say in the imperial court, but he was always fooling around all day long. I was left without a choice."

The Fei clan of the City of Chuancheng had very few male offspring. There was only Fei Shi of lawful birth in the legitimate line of descent. If the Marquis of Helian did not plan ahead, they would become the second Xue clan. However, even though the Xue clan was on the decline, they had still produced a Xue Xiuzhuo. On the contrary, the Fei clan genuinely had no one else in the family.

When Marquis of Helian thought to this point, he got up again and asked, "What's the name of that child who used to serve in the Imperial Bodyguards?"

"You mean, Fei Sheng?" Fei Shi offered.

"Right, right! Fei Sheng," Marquis of Helian said. "It was all because I vouched for him that he could inherit his father's position, and it was also on my account that Han Cheng promoted him.. He later fled with Xiao Chiye, and now, he's serving Shen Zechuan in Zhongbo."

The color drained from Fei Shi's expression. "Those are rebels! Associating with him is punishable by death."

"There's no way we can make up for such a large deficit." Marquis of Helian raised his voice. "Not only will we be confiscated of our properties but also stripped of our noble title. Who knows? Perhaps we will even be beheaded. Look at the Pan clan. How many of their members are still alive? Even if they were sent into exile, they would still die midway through the journey." The more he spoke, the more his heart grew cold. "We might as well switch allegiance to Zhongbo... Even Tao Ming of Huaizhou has fled..."

Fei Shi sat, stunned. He was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, and what's more, he was a junior marquis. All along, he had been an official of Dazhou, and yet, he was now suddenly asked to throw in with the traitors and rebels; he could not help but find it absurd and ludicrous. After sitting in a daze for a while, he said, "No, that won't do. How can I be a disloyal turncoat?<sup>46</sup> Chengzhi did not betray the state even right until the time he died. He and I are bosom friends. I can't do such a disloyal and unrighteous thing. Besides, Shen Zechuan is a vicious and ruthless person who is hard to get along with, while Fei Sheng hankers after fame and power.... No, this won't do."

"Who cares about loyalty and righteousness when disaster is at hand?" Marquis of Helian was exasperated with his son for failing to live up to expectations. "You wouldn't learn what you ought to learn, but you just have to learn all that reeks of Pan Lin!"

"In any case, I'm not leaving." Fei Shi started to get all bull-headed. "For what it's worth, you are a marquis. I don't believe the Grand Secretariat will really lay their hands on you."

"Why won't they dare?" Commandery Princess Zhaoyue wiped her tears. "Without the Empress Dowager, the Heir Apparent will investigate and deal with the matter according to the law. Once the memorandum from the Grand Secretariat is issued, it'd be just a matter of one night for the properties to be confiscated and for the clan to be executed." She thought of Pan Yi and covered her face to weep. "That was what happened to the Pan clan."

"Look at your elder sister. She still has a child." As Marquis of Helian spoke, he shed a torrent of tears too. "Can you bear to see your old father



executed, your dear elder sister sent into exile, and the whole family ending up as tombs in mass burial graves?”

“But it won’t do for us to leave either.” Commandery Princess Zhaoyue lifted her head and wiped her tears clean. “Shi-er is right. When Fei Sheng was in the Imperial Bodyguards, he was already a master at currying favors with those in authority for personal gains. He hankers after fame and power. There’s no way to move him if there is no benefit in it for him. Father, please hear what I have to say. The City of Yongcheng is now hit with a drought, and Jiang Qingshan is in Qudu raising grains. But Tao Ming has fled, and the imperial court is in a quandary. Why don’t you sell off our manors and use this sum of money to raise grains for the imperial court?”

“But there are no grains everywhere right now,” Marquis of Helian said. “I won’t be able to raise grains even if I have the money.”

“Buy back the grains from whoever you sold it to to resell.” Commandery Princess Zhaoyue tucked away her handkerchief. “As for Fei Sheng, we’ll talk about him again when the need really arises in the future.”



Mingli Hall replaced its ice basins several days later. Li Jianting was reading the memorials, while Fuman, bowed at the waist, stood in attendance at the side with a fan in hand, gently fanning the Heir Apparent.

“Your Highness has been looking for two hours,” Fuman said softly. “Please take a break.”

Li Jianting closed the memorial. Before she could speak, Fuman turned his head to shout outside, “Bring in the chilled sour plum soup—Your Highness, the weather is hot. Please drink some sour plum soup to dispel the heat.”

Fuman was in Li Jianting’s good graces lately; she still seemed to be angry with Fengquan, keeping only Fuman by her side to serve her. Fuman was as pleased as punch. In the past, he would most certainly not have dared to make the decision for the Heir Apparent, but after several attempts at feeling the Heir Apparent out, he noticed she did not reproach him, and so he grew increasingly bold.

When Li Jianting wiped her hands, Fuman tidied up the tabletop for the Heir Apparent. Li Jianting saw him arranging the memorials one at a time, sorting them in successive order by regions and ministries. Thus, she asked, “Why is this memorial by Ming Zang placed together with the Grand Secretary? From what I remember, they are not from the same hometown.”

“Your Highness may be unaware, but they are teacher and pupil.” Fuman was all smiles. “The Grand Secretary was the one who selected His Excellency Ming for promotion.”

Kong Qiu held the post of the Grand Secretary of the Grand Secretariat. The number of officials from the various ministries he evaluated during the appraisals was too numerous to cite individually. As per customary, these officials could all address him as “Teacher”. It had not been long since Li Jianting took over government affairs, so she indeed did not know. There was such a motley crew of officials from the various ministries in the capital. Unless she paid particular attention to them, it would be difficult for her to remember it.

At present, Fuman was merely serving in the presence of the future emperor. When the time came for the Heir Apparent to ascend to the throne, he could very possibly become the Brush-holding Director, who could hold on to the brush dipped in vermillion ink and comment on or endorse memorials on the emperor’s behalf.

But Li Jianting was not Emperor Xiande. She personally managed government affairs, and she was young, so she did not use eunuchs to handle such important and essential governmental affairs on her behalf at all. In memorizing these relationships by heart, Fuman’s ambition was evident.

It dawned on Li Jianting, who said in understanding, “You know better than I do.”

Fuman was slightly taken aback on hearing that. Reacting quickly, he said, “This humble slave doesn’t handle affairs in the imperial court. This matter was actually mentioned once by the Grand Secretary back in the office compound the last time. This humble slave remembered it while serving at the side.”

“It’s a good thing.” Li Jianting’s expression was mild as she said with a smile, “I just can’t remember, so I’ll still need you to remind me in the future.”

Fuman stole a glance at Li Jianting as he picked up the bowl. It was only when he saw that the Heir Apparent looked normal and no different from how she usually was that he felt relieved. “It’s this humble slave’s great fortune to share Your Highness’s worries.”

“Have the various gentlemen arrived?” Li Jianting asked. “If so, let them in.”

Kong Qiu, Xue Xiuzhuo, and the rest who had just arrived outside Mingli Hall entered on hearing the summon. They kowtowed in unison and greeted, "These humble subjects pay their respects to Your Highness."

"All of you are my teachers." Li Jianting gestured to Fuman to help Kong Qiu up. "There's no need for the Grand Secretary to be so overly ceremonious on entering the hall. It is I who ought to pay my respects to the Grand Secretary as a student."

Kong Qiu took his seat and said with a smile, "Your Highness is now different from the past. There is no need to abide by the formalities between teacher and pupil. Mingli Hall is a place where affairs of the state are handled. There's only the ruler and his ministers here. This humble subject dare not overstep my authority."

Li Jianting could hardly suppress a smile as she scrutinized Kong Qiu. "There's good news today."

Kong Qiu was reticent, experienced, and prudent, so he rarely beamed with such visible joy like this. Sure enough, the next moment, she heard Kong Qiu say, "Jiang Qingshan reported this morning that the relief grains for the City of Yongcheng are already all prepared."

"That's fast." Li Jianting was delighted. "Did he borrow grains from Hezhou?"

"It was the Marquis of Helian." Kong Qiu curbed his delight a little. "Marquis of Helian knew that there were discrepancies with the field taxes. In the hope that Your Highness will be lenient on him, he sold his country estates and raised the grains of his own accord to help the common folks of Yongcheng out of their difficulties."

The case of the Chuancheng field tax was one everyone tacitly understood. The imperial court wanted to recover the arrears, and even re-survey the fertile lands to return to the commoners. No doubt Marquis of Helian would have to bear responsibility for it and accept his punishment. But by doing what he just did, the Grand Secretariat would now have to use their discretion to make a judgment in light of his contribution.

"As the saying goes, there is no room for kindness and tolerance in the law. Your Highness must not take any chances with villains because of this. In this humble subject's opinion," Xue Xiuzhuo kneeled, "Marquis of Helian still has to be investigated and punished according to the law, even if he has prepared grains for the City of Yongcheng."

“When all is said and done, our investigation of the field taxes is to restore the people’s livelihoods in the eight cities. Since Marquis of Helian is willing to raise grains for the City of Yongcheng, it means he is repentant,” Cen Yu said. “Your Highness wants to govern the world with benevolence and filial piety, so if you abide strictly by the law and punish the Fei Clan by confiscating their properties and executing them, I fear you will lose the heart of the people.”

Cen Yu was an old-time minister, and he was an old-time minister who hailed from a humble origin. Yet he was now trying to preserve the life of Marquis of Helian, and it was all precisely for Li Jianting. Marquis of Helian raised grains to provide disaster relief. No matter what, he had made a reputation for being benevolent in the City of Yongcheng. If Li Jianting were to insist on confiscating and executing their whole clan, then to the remaining noble clans who were still adopting a wait-and-see attitude, the only way left for them was to fight to the bitter end.

A long time back, while they were investigating the accounts of the City of Dancheng, Cen Yu had already repeatedly advised Kong Qiu to slow down. The Prefecture of Duanzhou had now scored a resounding victory, and the six prefectures were now all under Shen Zechuan’s command. Once Libei has the war under control, the next stop would be Qudu.

As the saying goes, perseverance yields success, much like how constant dripping water could wear down a stone. Since the noble clans were a long-standing and deeply-rooted malady, they could not rush it, or they would harm their very core—the heart. How would they have the spare energy and strength to deal with Zhongbo then?

Besides, with the re-surveyance of commoners’ fields in Dancheng, they still had to recheck the census register. If the imperial court wanted to focus on treating their malady, then they had to do so on the premise that there was no external threat.

“During the reign of Xiande, the imperial court gave them some latitude, but the eight cities went from bad to worse, eventually bringing about the incident of reselling public grains,” Xue Xiuzhuo said. “If we don’t punish one as a warning to the others, how can we inspire terror in them?”

“The state is now in imminent peril.” Cen Yu kneeled too. “Libei and Zhongbo revolted one after another, and the rebels are assembled in the

countryside. Shen Zechuan—”

“It’s precisely because the state is in imminent peril that we have to strictly enforce court discipline. If we can’t root out the noble clans as soon as possible,” Xue Xiuzhuo kowtowed heavily, “then how can we strive to bring peace to the lands?”

Cen Yu raised his head and exhorted earnestly, “The potent medicine has already been administered. The Pan, Han, Hua, and Wei clans have already collapsed, and the vise grip of the noble clans is not as it used to be before. If we do not eliminate external threats at this moment, it will be a great catastrophe in the making. Your Highness, governing a great state is like cooking a small fish!”<sup>47</sup>

Li Jianting pondered it over without saying a word.

Waves of heat outside the hall billowed. It was so quiet it was terrifying. After a long time, a junior eunuch with a look of urgency swiftly made his way before the hall and whispered something into Fengquan’s ear.

“Your Highness!” The beaded curtain swung wildly. Fengquan announced, “Her Majesty is critically ill!”

Everyone in the hall turned pale.



## CHAPTER 259: RUMORS



When Li Jianting arrived, the imperial physician in the hall prostrated himself on the ground in panic. Matron Liu Xiang kneeled by the side of the bed, holding the Empress Dowager's hand as she called out softly, "The Heir Apparent is here."

The Empress Dowager's breathing was slightly urgent as she turned her eyes and saw Li Jianting. She was sweating profusely, and her non-makeup face was lined with some wrinkles, finally belying her old age. Her breath was thin and feeble as she said, "I... want to speak to... Her Highness."

Matron Liu Xiang stood up and retreated with the attendants.

The drapes in the hall were hung up on both sides. A fragrant scent wafted from the Buddha statue niche, while wispy, willowy smoke obscured the statue, rendering its compassionate expression indistinct.

Li Jianting bent over to pick up the rosary of prayer beads that had fallen between the rug and caught a waft of rich sandalwood.

"You hosted a banquet to kill Han Cheng." The Empress Dowager turned her head to the side, her hair all let down. "And so I knew... you would not tolerate... my existence either."

"Although I have the intent, I am too powerless." Li Jianting twirled the Buddha beads. "The way Fuman is so anxious makes it clear that Your Majesty has lost the heart of all. The end is nigh."

The Empress Dowager's chest heaved, but she forced herself to smile with some difficulty. Her gaze passed through Li Jianting. "You're indeed..."

Emperor Guangcheng's daughter... How laughable your Li clan is... Had you been a man..."

"Had I been a man, I would not have lived to this day." Grasping the prayer beads, Li Jianting sat on the edge of the bed. "You killed off all the men in the Li clan."

The Empress Dowager's soaked hair on her temples stuck to her cheeks, offering one a glimpse of her unsurpassed beauty in those bygone times. Her lips quivered. "Who could have imagined that he would be that ruthless? He would rather commit incest and leave such a scourge to me..." With mirth brimming in her eyes, she continued, "He was the one... who forced Prince Qin... to his death..."

Looking at the Empress Dowager, Li Jianting said, "You killed your husband and your sons to get to where you are today. You could have been an unprecedented emperor never seen before in history, but you handed over the power and authority to others. You trusted eunuchs easily, allowing them to undermine court politics, and you favored and helped Elder Brother, bolstering the influence and arrogance of the ministers in power... You can hardly absolve yourself from blame now that the state is in imminent peril."

The smile in the eyes of the Empress Dowager gradually waned. She stared at Li Jianting. "It's lonely at the top... You don't understand... I am like a floating duckweed with no one to depend on..."

*"I am like a floating duckweed with no one to depend on..."* Li Jianting repeated these words. There was no sorrow on her face, nor was there a smile. She looked away, her gaze gliding past the drapes before settling on the Empress Dowager's dressing table. Fixing her eyes on that clear yellow bronze mirror, she said, "Since you do not have the boldness of vision to dedicate yourself to the cause, why stir up such havoc in this political storm?"

"You are a woman too," the Empress Dowager said. "Why do you not understand me?"

"I am neither a woman nor a man." Li Jianting looked at the Empress Dowager again, her eyes clear and bright. "I'm merely Li Jianting."

The Empress Dowager felt at a loss. After a while, she said, "When I saw you, I realized just how regal the Emperor of the Li clan is... but you too, are also in the control of another."



“The chessboard lies in no one’s hands, but in the lands of the empire,” Li Jianting said softly. “Those who think they are holding the chess pieces are merely late to the game.”

The Empress Dowager’s breathing grew weaker, and her voice too, turned softer, “...Poor Xue Xiuzhuo, for all his scheming and plotting...” She widened her eyes slightly and murmured, “the lands of the empire, huh...”

The last rays of the setting sun outside the palace faded away. Several birds flew across the blue sky. A petal dropped off the peony that had not been secured in place and landed on the dressing table, where a nudge of the wind sent it on its way.



The news from Qudu was urgently dispatched to Qidong. Horse hooves crashed through the silent night, arriving at the Bianjun Commandery several days later. Hua Xiangyi still had yet to retire for a rest. Seeing the postal report coming in, she asked with a smile, “Is my auntie’s letter here too?”

Qi Wei’s expression was odd as he hesitated at the door.

As if sensing something, Hua Xiangyi slowly got up. “Did she fall ill?”

Qi Wei avoided her gaze and hung his head down. “To reply Eldest Madam... Her Majesty has passed.”

Hua Xiangyi immediately took a step back, and Hongying hurriedly held her to support her. She looked dazedly at Qi Wei. The tears were already flowing a moment later. Bracing herself against Hongying’s arm for support, she took several steps towards the door and said in a hoarse voice, “...Don’t lie to me.”

Qi Wei kept silent.

Hua Xiangyi hastily covered her mouth with her handkerchief and gradually broke into sobs. “How... how could this be...”

Before Qi Wei could answer, he heard Hongying shout, “Madam!”

Hua Xiangyi, already tilting and sliding down against her, had fainted.



The inside of the tent was lit with mind-calming and sleep-inducing incense. When Hua Xiangyi woke up, Qi Zhuyin was sitting in the chair beside the bed peeling an apple. Sensing that Hua Xiangyi had awakened, she set it aside on the small table at the side and wiped her hands before

touching Hua Xiangyi's forehead. "You don't even know you have fallen sick."

Hua Xiangyi's lips were pale. She did not open her eyes as she soaked the side of the pillow wet.

Qi Zhuyin was not adept at comforting others. Seeing how sorrowfully Hua Xiangyi was crying, Qi Zhuyin hurriedly wiped her tears for her with the handkerchief. It was only when she was done wiping that she belatedly remembered that this was the handkerchief she used to wipe her hands. Hua Xiangyi turned her back to her and curled her knees up, sobbing inconsolably until she was tired and fell asleep in the same position. When she woke up again, Qi Zhuyin was still sitting in the chair.

"News travels slowly," Qi Zhuyin said. "...The new emperor is about to ascend to the throne soon. I'll take you back."

"Since auntie is gone, there is no longer any place there that I want to return to." Hua Xiangyi blinked her red, swollen eyes. "When we parted, auntie was still in good health. It has only been two months. To think she has passed away from illness."

Qi Zhuyin was silent for a spell. "... I promised you not to let her die."

"Commander-in-chief Qi is far away in the Bianjun Commandery, and the reach of your power is limited," Hua Xiangyi said. "The forbidden palace is not the imperial court. Blades are invisible there. Even the Grand Secretary's reach does not extend there."

Qi Zhuyin thought Hua Xiangyi was going to say something, but she stopped right here and propped herself up.

"Commander-in-chief Qi is busy with military affairs," Hua Xiangyi said. "So just leave me be."

Hua Xiangyi's wrists dipped in the cold, frosty moonlight. The way she looked with her eyes lowered was very haggard. It would not do for Qi Zhuyin to linger any further, so she felt around her sleeve for a small scented pouch and set it in her lap.

"Hongying is waiting in attendance at the door." Qi Zhuyin rose to her feet. "I'll be in the side hall."

At this time, the night was already drawing to a close. Hongying heard Hua Xiangyi's summon during the hour of mao, so she sent someone to the kitchen to get breakfast while she herself went in.

"Bring my chest over," Hua Xiangyi said.

Hongying went to the cupboard and took down Hua Xiangyi's little chest. Hua Xiangyi unlocked it and instructed Hongying to bring the copper basin over. Then she burned the account books in the chest.

"Madam, what are you doing?" Hongying anxiously moved to stop her. "These are all accounts Madam went to painstaking efforts to calculate."

"The Heir Apparent promised Commander-in-chief Qi not to kill my auntie." Hua Xiangyi released her slender fingers and watched as the fire gradually devoured up the account books. "If she wasn't the one who did it, then she's incompetent. If she was the one who did it, then she's untrustworthy."

The breeze flipped the pages open and, under the sound of fire crackling, scattered ashes all over the ground.



The night in Duanzhou was cool, and the courtyard was full of flowers and trees. Mosquitoes were plentiful too. Fei Sheng lit incense in the newly erected pergola. Shen Zechuan stirred the ice-cubes in his bowl with the spoon, making a slight noise. As he watched Xiao Chiye guiding Xiao Xun to pull the bow, he listened to Fei Sheng reporting the updates from Qudu.

"If Xue the Eldest wants the important post of being in charge of the granaries, he has to deal with the eunuchs. The eunuchs in the palace are fond of the imported merchandise from the Port of Yongyi. Have Qingqing prepare it for him."

"Qingqing said it's already all prepared. When the new emperor ascends to the throne, she is bound to grant a general amnesty to everyone in the world. When the time comes, Xue the Eldest will get his chance to make a name for himself," Fei Sheng said. "Also, with the empress dowager's demise, the noble clans are in a precarious situation. However, Marquis of Helian sold his fields to raise grains, so the Grand Secretariat might very well go lenient on him."

"The fact that Marquis of Helian could think of raising grains shows that he is already being forced into a corner. He has no other choice but to sacrifice what he holds dear and start afresh." Shen Zechuan sipped the soup. "I have already done my part and fulfilled my moral obligations in giving him grains."

The grains Marquis of Helian bought by selling off his family assets were from You Tan, the Prefectural Prefect of Liuzhou in Juexi. Back then, when Yan Heru said he wanted to build a new port, Shen Zechuan agreed to

it, and You Tan of Liuzhou was their inside man in Juexi. This Prefectural Perfect was just like his name suggested—he was especially greedy. As long as he was paid enough, he would dare to take part in even transactions that could cost him his head. Otherwise, he would not have had any dealings with Yan Heru right under Jiang Qingshan’s nose.

“Xue Xiuzhuo is too radical. If the battle in Zhongbo was still ongoing, Kong Qiu and Cen Yu could still have agreed to it, but now, I have my hands unoccupied.” Shen Zechuan’s eyes reflected fireflies on the side.

“They naturally do not wish to engage in a life or death fight with the noble clans anymore. Joining forces to attack the enemies is the top priority. As long as the Heir Apparent is not a fool, she will pardon Marquis of Helian.”

“Then why are we still giving the Marquis of Helian grains?”

This batch of grains that Shen Zechuan had You Tan give to Marquis of Helian was not only offered at a fair price but were also all good-quality grains.

“The relief grains have to be given, of course.” Shen Zechuan looked at Fei Sheng. “Just get You Tan to tell the truth.”

Understanding promptly dawned on Fei Sheng. He laughed, “Master is wise!”

On the other end, Xiao Chiye released his fingers, and the sharp arrow struck the bull’s eye. Chen Yang and the other guards cheered in unison.

Fei Sheng sighed with feeling, “This arm strength of Second Master.”

Shen Zechuan watched Xiao Chiye for a long time before saying to Fei Sheng, “Elder Yin’s funeral arrangements are all settled. As for his remaining possessions... you’re the son, so you decide.”

“Where would he have a single decent stuff... Just throw away all the tattered mat and blankets. Burn it to him.<sup>48</sup> I’m scared of him scolding me too.” Fei Sheng raised a hand to press down on the blade at the side of his waist. “I’ll just keep this. This blade is nameless, as is he.”

“Elder Yin is a hero,” Shen Zechuan said. “This blade ought to have a name.”

“He and I both follow Master.” Fei Sheng grasped the blade. “So I’d like to ask of Master to bestow a name upon it.”

As Shen Zechuan turned the porcelain bowl, he saw moonlight flashing across the side of the bowl, rendering it bright as snow. He said, “A banner of ten thousand to slay the King of Hell.<sup>49</sup> Let’s name it Zhan Yan Luo.”<sup>50</sup>

Fei Sheng lifted the hem of his robe and kneeled, saying in a loud and clear voice, "This blade shall not fail its name!"



With the passing of the Empress Dowager, the enthronement of the Heir Apparent could no longer be delayed any further. The Grand Secretariat drew up the plan, with the date fixed at the beginning of the eighth month following right after the funeral. The reign title<sup>51</sup> selected was "Shengyin."

When Xiao Chiye heard it, he said, "The Heir Apparent has drive and spirit."<sup>52</sup>

At the beginning of the eighth month, Kong Qiu led the various officials to kowtow before Mingli Hall and pay their obeisances to the new emperor. Li Jianting thus became the veritable emperor of Dazhou.

"Guess what noble rank the new emperor is going to bestow upon Commander-in-chief Qi." Shen Zechuan had been cooped up all day in the house teasing Xiao Xun. With Xiao Chiye here this time, he teased Xiao Chiye instead. "There's a prize for the correct guess."

"What's the prize?" Xiao Chiye looked at his military affairs and let Lanzhou pressed down on his back. "The prize has to be enough."

Wherever Shen Zechuan saw, he used his folding fan to draw over to that spot. He found it rather comfortable to be pressing down on Xiao Chiye like this. "Anything is fine."

"Marquis." Xiao Chiye caught Shen Zechuan's hand and turned it over in his palm to look at the scar. "With the commanding sway the Prince of Libei has over the lands following its rise as a precedent, Qudu will not confer another as the Prince of Qidong."

Lu Pingyan of the Bianjun Commandery was already a Marquis of Bianbo.<sup>53</sup> Qi Zhuyin was the commander-in-chief of the Five Commanderies' troops. If she were to be of equal rank with Lu Pingyan, it would be a gross injustice. But since the reign of Yongyi, Dazhou only had two conferred princes of different surnames.<sup>54</sup> One was the Prince of Libei, Xiao Fangxu, and the other was the Prince of Jianxing, Shen Wei. Qi Zhuyin's meritorious military achievement was not on par with Qi Shiyu's, and she was not in the imperial censors' good graces either. Her conferment would be beset with difficulties. Weighing the two against the other, it would be much more appropriate to confer her with the title and rank of a marquis.

“Then I will guess a prince.” Shen Zechuan said into his ear. “If I win, you have to give me a reward.”



Fuman changed into his new robe. As he headed towards Mingli Hall, all the eunuchs and palace maids along the way had to pay their respects to him. He was puffed up with pride with his success, but he did not forget his place here, retreating each time he encountered a minister of the court, looking even more humble and deferential.

Fuman arrived at Mingli Hall, and the junior eunuch waiting in attendance at the door whispered, “Her Majesty has just woken up and is currently looking for *Zuzong*.”

Fuman patted his sleeves and strode in. He took over the tea from the palace maid and presented it to Li Jianting. “Your Majesty.”

Li Jianting often slept poorly. Pinching the middle of her brows, she accepted Fuman’s tea and took a sip. “What did the Grand Secretary say?”

“This is the Grand Secretary’s memorandum. Please take a look.”

Fuman took out the Grand Secretariat’s note from his sleeve and presented it to the imperial desk. “If Your Majesty agrees to it, it can be issued tonight.”

Li Jianting read the memorandum Kong Qiu drafted and pondered over it for a while. “The preceding Lu Pingyan was a marquis too. If we conferred Qi Zhuyin as a marquis again, I fear it will incur Qidong’s displeasure.”

Li Jianting often spoke to Fuman about government affairs. Fuman did not steer clear of the taboo either. Slightly embellishing what he heard in the Grand Secretariat’s office compound, he said, “Lu Guangbai defected. If Lu Pingyan were to be detained in Qudu, he would have been stripped of his noble rank, so his Marquis of Bianbo\* title and rank no longer stands. Your Majesty is the new emperor, and Commander-in-chief Qi is a new subject of yours. Conferring her as a marquis is already a great kindness.”

“You have a point.” Li Jianting set the note on the table. “Then let’s—”

Li Jianting had yet to finish her words, and Fuman was in the midst of preparing the ink when they heard someone outside the hall announce Kong Qiu’s arrival. With this interruption, Li Jianting set the matter aside and had Kong Qiu enter first.

Kong Qiu’s face was ashen as he lifted the hem of his robe and knelt down. After he kowtowed and paid his respect, he said in a heavy voice,

“Your Majesty, there is an issue with the relief grains sent to the City of Yongcheng. The memorial from Juexi just came in, so this humble subject dare not tarry!”

Fuman immediately stepped forth to receive the memorial and handed it over to Li Jianting’s desk.

The moment Li Jianting opened it for a look, her heart promptly sank.

“Rumors are now rife in the City of Yongcheng. They are all saying that the relief grains are provided by Shen Zechuan of Zhongbo, who is helping in secret. Discussions are abuzz, with everyone speaking with conviction.” Kong Qiu said. “If we let it go unchecked, I fear...”

“If we stop the distribution of the relief grains at this point in time, it will only confirm that these grains have something to do with Shen Zechuan.”

Qudu had no grains, and there was only this batch of grains that could provide aid relief to the drought-hit City of Yongcheng. Li Jianting could not let the common folks of the City of Yongcheng starve to death. But as Kong Qiu said, if they were to let it be, then everyone would soon take it as the gospel truth; after all, three men could make a tiger.<sup>55</sup> And Shen Zechuan would then benefit wholly at the expense of the imperial court, becoming the benefactor of the City of Yongcheng.

This one move was underhanded and ruthless.

And Li Jianting finally got a first-hand taste of it.

## CHAPTER 260 : BESTOWMENT



“Reward him.” The gears in Li Jianting’s mind whirled as she shut the memorial. “Marquis of Helian has made significant contributions in the raising of grains. I<sup>56</sup> must reward him handsomely.”

Kong Qiu prostrated over the ground, nodded approvingly to himself, and spoke in a respectful tone. “Your Majesty is wise.”

No matter the situation, the relief grains could not be recalled. If Li Jianting rewarded Marquis of Helian handsomely now, the rumors would be discredited on their own. Since Shen Zechuan intended to fight a war of benevolence and righteousness with her, she was all game for it.

“Han Cheng monopolized power and deceived his master, and he even harbored the intent to usurp the throne. His crimes are too reprehensible and heinous to be pardoned,” Li Jianting said, “To ensure my safety, Commander-in-chief Qi captured that Han traitor in my stead; it’s indeed a meritorious achievement. Furthermore, she returned in resounding victory after mobilizing troops against the Qingshu Tribe. Whether for personal or official reasons, I must bestow upon her a title.”

“Commander-in-chief Qi has had her fair share of suffering the bitter cold and impoverishment being stationed at the Bianjun Commandery,” Kong Qiu said. “Long since the reign of Xiande, she has earned herself laudable merit for sending troops to come to the rescue of the emperor. How does Your Majesty intend to go about conferring a title on Commander-in-chief Qi?”



“I’ve heard that Commander-in-chief Qi has the reputation of being known as ‘Wind Guiding the Scorching Plains’,” Li Jianting raised her brush and wrote two neat characters on the paper. “Why not bestow upon Commander-in-chief Qi the title, ‘Prince of Donglie’?”

Kong Qiu immediately raised his head and responded in astonishment, “That’s...”

“Qi Zhuyin has thrice stepped out of Qidong to come to the emperor’s rescue, burned down the thirteen camps of Biansha with aid of the wind, and penetrated deep into the enemy’s territory alone to save her father. Ever since she has assumed the post of the commander-in-chief of Qidong’s five commanderies’ troops, the commandery and twin passes have been impenetrable. From the reign of Xiande to Tianchen, not a single soldier from Biansha managed to invade our Qidong’s territory.” Li Jianting raised her eyes. “So why can’t I bestow the title of a prince upon such a loyal, steadfast, and valiant general?”

“But Commander-in-chief Qi is a woman,” Kong Qiu replied. “It’s already a breach of protocol for her to be able to set foot on Yulong Terrace to present herself before the emperor and receive her conferment. If she were to be conferred the title of prince,<sup>57</sup> a public outcry would no doubt ensue. Your Majesty, please think thrice!”

Li Jianting looked at Kong Qiu and said, “The Grand Secretary once taught me<sup>58</sup> during lessons that ‘the sovereign and his ministers ought to stand together in times of turmoil and peace.’<sup>59</sup> I should accept admonishments borne out of loyalty with graciousness, and treat the valiant and the virtuous with magnanimity. Qi Zhuyin is now not only able to stand guard at all quarters on my behalf, but also to capture and kill rebellious traitors for me. She treats me with utmost sincerity and loyalty, and yet I’m still going to harp on the distinction between men and women. Won’t that make the hearts of all the heroes and talents in the world turn cold with disillusionment?” She left her seat and stepped forward to help Kong Qiu up, saying with sincerity, “Teacher, she is a woman, yet she is willing to don military armor to slay the enemies. Take away her heartfelt sincerity in dedicating herself to the service of her country, and all that remains is her righteousness in being loyal to her sovereign. What’s more, I’m<sup>\*</sup> also a woman. Teacher teaches me<sup>\*</sup> all that I<sup>\*</sup> have to know without reservation, and even assists me<sup>\*</sup> in governing the state. Is the so-called distinction between men and women really that important?”

Li Jianting swapped from the imperial “I” used exclusively by the emperor to the common “I” used by all, but Kong Qiu could not switch from “Grand Secretary” to “Teacher”. In addition to her heartfelt words, the new emperor wanted to confer a title upon Qi Zhuyin also because Zhongbo and Libei both had well-trained and powerful armies. Relying on just the Eight Great Training Divisions to defend the city gates of Qudu was akin to throwing an egg against a rock. Only Qi Zhuyin – a Qi Zhuyin who held in her grasp the 300,000 troops of Qidong – could go head to head against the rebels.

“Your Majesty’s conferment of a title by imperial decree is already generous to Qidong, but this noble rank is truly too high a rank.” It was not that Kong Qiu did not understand the situation; on the contrary, he understood it all too well. Once Qi Zhuyin was conferred a prince, there would no longer be any other military power in the present Dazhou that could act as a counterbalance against Qidong. The rise and fall of the entire dynasty would thus come to depend on these 300,000 forces of Qi Zhuyin. If they scored a victory, what other titles could they confer upon Qi Zhuyin in the future? She had already achieved the same position as Xiao Fangxu. Not only would there be nothing else to confer upon her, there was also no longer a Libei that could mutually hold her in check.

Li Jianting similarly understood this, but Qi Zhuyin was on good terms with the Xiao clan of Libei, and this was the only thing she had left in her hands to give Qi Zhuyin.



“There lies a sharp sword on the tongue, that kills without spilling a drop of blood.”<sup>60</sup> Yao Wenyu held the scissors in hand and did an ugly job of trimming the potted plant on his lap. “Once rumors start spreading, it’s tough to eradicate them altogether. The new emperor is forced by the current political situation to reward Marquis of Helian handsomely. Her intent to kill off Marquis of Helian is already set in stone.”

“It looks to me that the new emperor acts neither like Xue Xiuzhuo nor Kong Qiu in handling matters.” Shen Zechuan bent over to pick up the broken branch that had fallen to the ground. “She has her own mind.”

“She has just ascended to the throne, and already she has seen the world,” Yao Wenyu said. “How would she still be willing to remain a chess piece? She is already staking it all by conferring Commander-in-chief Qi as the ‘Prince of Donglie’. Although Your Lordship has slightly gained the

upper hand in providing aid relief to the City of Yongcheng, it has also put You Tan in a dangerous position. If Marquis of Helian were to confess about him under heavy torture, then our inside man in the Prefecture of Liuzhou would be forfeited.”

“The new future port in Liuzhou will have merchandise moving throughout the entire territory.” Shen Zechuan tossed the broken branch into the pond in the courtyard. “The handling of the tariffs has a significant bearing on many matters. You Tan is not a good candidate for it. Tell him to pay more attention since Xue Xiuzhuo is determined to investigate the accounts. After all, he has a pile of bad debts at home. I fear he will be too powerless to fend for himself when the time comes.”

You Tan was a money-grubber. He was convenient to use, but not convenient to keep around. The most accessible connection Shen Zechuan had in Juexi was the Xi clan’s contacts, but he still picked You Tan to do business with the Marquis of Helian.

This was his lord and master’s idea, so Yao Wenyu could not discuss it in depth. Even if he saw through it, he could not expose it. The potted plant on his lap grew more and more bare. Yuanzhuo said, “Looks like Xue the Eldest has already gotten what he wanted from Ge Qingqing’s latest update.”

“A great position indeed in the palace granaries of Qudu, managing the coming and going of supplies in the capital. As long as he has a mind to bribe, he will be able to line his pockets full. Xue the Eldest has been the rich young master of a noble clan for all his life, so how could he stand to suddenly become a small-time, down-and-out official? Xue Xiuzhuo has been particularly careful when it comes to promoting or conferring titles upon his fellow kinsfolk of the Xue clan. He’s unwilling to show favoritism and help the Xue clan, and that has long incurred the disapproval and criticism of those in the same clan.” Speaking to this point, Shen Zechuan watched Jiran chase after Xiao Xun as they frolicked at the end of the walkway. “After taking a look at you that day, Jiran has never gone back looking for you?”

“Xue Xiuzhuo is thorough in everything he does. Since he wants to kill me, he will not show mercy. Even if the Venerable Master is alive, there is no cure for both these legs and this poison. Jiran is young; Your Lordship need not make things difficult for him,” Yao Wenyu said calmly. “There is no need to force the matter. Let’s leave it to Heaven’s will.”

Xiao Xun fell on the ground and quickly scrambled to his feet before running with stalks of grass on him.

Yao Wenyu released his grip on the scissors. He was not particularly fixated on this. He continued, “The Hereditary Prince is healthy. He is neither arrogant nor delicate. I can tell he’s naturally talented and intelligent, and he excels in learning. With the teaching and guidance of the various gentlemen in the future, he is sure to live up to expectations.”

Shen Zechuan said nothing.

Yao Wenyu then smiled. He gifted the potted plant to Shen Zechuan. “Your Lordship is still hesitating.”

Shen Zechuan raised his left, fan-holding hand and pointed towards the west. “The empire is a cage.”

Qudu was the freest place of all in the world. It was also the world’s worst prison.

“Even brothers born of the same parents differ from each other, just like the nine sons of a dragon are different in their own ways,” Yao Wenyu said. “Can the wolves of Libei only run in the grasslands? The Hereditary Prince is bright and intelligent, so why not Your Lordship ask him himself?”



Xiao Xun was tired of playing, but he still kept his spirit up, wanting Shen Zechuan to lead him by the hand back. He walked past the pond and pointed to the water as he said to Shen Zechuan, “Second Uncle, this is a bright mirror.”

He called Xiao Chiye Second Uncle, and so Xiao Chiye taught him to address Shen Zechuan as Second Uncle too.<sup>61</sup>

“Yes,” Shen Zechuan said, “by looking into the mirror, you can straighten out your clothes.”<sup>62</sup>

Facing the water surface, Xiao Xun patted his robe clean.

It had to be known that when Xiao Chiye was of the same age, he was still running after the colts and yearning to sleep all day long among the grass. Xiao Xun resembled Xiao Jiming in the looks department, but from what Xiao Chiye had divulged to him, even if Xiao Jiming was not as prone to getting a beating as Xiao Chiye was, he was not *this* quiet either when he was this old.

“Did you come looking for Mister today to teach you to read?” Shen Zechuan asked.

Xiao Xun nodded. “Reading can make one wise.”

“There are so many learned gentlemen in residence.” Shen Zechuan’s folding fan lifted slightly to point at Yao Wenyu’s room. “Why must you pick this one?”

“Mister Chengfeng said Mister Yuanzhuo is the most learned and knowledgeable.” Xiao Xun paused for a moment, then raised his head to say to Shen Zechuan, “I want the best teacher.”

After a moment’s silence, Shen Zechuan asked, “What if there is no Yuanzhuo?”

“Mister Yuanzhuo said, *he who stands on his toes is not steady, while he who takes long strides cannot keep up pace.*”<sup>63</sup> Xiao Xun pointed at himself. “Even if Xun’er wants the best teacher in the world to teach me, Xun’er must be able to understand too. I cannot reach for what is beyond my grasp.”

The way he spoke was sophisticated. Merely seven years of age, and he had already far surpassed his peers. Influenced by Yao Wenyu, the gentlemen in residence would occasionally engage in philosophical discourses<sup>64</sup> when they had no government affairs to attend to. Xiao Xun did not like those discourses, but he would always sit by the side to listen whether it was Xiao Chiye handling military affairs or Shen Zechuan discussing political affairs.

“Are you working so hard because you want to become the best teacher?”

With a strange expression, Xiao Xun shook his head at Shen Zechuan and said, “Xun’er is not a teacher, but Xun’er wants teachers.” Saying so, he pointed at Fei Sheng. “Xun’er is not a general, but Xun’er wants generals too.”

*Of the learned the sage beckons, into my trap the heroes walk!*<sup>65</sup> Whether the civil ministers or military generals, he wanted all the “best”. This was the grand ambition of recruiting all the virtuous and talented in the world.

Shen Zechuan squeezed Xiao Xun’s hand and spoke no further.



The new emperor granted a general amnesty to all in the world, and personnel from the Six Ministries were transferred around. On the day of Xue the Eldest’s promotion to the custodian of the palace granaries, he held a feast on Donglong Street and invited his distant relatives and next-door neighbors to vindicate himself.

Having drunk himself drunk, he let Ge Qingqing support him as he staggered his way home. “The tables have turned. I’m a lucky man. What’s more, I’m the legitimate son of direct descent.” He held up a finger and said to Ge Qingqing, “My courtesy name is ‘Pingjing’. Ping—Jing! Xue Xiuzhuo’s courtesy name is ‘Yanqing’. Extend whose integrity?”<sup>66</sup> He patted his own chest and said with a smile, “Mine. It’s mine. I’m his eldest brother. I should be standing—*burp*—higher than him to begin with!”

Ge Qingqing swayed with him and repeatedly concurred, “Yes, yes, it is as my lord says.”

“Lord,” Xue Pingjing said in a loud voice. “That’s right. I’m the lord! Why do, do I have to take my cues from him? He’s a mere son of a concubine who seized, seized my head of family position, and divided up the family property to kick all of us out. He is really, the most, most cold-blooded and merciless person.” He waved his hand, looking as if he could not deign to speak about Xue Xiuzhuo. “Look at him. He has become a minister of importance in the imperial court, yet he isn’t willing to help us financially... Is this, this something a human would do?”

Ge Qingqing did not answer.

“You’re all afraid of him.” Xue Pingjing’s puffs of breath reeked of wine. “What’s so scary about him? He is of low, lowly birth, born to a concubine! When we went to school last time, I knew he was one who wouldn’t be content with his lot in life.” On touching upon his sore point, he unexpectedly started to choke with sobs, “I’m his eldest brother. Who is he to be more talented than me? He wouldn’t do it when those at home told him to write essays for me... Had he done so, I’d be an important minister too now.”

The more Xue Pingjing cried, the sadder he was. Eventually, he held on to the wall for support and, with a “*blargh*“, puked.

“He said I showed favoritism to my concubine... and neglected my son’s studies... so he wouldn’t allow us father and son to meet again...” Paying no attention to the wretched mess, Xue Pingjing covered his face and bawled, “He’s really a heartless one! Even if my son becomes an ignorant and incompetent ne’er-do-well in the future, he’s still my son! He snatched another man’s son. He is not fit to be human!”

Ge Qingqing said comfortingly, “Now that my lord has also been promoted, you will be able to exchange words with the *gonggong* in the

palace. Naturally, there will be opportunities for you to ask for your eldest son back.”

Xue Pingjing wiped his tears and clutched Ge Qingqing’s arm tightly as he spat with hatred, “I’ve seen him rise to the height of his power, and I want to see him plunge all the way down too!”



**Author’s Note:**

I made up the position of the palace granaries custodian. (内仓典守) There was indeed a similar position in the Ming system, but I can’t really remember offhand what it’s called.

Credit: Special thanks to [MaruChan](#) for spotting the typo! <3

## CHAPTER 261 : OF BENEVOLENCE & INTIMIDATION



The next day at noon, the Marquis of Helian headed over to Mingli Hall to give his thanks for the reward.

Fuman stopped him and advised, “Your Lordship, please hold on. Her Majesty is taking a nap right now. She will not be able to summon you until a little later.” He turned aside. “If you’re not in a hurry, you may wait here first.”

The Marquis of Helian made a special trip here today to express his loyalty. The rumors in the City of Yongcheng had given him sleepless nights, for fear that the Son of Heaven, Li Jianting, would fly into a rage and seal off all their Fei clan’s properties. He promptly nodded in acknowledgment and waited under the sun.

It was murderously scorching at noon. A little less than an hour passed. The Marquis of Helian was sweating profusely from the heat. He did not dare to make any inquiry, but his heart was gradually sinking. Under the silent gazes of the eunuchs around him, he became aware of the new emperor’s disciplinary punishment.

“Your Lordship,” Fuman called out to him softly. “Why don’t you wait in the side hall first? It’s such a hot day.”

The Marquis of Helian squeezed out a smile with some difficulty. Wiping his sweat with his sleeve, he answered, “It’s fine.”

He was the one who made arrangements for the City of Yongcheng’s relief grains, so he could not absolve himself of responsibility when things



went awry. If Li Jianting suspected him of colluding with the rebels, his head would definitely roll. As long as he could preserve his life, he would even be willing to kneel while waiting, let alone stand and wait.

The Marquis of Helian did not know how long it had been, but he felt as if there was a scalding hot iron plate stuck to his back. His face was ghastly pale, and he was perspiring an abnormally copious amount of sweat. His vision, too, was swimming. It was all by sheer willpower that he remained standing.

The beaded curtains swung slightly, and Fengquan leaned partially out of it to announce in a feminine manner, “Her Majesty is awake. All of you move quickly. Don’t hold Her Majesty up from dealing with government affairs.”

The eunuchs and palace maids waiting in attendance under the eaves entered with the basins in hand. Not long later, the Marquis of Helian heard his name. He lifted the hem of his robe and went up the steps to come before the hall. It was such a spinning blur before his aged eyes that he had no choice but to hold on to Fuman for support.

“Oh, dear me.” Fuman looked worried. “Your Lordship, what’s wrong?”

The Marquis of Helian felt so oppressively stifled in the chest that it made him nauseous. As it turned out, he was having a heatstroke. Li Jianting was waiting in the hall, so the Marquis of Helian hastily steadied himself on his feet, though both his legs were trembling somewhat. He could only murmur to Fuman, “It’s... It’s nothing.”

“There are basins of ice inside,” Fuman whispered to him. “Just in time for you to go in and alleviate the heat.”

The Marquis of Helian strode through the door and lowered his head before Li Jianting’s desk to kneel and pay his obeisance. His voice was weak and feeble. “This, this humble subject pays his respect to Your Majesty. Blessed is Your Majesty.”

Holding the memorial with her fingers, Li Jianting did not look up.

The Marquis of Helian prostrated himself, not daring to move. Even his breathing grew lighter. Very quickly, the sweat beside his forehead dampened his sleeves.

“I’ve seen from Liang Cuishan’s memorial that the Fei clan has encroached on the commoners’ fields in the City of Chuancheng.” Li

Jianting took a sip of the cooled tea and continued in a gentle voice, “Do you know of this?”

The sweat all over the Marquis of Helian’s body from the heat turned into cold sweat. “This humble subject knows. The Chief Surveillance Bureau has impeached this humble subject, while the memorandum the Grand Secretariat issued has asked the officials from the Ministry of Justice to work in collaboration with those from the Ministry of Revenue to head over to Chuancheng to audit the field taxes. It even has Xue Xiuzhuo of the Court of Judicial Review act as an official to supervise and inspect.”

“The Ministry of Revenue is now saying that the Fei clan of Chuancheng is in cahoots with the Pan clan of Dancheng and the Han clan of Wucheng. You conspire to deceive the imperial court, embezzle the field taxes, and even inflict harsh punishments on the commoners in the cities, causing hundreds of people from Chuancheng to flee the city,” Li Jianting said. “Is that true?”

The Marquis of Helian was burning up inside with anxiety. Propping himself with hands on the ground, he took a few slight gasps and blurted in a moment of desperation, “This, this humble subject dares not...”

Li Jianting suddenly flung the memorial onto the Marquis of Helian’s body and said in a frosty tone, “You dare not? So you are saying no one in Chuancheng died of starvation in winter? You not only collude with the Pan clan, but also collaborate with the merchant of Juexi to use the Chuancheng commoners’ grains to ingratiate yourself with the rebels! Do you think I don’t know? Do you think the Grand Secretary is unaware? The imperial court has been watching the whole of you cancerous lot for a long time!”

The Marquis of Helian almost slumped to the ground, paralyzed. With tears in his eyes, he cried, “Your Majesty, Your Majesty! During the reign of Xiande, the Hua faction joined forces with the Pan faction to monopolize state power, and they had the Empress Dowager on the inside helping them. This humble subject had no choice but to do so in order to preserve the lives of my entire family!” He bowed his head and kowtowed, weeping loudly as he knocked his head against the ground. “The common folks of Chuancheng are just like my own sons. They have been under the charge of my Fei clan since the Great Imperial Ancestor<sup>67</sup> established and ruled the empire. If I had not been pushed to the end of my tether, how would I have dared to commit such an inhuman act?! As for the grains, Your Majesty, this humble subject saw how troubled Your Majesty was over the Yongcheng’s

grains and could not help but feel anxious too, and that was how I fell for that traitor Shen's trap so easily!"

In the face of imminent death, the Marquis of Helian wised up and disavowed himself of involvement by not bringing up Yan Heru.

"Han Cheng acted tyrannically and coerced this humble subject numerous times to help him commit regicide and self-proclaimed himself king." The Marquis of Helian's face was awash in tears as he raised his head to look at Li Jianting. "But this humble subject is a court minister of the Li clan and could absolutely not throw in with him! That night during the banquet, this humble subject fought at the risk of my life to protect Your Majesty... This humble subject deserves punishment for my crime. I only ask of Your Majesty to spare my son and daughter in consideration of the Great Imperial Ancestor's great kindness..."

Li Jianting seemed to be moved. "In an act of kindness, the Great Imperial Ancestor handed the eight cities to you people. Yet you commit such a grave mistake for your own interests."

"This humble subject is deeply aware that my crime is deserving of death." The Marquis of Helian choked with sobs "...To be owing several tens of thousands in field taxes... This debt... Even if the Fei clan has only one person left standing, we will spare no effort to pay it back."

As long as Li Jianting did not kill the Marquis of Helian, he would not only be willing to return all the fertile fields, but also make up for the arrears in field taxes. The location of the City of Chuancheng was more special than the City of Dancheng. It was close to the City of Dicheng, connected to the waterways, and inextricably linked to Juexi, so he really might just be able to make up for this sum of money, but the Marquis of Helian was just like the rest of the wily old foxes from the other noble clans and did not say how long exactly it would take for this sum of field taxes to be fully paid up.

Li Jianting turned back, as if contemplating it over. After a time, she said, "Your crimes are unforgivable. On account that you were willing to help Yongcheng out of their predicament and that you still have a conscience, I shall spare your life."

The Marquis of Helian immediately felt relieved and hurriedly kowtowed. "Your Majesty is benevolent of heart..."

"However, you formed cliques for your own selfish ends, and you have failed the Great Imperial Ancestor for the favor he has shown you. The title

‘Marquis of Helian’ can be retained no more.” Without giving the Marquis of Helian a chance to gasp for breath, she continued, “And then there’s the matter of the encroachment of the commoners’ field.”

The Marquis of Helian’s heart leaped into his mouth again.

“Fuman,” Li Jianting said towards the door. “Drag those few lowlifes out.”

Fuman acknowledged his order. Not long later, the guards escorted several detained people to kneel in the open space before the hall. Propping himself up with his hands, The Marquis of Helian looked back through the beaded curtain and realized that all these people were the officials he himself had set up in the City of Chuancheng’s *yamen*.

“The Great Imperial Ancestor might have handed the eight cities to you people, but the eight cities still take after the surname ‘Li’. It is by virtue of my amnesty that you could escape the death penalty. These people deceive their superiors and subordinates, trample over the law, and commit all kinds of atrocities.” Li Jianting stood beside the Marquis of Helian and reached out a slender palm to pat him gently on the shoulder. “They caused the common folks in the territory to be forced into displacement. They deserve death. Fuman.”

Fuman raised his voice. “Flogging paddles in place—HIT!”

The moment the word left Fuman’s mouth, the iron-covered upright rods suddenly struck human flesh. The sound of it startled the Marquis of Helian so much that he trembled all over.

The few of them had their mouths stuffed. They were not dragged to the Gate of Duancheng in accordance with the flogging rules, nor were they wrapped in cotton-padded clothes. They were in their inner garment, their official robes having long been stripped off them. The paddle-wielding eunuchs were all old subordinates of the Eastern Depot, and they flogged with everything they had. A few floggings later, the few people were all a bloody mangle of flesh.

The Marquis of Helian’s ears were buzzing. Mingli Hall was very cool, giving him a chill all over. The sound of flogging continued, and one of them tilted his head back twice, the blood between his teeth soaking through the white fabric gag as he sobbed and whimpered at the Marquis of Helian. The entire Mingli Hall was extremely quiet, with the eunuchs all standing in solemn silence with their hands at their sides. Only the flogging sound of “*thud, thud, thud*” persisted.

After an hour, the acrid stench of blood pervaded the air.

Without looking at the Marquis of Helian again, Li Jianting said, “You may leave.”

The Marquis of Helian tripped over himself as he got up and fell back onto his knees on the cold, hard floor. Fuman signaled the junior eunuch with his eyes, and both of them hoisted up the Marquis of Helian to send him out. The Marquis of Helian’s boots stepped into the blood. He widened his eyes and looked at his feet.

The pool of blood reflected the Marquis of Helian’s official robe.

The Marquis of Helian staggered a few steps and felt the world spinning— so frightened was he that he literally passed out cold.

Li Jianting reclined in her chair. Through the dark shadow of the window, she could see Fuman ordering the guards to clear away the bodies on the ground.

Fengquan picked up the memorial that had been flung to the ground and said in a soft voice, “This scene is truly horrifying.”

“You have never seen a scene of carnage and bloodbath before.” Li Jianting’s eyes were hidden from view under the darkness. “When the epidemic ran rampant in the City of Dancheng, refugees crowded the entrance of Qudu, wanting to dig their way in through the ditches. Eventually, they clogged up the ditch, and the stench of corpses permeated all over... No one saved them. Now, that was a scene that was truly horrifying.”

Fengquan did not touch her desk and merely set the memorial back lightly.

“Tough times call for tough measures in governance.”<sup>68</sup> Li Jianting paused for a long time. “Let the Marquis of Helian live for a while longer. Has Xue Yanqing come looking for you recently?”

Fengquan bowed and answered, “He came to ask about Your Majesty’s daily routine.”

“Cen Xunyi is a long-time elder in the imperial court. He’s far-sighted in having misgivings about Zhongbo. I did not go along with what Xue Yanqing wanted this time,” Li Jianting said. “I ought to make it up to him.”

“His Excellency Xue had his hands clean of corrupted practices, and he lives frugally when he is in official residence. For that reason, he has quite the reputation in the Imperial College. If Your Majesty were to reward him

with money and commonplace objects..." Fengquan lowered his eyes, and his voice gradually trailed off.

Li Jianting pondered it over for a moment. "Jiang Qingshan has made meritorious contributions in raising grains, and he treats the people like his sons. Let the Grand Secretary draft up a memorandum. I heard his wife, Liu, also has a reputation for being virtuous. Reward them together."

Jiang Qingshan was Xue Xiuzhuo's capable right-hand man in Juexi, so by rewarding him, she would be appeasing Xue Xiuzhuo. Besides, Li Jianting still had other uses for Jiang Qingshan. There was currently no one holding the Prince of Donglie, Qi Zhuyin, in check. The Qidong Garrison Troops, however, needed military provisions, and Li Jianting had the key to this granary placed in Jiang Qingshan's hands.

Fengquan acknowledged his order and retreated, taking particular caution as he did so.



"The new emperor has shown her mettle. This move of check and balance is indeed impressive." Xiao Chiye pushed aside the military affairs and read over the updates from Qudu again. "To pacify Xue Xiuzhuo, she rewarded Jiang Qingshan. She can intimidate Commander-in-chief Qi and at the same time, threaten Xue Xiuzhuo, who holds sway over the practical doers faction and the way the Imperial College blows."

"It has been so easy for Xue Xiuzhuo to bring on a change of emperor; she has to be on guard against him. Jiang Qingshan is a provincial governor who has never received the Li clan's favor during the reign of Xiande and Tianchen, and now he is going to enjoy a meteoric rise." Shen Zechuan set aside Yu Xiaozai's letter. "On the contrary, I do find her way of dealing with the Marquis of Helian unexpected."

"It is." Xiao Chiye looked opposite him. "She's got some guts."

Shen Zechuan had truly never expected Li Jianting to take the measure of flogging the corrupted officials to death to intimidate the Marquis of Helian. Dipping his brush in ink, he said, "I initially thought she would find an excuse to kill him. I never expected her to be able to hold herself back."

"The Marquis of Helian originally excused himself, saying that he had no money, and now he has been so frightened he's willing to make up for the deficit; he even gave up his manors." Xiao Chiye tilted his head back slightly as he slouched lazily in the chair. "The female emperor adopts a policy of both benevolence and intimidation and applies carrot and stick

judiciously, which allows for more latitude than Xue Xiuzhuo, who would never let it rest. Seeing how she treats the Marquis of Helian, the noble clans, who have been beaten to this point, will certainly take the initiative to make up for the deficit in the hope of making amends for their transgressions in exchange for a slim chance of survival.”

What were the accounts the Grand Secretariat was investigating?  
Fields and money.

If there had been no Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye in the equation, Li Jianting would perhaps go along with Xue Xiuzhuo’s way and stick it out to the very end. But she was unbelievably shrewd, and she understood the truth in Cen Yu’s words. Compared to dealing with the Eight Great Clans at this moment, Shen Zechuan was far more terrifying.

“How amazing.” Shen Zechuan held up the brush and traced Xiao Chiye’s eyes. “Now, this is a genuine emperor.”

“I never used to believe that a person is born to be an emperor, but she is indeed gifted and talented. She has resided in the inner compound for merely five years.” Xiao Chiye grasped hold of Shen Zechuan’s wrist across the table.

“—Want your reward?”

“I was in Zhaozui Temple for merely five years, too.” Shen Zechuan’s leg under the table kicked off its wooden clog and inched up along the side of Xiao Chiye’s leg. He loosened his grip, and the brush fell onto the table, leaving several oblique shadows among the papers.

Lanzhou bent a finger and pressed it down on the bridge of Xiao Chiye’s nose.

“Give it to me, quick.”

## CHAPTER 262: SEPARATE WAYS



“If I do, I’m afraid your waist will break.” Xiao Chiye said with a ghost of a smile.

Although there had never been explicit instructions, Shen Zechuan had indeed injured his waist and could not stand up to the torment.

Shen Zechuan held back for a moment and was just about to put his leg back down, but Xiao Chiye did not permit him to. Instead, he grasped this ankle in his palm, pressing it against himself.

“Oh...” Shen Zechuan drew out the end of his words. “You want me to sate myself by feeding on fantasy, much like quenching my thirst by looking at plums.”

“It’s getting late.” Xiao Chiye said, but still, he did not let go.

Shen Zechuan initially still meant to say a word or two, but the hand grasping on to him suddenly began moving.

“If, before the ninth month, Commander-in-Chief Qi is still indisposed to deploy troops, I will not wait anymore.” Xiao Chiye’s attire was all in order, and nothing seemed amiss looking at his upper body. Even the way he spoke was no different from how it usually was.

“Given the means the emperor resorts to, she will not agree to the Commander-in-chief’s deployment of troops. Furthermore—” Shen Zechuan’s voice suddenly went soft, as if he had melted.

Xiao Chiye took off his clean sock.

There was still tablecloth hanging down around the table. Spurred along by the movements of Xiao Chiye’s palm, Shen Zechuan’s knees pressed



gently against the table board. His bare, treading foot worked through the intricately decorative-patterned robe, and that fabric chafed against the underside of his foot, belying the hardness blanketed under the softness.

“Besides, Commander-in-chief Qi has to consider the Five Commanderies too.” Xiao Chiye picked up from where Lanzhou left off. “Penetrating deep into the desert takes time and effort. She has to weigh her priorities. Even Qi Shiyu might not necessarily be willing to go ahead with this battle if it drags on.”

The corner of Shen Zechuan’s eyes reddened, prompted by the tidal waves of heat. “You told General Lu the other day that you were going to wait for Qidong.”

“At that time, the emperor still had yet to show her mettle. Looking at it now, the chances of Qidong deploying troops is slim.” Xiao Chiye stopped teasing Lanzhou when he spoke to this point. “This year, you gathered grains from the four prefectures of Huaizhou, Chazhou, Cizhou, and Hezhou to resolve the dilemma of putting food on the table. Although we made it in time for the spring plowing, the Huaizhou granary is lost. Now that Tao Ming has fled, the imperial court will naturally have to send someone else to manage it. It’ll be hard to do business with them again next year. And with the Port of Yongyi and the Xi clan’s copper mines sealed, Libei’s mutual trade market business is going to fall by half. Lanzhou, we will not be able to afford to feed the Qidong Garrison Troops next year.”

Qudu did not give grains when Qidong dispatched troops to the Qingshu Tribe this time, but Qi Zhuyin still had confidence. But where had her confidence come from? Other than Shen Zechuan, who else was there in the world who could be so generous as to supply a garrison troop the military grains they needed? Xue Xiuzhuo was not a fool. He was well aware of who had given the garrison troops their grains. He just did not expose it right to Qi Zhuyin’s face.

As Qidong had deployed troops to assist external forces this year, the military fields of three out of five commanderies had no one to farm the land, so it was inevitable that the harvest from military farming would suffer a drop. This, in turn, resulted in Qi Zhuyin’s military provisions needs this year being even higher than the previous years. The only thing worth rejoicing was that the spring plowing of four commanderies’ commoners’ fields was proceeding as usual, so she only had to worry about the grains for the army. But even so, the military grain expenditure for

300,000 soldiers was frightfully immense. And this had yet to take into consideration the invasion deep into the desert, which was a completely different matter from her leading troops to launch a surprise attack.

After the victory of the Duanzhou battle, the expenditure for fortifications and defenses in the various prefectures was bound to skyrocket. Not only that, the six prefectures were already beginning to take shape. Shen Zechuan had to supply year-round military provisions to the 120,000 garrison troops of the six prefectures, as well as continue to supply military provisions to Libei's 120,000 Armored Cavalry. Add the Qidong Garrison Troops to the equation, and the burden of supporting a grand total of 540,000 troops and horses would all fall upon him.

"Wang Xian wrote to me and said that he sent you a letter half a month ago, in which he elaborated on the stakes involved." Xiao Chiye switched to a more comfortable posture. "You didn't reply."

The underside of Shen Zechuan's foot was still sticking to Xiao Chiye's bulging and erect member. Leaning against the chair, he said, "The advisors had yet to draw up an estimate for a budget half a month ago, so I put a hold on Wang Xian's letter and did not reply."

"The advisors in residence are good, but they are mostly from the countryside. They are talented, but they are not as well-versed in the trade as officials like Wang Xian. Wang Xian served as the Secretary for the Ministry of Revenue and often engaged with the Ministry of War. Every year, he has to deal with us military officers who enter the capital to ask for our money and grains. He is well-acquainted with the various regions' military expenditures and military grains needs." Xiao Chiye had been resting at home of late, and the issue that had been on his mind the most was the military provisions too.

It was all too wonderful for the three armies to join forces as one, but it was also too difficult.

The equipment of the Libei Armored Cavalry wore out too fast, and the back-end squad still had to bring along the military craftsmen when they were transporting military provisions. Once the convoy squad stepped out of the battle zone, there was no more bridle path for them to take further east. The barren sands of the Gobi desert were all the Twelve Tribes' territories, so they had to increase the numbers of troops for the transportation of military provisions as a protective measure, but increasing manpower meant increasing military grains. The farther away the Libei

Armored Cavalry went, the more grains they would consume. Then, there was also the need to plan for all possible contingencies that might happen along the way. This was much harder than fighting a defensive battle.

“Last year, Xue Xiuzhuo abandoned the City of Quancheng and Luoxia Pass to defend the thirteen cities of Juexi alone. At that time, it didn’t feel all that impressive.” Finally looking awkward, Shen Zechuan sighed. “Only now do I know just how impressive it was.”

Who did not want Qi Zhuyin’s military strength? Shen Zechuan wanted it too. He only had to take down the Qidong Five Commanderies, and it would be impossible for Qudu to turn the tide in their favor even if the current emperor was Emperor Guangcheng himself. All along, Xue Xiuzhuo had been indifferent to Zhongbo and Libei’s battles. He let Shen Zechuan recruit soldiers and buy horses at the beginning of the year and did not even pursue the matter of Qidong’s military grains. This was all another way of wearing Shen Zechuan down.

“Jiang Qingshan is truly a great help. No wonder the emperor wanted to use him to contest Xue Xiuzhuo. This person shouldered the responsibility for the Dazhou granaries all alone with just his unyielding dauntlessness.” The expression in Xiao Chiye’s eyes was deep and penetrating. “Lanzhou, the battle you are going to fight is even harder than mine.”

Shen Zechuan did not reply to Wang Xian’s letter in consideration of Xiao Chiye. Similarly, Xiao Chiye was also now giving up on the Qidong Garrison Troops in consideration for Shen Zechuan.

Xiao Chiye shifted the chair away and bent over to pick up the wooden clogs. However, he did not put them on for Shen Zechuan, but set them aside neatly. He released his grip on Shen Zechuan’s hand and leaned over to stroke Shen Zechuan’s cheeks, whispering, “I’ll go by myself.”

The corners of Shen Zechuan’s eyes reddened, but there was no surge of passion in those expressive eyes of his.



The watchman’s clapper struck a few times late into the night. Hugging his legs close to him, Fengquan leaned against the foot of Li Jianting’s bed. He did not fall asleep, however. After a little less than an hour, he heard Li Jianting say from within the lowered drapes, “Aren’t you going to sleep?”

Resting his chin on his knees such that one side of his delicate, refined face was buried, Fengquan answered, “Your Majesty has had difficulty sleeping for several days. We should summon an imperial physician.”

With her eyes open, Li Jianting turned slightly to the side so that her back was to the lowered drapes. "I'm just not used to sleeping here."

Silence descended in the palace interior for a moment.

"Have you seen Shen Zechuan before?" Li Jianting asked.

"I saw him during the reign of Xiande when he had just emerged from Zhaozui Temple."

"Rumors have it that his mother was a dancer from Duanzhou." Li Jianting seemed to be seeking confirmation. "Is this true?"

"Yes, it's true." Fengquan moved his numbed legs. "He's the eighth son of Shen Wei, born of common birth. He was not a favored child in the Prince of Jianxing's manor, and was sent away to a private residence in Duanzhou very early on. He has relations with Ji Gang, the former Vice Commander of the Imperial Bodyguards. When Duanzhou fell into the enemies' hand, he was in the Chashi Sinkhole too."

After a moment of silence, Li Jianting said, "Qi Huilian is a veritable extremist to dare to cast aside his prejudices to impart all he had to him without reservation."

"But Shen Zechuan is small-minded and vindictive." Fengquan turned his head to the side. "Ji Lei had a feud with him, and so he made Ji Lei... suffer a fate worse than death. If Han Cheng had not been so thick-headed to keep resisting that day at the banquet, Your Majesty could very well dismiss him from his position and send him into exile in Zhongbo to see how Shen Zechuan treats him. No doubt he will also make Han Cheng wish he were better off dead."

The shadows of the trees outside the windows fell upon the ground. The palace in the dead of night was silent and totally devoid of human voices.

"You are Mu Ru's younger brother by blood?" Li Jianting changed the topic.

Fengquan's expression cracked a little, but he did not reply rashly.

"You became a eunuch before Mu Ru entered the palace. At that time, she was already Prince Chu's favored concubine. Why did you have to enter the palace to suffer?" Li Jianting's eyes turned slightly. "You are not like Fuman, who has been to the Eunuch School, but you are well-versed in the classics. Given Mu Ru's family background, being able to read is already not bad."

Fengquan immediately knelt on the ground. "This humble slave, this humble slave..."

“I can see that both of your ears aren’t newly pierced, but the former emperor has never rewarded you with ear ornaments, and it’s highly unlikely for him to do so. Those who can wear pearl or gem earrings at an early age are either of lawful birth or noble blood. So, where...” Li Jianting propped herself up and paused for a moment before looking at the lowered drapes, “...exactly are you from?”



The zither strings jolted with a hum. Looking as if he had just woken up from a dream, Qiao Tianya raised his hand with the intent to rub the center of his forehead, only to realize that the skin on the pulp of his finger was torn.

“The fact that Commander-in-chief Qi has yet to reply means that she’s displeased with His Lordship for wanting to hand the Qingshu Tribe’s territory over to Hairigu...” Yao Wenyu stopped talking and looked into the inner chamber through the drapes.

“This matter is a tough one to deal with. The fear is creating a rift with Qidong.” Kong Ling followed Yao Wenyu’s gaze. “Songyue has been restless. Why not come out and have tea with us?”

Qiao Tianya wiped the bit of blood off with his thumb and leaned back in the rattan chair. With a smile, he said, “Since it is at your invitation, I shall respectfully comply.”

With that, he set the zither on the table, rose to lift the curtain, and stepped out.

The weather was fine today, and a tea table had been set up under the eaves. They did not seem to be discussing official business, but more like sampling tea. Yao Wenyu was dressed in a green robe with wide sleeves, and when he drank his tea, the red thread appeared ever so imperceptibly.

Qiao Tianya did not stand on ceremony and sat down on the chair beside Yuanzhuo.

“What fine tea is it?” Qiao Tianya accepted the tea Gao Zhongxiong handed to him. He took only a sniff before saying, “Oh, the ‘Height of Spring’ from Hezhou.”

“Don’t be misled by how he’s no different from a general, always astride his horse wielding his blade.” Kong Ling pointed at Qiao Tianya. “He is, in fact, a tea connoisseur.”

“Make merry to the fullest while the going is good.” Qiao Tianya sipped his tea. “If I had money, I’d want to satisfy my appetite to dine and

wine. As long as I can sample all the fine tea and fine wines, I'd be happy to spend the money regardless of the cost."

With his eyes lowered, Yao Wenyu said, "You should learn from Shenwei."

Gao Zhongxiong hurriedly waved his hands. "On the contrary, I envy Commander Qiao. Me, I just want to save up money to build up the family finances so that I can marry a virtuous wife when the world is at peace."

"Songyue isn't married either," Kong Ling asked. "Don't you feel anxious to do so?"

"Look at Old Fei the Tenth. He's not married either, is he? They are in no hurry, but of course, I'm burning with anxiety." Qiao Tianya set down the teacup and said with a straight face, "I've been wanting to earn this sum of gift money<sup>69</sup> so much I have been tossing and turning all night."

The various gentlemen burst into laughter.

Qiao Tianya turned his face to the side to look at Yao Wenyu. "Mister isn't married, either. Any urgency to?"

The flowers on the branch fell amongst Yao Wenyu's sleeves. He turned his gaze to meet Qiao Tianya's eyes. When the wind blew off the flowers, it also sent a waft of his slightly bitter medicinal scent over to Qiao Tianya.

"Used to," Yao Wenyu answered. "But it doesn't matter now that I have Hunu."

Other than Qiao Tianya, everyone present did not know much about Yao Wenyu and the Commandery Princess Zhaoyue. They had only heard rumors that the Commandery Princess Zhaoyue wanted to marry him, so naturally, they thought he was referring to her.

"If you ask me, there are three regrets in life. Not being born as Hunu is one of them." Qiao Tianya moved to hug Hunu, but grasped hold of Yao Wenyu's wrist behind Hunu's plump body. "Or I could have rested all day and night on your lap, fantasizing to infinity and beyond even in my dreams."

Yao Wenyu's expression shifted slightly. He did not expect Qiao Tianya to be so gutsy, and in his fluster, he started to cough.

"Commander Qiao often surprises one with his words. It'd be wonderful if he could engage in a philosophical discourse<sup>70</sup> with Yuanzhuo." Gao Zhongxiong sighed with emotion. "I wonder if I will ever have the chance to see Yuanzhuo's literary grace on full display."

“Philosophical discourses that are mere rhetoric are detrimental to the state.” Yao Wenyu raised his hand to cover his mouth. His wrist was a little red. “I have yet to finish my words from earlier. Commander-in-chief’s lack of reply means she’s displeased with Hairigu. When all is said and done, we were not the ones who fought and took down the Qingshu Tribe territory, so we can’t force the issue.”

Kong Ling nodded. “I’m worried that Commander-in-chief Qi might bear ill will towards His Lordship because of this.”

“We want to leverage their military force to fight another, but Hairigu is a Biansha Scorpion, after all. It’s only reasonable for the Commander-in-chief Qi not to trust him.”

“This is only part of it.” Kong Ling exchanged glances with Yao Wenyu and slowly shook his head. “The worst fear is Commander-in-chief Qi suspecting His Lordship of threatening Qidong with this move.”

“The Qingshu Tribe lies close to the Bianjun Commandery,” Yao Wenyu said. “Even if Commander-in-chief Qi doesn’t think so, the various generals of Qidong will. They have had enough of being held under duress by the army-inspecting eunuch of Qudu. No doubt they will not agree to let the Scorpions keep a close watch on them again.”

“If Qidong isn’t willing,” Kong Ling said, “then all we can do is to make other plans.”



A candle was lit in the military tent. Qi Zhuyin sat with a leg propped as she squeezed her neck and listened to Qi Wei speak.

“Tell Lu Guangbai to stop sending letters. He indeed doesn’t have the burden of military supplies, and his 20,000 infantry soldiers can leave at just the drop of a hat.” She stared at the top of the tent. “Even Jiming and Xiao Chiye have never brought this matter up again.”

“General Lu has served under the Commander-in-chief for the longest time,” Qi Wei said. “He knows of your capabilities, so it’s only natural for him to want to persuade you to deploy troops.”

“I understand his desire to fight the Biansha Cavalry.” Qi Zhuyin frowned slightly. “But Dazhou has never gone deep into the desert. It’s a long journey to make, and danger lurks all around. Once all the three armies have been mobilized, who is going to ensure the safety of the encampments? The Scorpion in Qudu is still around.”

Qi Wei knew of the spot Qi Zhuyin was in. After hesitating for a moment, he said, "If you were to reject them at this moment, I fear you will earn the infamy of forsaking your integrity for gains."

No sooner had Qudu conferred her the title of Prince of Donglie than she turned against Zhongbo and Libei while the garrison troops were still eating Shen Zechuan's grains. Anyone who caught word of this would be inclined to condemn her.

Qi Zhuyin couldn't care less. "As they wish. There is nothing in the world you can't control more than wagging tongues."

"This account is tough to square off. In Zhongbo's view, their giving of grains to feed the garrison troops is an act of great kindness," Qi Wei said. "But if weren't for the war in Libei being at a critical point and Zhongbo needing us to mobilize troops to go to their aid when their gates were breached, Shen Zechuan's grains would not have come this easily either."

"They are people who scheme for world domination. They know how to grasp the opportunity." Qi Zhuyin's side profile was serious. There was no trace of her usual cheeky smile. "I was helping myself by helping Libei, and now, I'm also helping myself by not deploying troops. Qidong and Libei are brothers who go through adversities together, but the crisis in Libei has already been quelled, and Ce'an's desire to continue pushing further in *will* smack of militarism. Refugees abound after the empire started disintegrating. The wars this year and last year were inevitable. I know Amu'er is already showing signs of fatigue, and this is an excellent time to crush the alliance of the six tribes. But the eight cities' granaries are empty, and commoners are dying on the streets. The city of Yongcheng in Juexi is hit with a drought, and yet Jiang Qingshan still has to do his best to supply grains to Qudu and Qidong after autumn. These grains all had to be taken from the people. Of Shen Zechuan's six prefectures, three have yet to reach the bumper harvest year, so he also has to rely on the granaries in Hezhou... It's exhilarating to be fighting a battle, but I can't go."

Amu'er was an exceptional man, and the six tribes of Biansha were the bane of Dazhou's generals. If they were to emerge victorious after penetrating deep into the desert this time, then no matter who was to rule the state in the future, the names of the Libei Armored Cavalry and Xiao Chiye would go down in history. And besides, as a general, who would not want to pit themselves against such an opponent?



Qi Zhuyin snuffed out the candle wick, and the interior of the tent plunged into darkness. She sat for a moment, then said, “I voice it out; you write it down. Tell Shen Zechuan that even if the Qingshu Tribe’s territory were to fall into disuse, I will not permit Hairigu to set foot on it. Next, tell Xiao Jiming that I, Qi Zhuyin, may be acquainted with him since our youth and see him as a bosom friend, but my Qi clan is still a subject of Dazhou. Fighting against foreign foes together is my duty, but empowering Zhongbo is treason. And finally, tell Lu Guangbai, I wish him great success in his military exploits and in seeking redress for his previous humiliation, but this time, us siblings<sup>71</sup> will longer be going the same way.”

A solitary lone goose cried at the moon as it flew across the horizon of the Bianjun Commandery. Qi Wei put the respective letters away and turned to step out of the tent. Yellow sand rustled under those military boots, and a palm grabbed up a handful of the yellow sand. Lu Guangbai had his back to the dusky sky, the letter from Qidong still between his fingers. He squatted for a while, then put the letter away.

The sand in his palm trickled back to the ground.

Commander-in-chief Qi, treat this letter as you would me in person.<sup>72</sup>

In dereliction of duty, I left the commandery without due authorization, and for that, I have failed the elders of Qidong. Unless I step onto the battlefield and slay the enemies, my aspirations will never be realized. I will always be a general subordinate to Commander-in-chief Qi. We may not be able to tread the same path and fight together this battle, but the moon shines bright over the lands of the country. I will not let Commander-in-chief Qi down.



Credits: Thank you [Ami](#) and [Suika](#) for the brainwave, and [daisiesfordaze](#) for spotting the typo.

## CHAPTER 263: LAOHU (TANTAI HU)



In the eighth month, the autumn harvest was sent to the granaries. Acting on Shen Zechuan's orders, Wang Xian went on an inspection tour with Yu Xiaozai to the six prefecture granaries, where he organized Zhongbo's grains and had the details recorded into books for submission to Duanzhou. The horse carriage crushed over the gravel. All donned in a round-collared robe,<sup>73</sup> Wang Xian watched through the window as the City of Duanzhou grew gradually closer.

"The moat is still under construction, but the city gates are all repaired." Yu Xiaozai pointed out to Wang Xian. "Brother Minshen, this is where His Lordship defended the city."

Wang Xian nodded and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

When Yu Xiaozai was still in Qudu, he had some contact with Wang Xian, but owing to the different nature of their duties, he had merely a nodding acquaintance with him. It was not until the seventh month, when they worked together, that they really became familiar with one another. He said comfortingly, "His Lordship treats others with magnanimity. Since he is willing to use you, it means he is willing to trust you. There is no need for you to keep dwelling on what happened in the past."

Wang Xian said with a bitter smile. "I was relegated from the capital and exiled to Zhongbo. If not for Second Master looking out for me, my head would have already rolled. I'm beyond grateful to His Lordship for letting bygones be bygones, so how would I still bear grudges? I'm just afraid that I'd be too inarticulate to answer in the hall later."

Yu Xiaozai knew of Wang Xian's misgivings. After pondering it over, he said, "Brother Minshen, look at me. I came to Zhongbo at the behest of my teacher, Censor-in-chief Cen, to negotiate peace with His Lordship. The talks later failed, and returning to Qudu was no longer an option. I initially thought of buying a few *mu*<sup>74</sup> of fertile lands in Zhongbo and becoming a commoner from then on, but His Lordship promoted me, making me a 'Surveillance Commissioner' of Zhongbo. Brother Minshen was demoted and relegated because you were caught in the crossfire of Second Master's bribery case and framed by Fu LinYE and those people. Second Master is a man who values ties, and he has always remembered this incident. This time, Brother Minshen successfully prepared Libei's military grains without taking the credits. Whether for official or personal reasons, His Lordship will not make things difficult for Brother Minshen."

Feeling slightly relieved, Wang Xian waved his hand and said, "My contribution is too insignificant to be worth mentioning."

The horse carriage arrived at their destination and passed through the overhanging gate that had been lowered. Both of them got off the carriage one after another and saw Fei Sheng, who was waiting at the entrance of the passageway.

"Both excellencies are fatigued from the long journey. Please go in first." Fei Sheng led both of them inside. "His Lordship has prepared a banquet to welcome both excellencies at the residence."

Slightly surprised, Wang Xian said, "This humble subordinate is merely following orders. How am I deserving of such favor from His Lordship?"

"Don't worry about it," Yu Xiaozai said with a smile. "His Lordship is never extravagant when he hosts feasts. It's just some common dishes over an invitation of wine and tea."



"Wang Xian is swift and efficient in making arrangements for the military grains." Shen Zechuan turned his head to the side and said to Xiao Chiye behind him. "What's even rarer is that he is able to successfully negotiate with the *yamen* of the various prefectures. It's too gross an injustice to put him in Chazhou."

Xiao Chiye secured the bandage for Shen Zechuan and said, "He could even drag out and stall my account, so of course he's also in his element dealing with the various prefectures' *yamen*."

Shen Zechuan sucked in a slight breath at Xiao Chiye's movements. "The tyrant of Qudu is going to break my waist."

"This waist," Xiao Chiye sized it up and brought his palms around to the front to lead Shen Zechuan back to his own chest, "is so slender it looks like it's within my grasp."<sup>75</sup>

"That's why there is the saying '*shen yao pan bin*'—'slender of frame and graying of temples'."<sup>76</sup> Shen Zechuan's back clung against Xiao Chiye's chest. "So, envy not, my beloved—*Xiao-lang*."<sup>77</sup>

"In any case, it's all mine," Xiao Chiye said. "The only ones doing the envying here are the others."



Jiran, who was under the eaves, watched as the maidservants entered and exited. Putting his palms together, he tilted his head and said to Ding Tao, "We have a guest."

There was more to this little monk's words than meets the ear. Ding Tao folded his arms and answered in great understanding. "You will still get your vegetarian dishes. His Lordship has given the instructions earlier."

Jiran immediately showed a delighted expression. "*Anitabha*,<sup>78</sup> Ding Tao-gege, you're so much smarter than the fishes in the pond!"

Shen Zechuan, who had been in the principal room, had already stepped out. Preparation was all in order in the side hall, and the various gentlemen had already all taken their seats. When Wang Xian and Yu Xiaozai arrived, they first paid their obeisances to the Prefectural Lord before exchanging pleasantries with the gentlemen at the table.

"The depositing of grains in the six prefectures is a major event of utmost importance for the entire year," Shen Zechuan said. "Youjing and Minshen have worked hard."

During the autumn harvest in the eighth month, the various regions would sort out the grains and put them into storage at the granaries. Following right after in the ninth month, they would calculate the surplus grain reserves in all localities to prepare for the winter. Going by Zhongbo's process, there was no way Libei's military grains could be prepared this fast, but Wang Xian had been making preparations as early as the sixth month. Once the defensive battle in Duanzhou was over, he asked the garrison troops of the various prefectures to allocate manpower to start harvesting the grains. They made it in time for the lull in the eighth month,

giving the six prefectures that were about to supply military grains time to catch their breath.

Wang Xian hurriedly stood up to bow in return. "This humble subordinate was just following orders. It is all due to His Lordship's foresight."

"I heard Tantai Hu vented his anger on you?" Xiao Chiye, having not moved his chopsticks yet, said to Wang Xian with a smile.

"General Tantai is concerned about the war, so it's only natural for him to ask about the preparations. We had a pleasant talk in Dunzhou." Wang Xian knew that Tantai Hu was chosen by Xiao Chiye to head down to Dunzhou. He had military merits to his name, and he was also in the position to get his say in before Shen Zechuan, so of course Wang Xian could not offend him. "Those rumors are not to be believed."

Looks like this incident had really taken place.

This was not the first time Tantai Hu had clashed with the civil officials. He was impatient by nature, and he was Xiao Chiye's trusted aide. While in Dunzhou, he and the *yamen* functionaries could still mutually tolerate each other at first. His military reports were submitted directly to Shen Zechuan's desk, and he had no need to be supervised by the *yamen*. By all logic, there should not have been conflicts between both parties. However, the Dunzhou Garrison Troops, having been rewarded several times, boasted of being a branch of the Imperial Army. By the time of the Duanzhou battle, they were reveling in the height of their glory among the six prefectures' garrison troops. The preparations of military grains were a matter between Wang Xian and the various prefectures' Tax Circuit Intendants,<sup>79</sup> and despite that, Tantai Hu dared to interfere and concern himself with it.

When peace reigned in the world, discord between generals and ministers merely meant that they could not work together, but in times of turmoil, dissension was a critical issue that could affect the overall situation.

Kong Ling, being the insightful person he was, stepped forth to smooth things over. "General Tantai comes from the Imperial Army, and he has gone through thick and thin together with Libei. Long when Second Master decided to fight the Twelve Tribes, he had discussed with me the issue of military grains. Your Lordship, General Tantai has deployed troops to come to the rescue several times, so he's naturally more attentive when it comes to the military grains." He turned his head aside to smile at Yao Wenyu.

“Yuanzhuo and I often ask about the fortification of the city walls too after the fright we got from the defensive battle.”

The gentlemen laughed at this, and the atmosphere eased a little.

Yao Wenyu then said to Wang Xian, “Brother Minshen once served as the Ministry of Revenue Secretary. Censor-in-chief Cen often praised Brother Minshen for being efficient in his work, and it can indeed be seen from the preparation of military grains just how extraordinary Brother Minshen’s capabilities are.”

Yao Wenyu’s words were partially true. Wang Xian was indeed capable, but he was not that conspicuous. Xue Xiuzhuo, who often had dealings with the Ministry of Revenue at that time, was in Hai Liangyi’s good graces more. In addition, the Ministry of Revenue had always been under the control of the noble clans. So even when the Ministry of Personnel wanted to promote Wang Xian after taking the imperial censors’ testimonials into consideration, they could not manage to do so. But even if what he said was not true, Yao Wenyu had still accorded him the respect he was due.

Wang Xian had been an official in the capital for a long time, so how could he not understand? Yao Wenyu’s intent was Shen Zechuan’s intent. Since Yao Wenyu was willing to speak up to placate him, then he should leave it at that. The incident had already been made known, and His Lordship and Second Master would naturally have their own follow-up arrangements.

Wang Xian bowed. “How would I dare to accept praise from Yuanzhuo? This humble subordinate is truly unworthy.” With this, he relaxed a little and continued, “As for the military grains, this humble subordinate still needs General Tantai’s advice in certain aspects. Fortunately, the General did not mind and carefully analyzed the pros and cons with me. To tell Your Lordship and Second Master the truth, this humble subordinate might have managed all that relates to the military grains back in Qudu, but when all is said and done, I’ve never handled supplies over a long distance. It was all General Tantai who advised me in detail on issues such as the consumption of grain wagons and the increase and decrease of military supplies.”

Kong Ling cast a glance at Zhou Gui, who was a short distance away, and inwardly lamented with a sigh, as expected from an official from the capital; smart and perceptive, he can get his message across in much fewer words.

Zhou Gui was also here regarding the preparations of military grains, although he had arrived several days before Wang Xian and Yu Xiaozai. At present, he was sitting in his seat listening carefully to the conversations, finding this Wang Xian to be measured in his conduct and tactful with his words. He could not understand why Chengfeng was looking at him.

They discussed a little more about official matters, and Shen Zechuan then invited Wang Xian to take a seat, thereby signaling the start of the feast.



When they returned to their room at night, Xiao Chiye slipped out of his clothes, his expression one of displeasure.

Shen Zechuan spoke as he switched out of his shoes. “You know how Laohu is; he’s not one to become arrogant because of his achievements.”

Xiao Chiye was still in the midst of disrobing. “The Dunzhou garrison troops are all soldiers recruited from the two prefectures of Fanzhou and Dengzhou, and there are a number of bandits among them. It will not bode well if military discipline is lacking.”

Shen Zechuan saw the candlelight reflected on the side of the wolf on Xiao Chiye’s back, looking very awe-inspiring indeed, so he stretched out a finger and poked it.

Xiao Chiye backhandedly grabbed hold of it and gave it a squeeze. He continued, “I know Laohu will not get all puffed up with his achievements, but the fear is that he might get egged on by others to have the Dunzhou Garrison Troops emulate the Imperial Army.”

The Imperial Army was a slippery bunch who only knew to skive on the job, but that was only when there was nothing else going on. When there was really a war impending, they were the first to draw their blade and charge onto the battlefield. The Imperial Army dared to play the ruffian because they were not ruffians at all. All the 20,000 men were soldiers that Xiao Chiye went to great lengths to select. They were all from proper military households,<sup>80</sup> and they were naturally a leg above the others when trained. The original batch of soldiers from the Imperial Army in Qudu were once given the cold shoulder, and that had built up their strength of character. They knew when to go all out and when to pull back, and that was definitely not something the Dunzhou Garrison Troops and the like would be able to do anytime soon.

“This time, I’ll lead the Libei Armored Cavalry to advance from the east. If Qudu plans to seize the opportunity to attack Zhongbo,” Xiao Chiye turned back, “the Dunzhou Garrison Troops are all that you will have to rely on.”

Yin Chang’s death in battle was undoubtedly a heavy blow. The Cizhou Garrison Troops that were just beginning to take shape now needed a new commander, but scouting for a suitable candidate took time. The Duanzhou Garrison Troops had taken a beating and suffered casualties, while the Fanzhou and Dengzhou Garrison Troops had only been recently established. The only ones that could be truly put to use were the Dunzhou Garrison Troops and Imperial Cavalry, and even then, the Imperial Cavalry were low in numbers.

“Tantai Long could die for Dunzhou, and so can Tantai Hu.” Shen Zechuan tilted his head up to look at Xiao Chiye. “Don’t worry about the rear as you advance eastward. I naturally have my own means.”

“The Eight Great Training Divisions often carry the reputation for being incompetent, but Han Cheng is now dead, and the new viceroy is still unknown.” Xiao Chiye’s eyes betrayed his worry. “If Xue Xiuzhuo has a good candidate...”

Without the vise grip of the noble clan, the Eight Great Training Divisions could re-recruit.

“I’ll leave 5,000 Imperial Army soldiers to you,” Xiao Chiye said.



Several days later, Tantai Hu hurried to Duanzhou as he was ordered to. The moment he stepped into the residence, he fell to his knees before Xiao Chiye.

“Master...”

Tantai Hu had yet to say his piece when Xiao Chiye said, “You are now His Lordship’s general.”

Tantai Hu lowered his head and changed his tune. “Second Master! Did some shitty official lodge a complaint against me here? They came into the territory to prepare military grains and still wanted to audit Dunzhou’s grains and land tax ledgers. Wang Xian accused my Dunzhou Garrison Troops of squandering public funds right in front of so many people in the *yamen*!” He raised his head in indignation. “Second Master, of the garrison troops in the six prefectures, our Dunzhou Garrison Troops is the one that can provide timely assistance. In order to fight the Biansha baldies, we



provide reinforcements all around, so our military expenditure will definitely be much higher than others! Does he have to go harping on and on and on about this? His Lordship is aware of this too!”

With one arm propped up on his knee, Xiao Chiye leaned sideways as he turned his thumb ring and said nothing in reply.

Chen Yang, who was waiting in attendance at the side, signaled to Tantai Hu with his eyes several times, but the latter refused to look at Chen Yang at all.

Tantai Hu knew what Xiao Chiye’s temper was like, but he was furious deep down. Forcing his anger down, he continued, “If Wang Xian has something to say, then say it to my face! Why stoop so low to frame me behind my back? What’s the fucking difference between him and those officials shamelessly currying favors for personal gains in Qudu? He said I squander public funds. Bah! And what about him wasting grains in Chazhou with Luo Mu?!”

“You find it a gross injustice.” Xiao Chiye raised his eyes.

Tantai Hu saw Xiao Chiye’s expression and could not help but feel a lump in his throat. “I brave untold dangers with Second Master, so how can they trample over me like this?! His Lordship knows of the account too, yet he doesn’t reprimand that Wang Xian. I, I can’t take it lying down!”

“You can’t take it lying down?” Xiao Chiye said in a sudden, frosty tone. “And so you had someone oust Wang Xian from the *yamen*? Is that your area of jurisdiction? When I transferred you to Dunzhou, Lanzhou made it clear that the civil administration doesn’t outrank you, and likewise, you don’t outrank them either!”

Tantai Hu’s chest heaved. “Even so, he can’t speak that way and cause the brothers under my command to be disillusioned!”

“I’ve looked through the accounts of the Dunzhou Garrison Troops. After the battle in Duanzhou, you transferred troops back to the city and did nothing else but first call together the local gentry to wine and feast.” Xiao Chiye’s expression was gloomily somber. “The money for the open banquet where guests are served as they arrive comes from Dunzhou’s public funds. How very impressive of you, Tantai Hu. His Lordship rewarded the Dunzhou Garrison Troops handsomely back in Duanzhou, but you know not to be content, and you even have to slap your own face in an attempt to impress beyond your means<sup>81</sup> by rewarding the soldiers with a feast. If you ask me, you’re the one who disillusioned me more!”

“Look at how easy it was for Yin Chang to take down Fanzhou back then. When the Cizhou Garrison Troops returned, His Lordship hosted a banquet to reward them, but when it came to the Dunzhou Garrison Troops, we only get a monetary reward.” Tantai Hu forced his voice down. “Second Master, can several taels of silver buy the lives of my brothers? It’s on behalf of His Lordship that I’m—”

Xiao Chiye abruptly jolted to his feet, and his shadow instantly enveloped Tantai Hu.

“Second Master!” Chen Yang dropped to his knees with a thud. “He’s simple-minded, and he indeed did it just for that meal! Nevertheless, squandering state funds is wrong of him. Second Master may just punish him!”

The freedom that Shen Zechuan gave to Tantai Hu was an act of kindness, but Tantai Hu could not hold this kindness hostage to make demands. Today, he dared to take the decision in his own hands because of his discontent, so he could very well disregard His Lordship and overstep his authority to take action tomorrow. He had several conflicts with the civil officials several times, and each time, Shen Zechuan had suppressed it without so much as a word, all in consideration for Xiao Chiye.

Tantai Hu knew he had misspoke out of turn in his desperation. He kept his head lowered, but could not bring himself to plead for mercy.

“Give him the ledger of the sealed granary in Dunzhou.” Xiao Chiye held up Langli Blade and wore it at the side of his waist. “Let him see this piece of land that Tantai Long defended with his life.”

Chen Yang took down the ledger and presented it before Tantai Hu.

“*Your soldiers*,” Xiao Chiye stressed these two words, “could eat well because the commoners of Cizhou and Dunzhou tightened their belts to make every money and every grain count. There are all kinds of delicacies at the open banquet, but my Lanzhou, in his sickness, is still eating wild vegetables from Duanzhou with the various advisors.”

Tantai Hu looked at that ledger book in detail, and his eyes could not help but reddened. He had realized the errors of his ways, although he still attempted to argue, “The granaries were in abundance the last I saw them in Dunzhou...”

Xiao Chiye whistled, raised an arm to receive Meng, and left without so much as a look back.



Credits: Thank you fukixie, [AliceLiddell](#), and [MaruChan](#) for pointing out the wonky footnote and typo! <3

## ◇ CHAPTER 264: SHAO CLAN ◇



The preparations for the military expedition concluded at the beginning of the ninth month, and Chen Yang and Guo Weili set off first together with the army provisions. The bridleway at Mount Luo, having already been restored, led the Zhongbo grain wagons directly from Dunzhou to Mount Luo and then from Mount Luo to the Shasan Camp. Large numbers of troops from the various camps were mobilized, with Zuo Qianqiu and Zhao Hui stationed at Shayi and Sha'er Camps for defense. This time, Xiao Chiye took with him 90,000 elites from Libei.

“You are shouldering the army provisions alone this time.” There were no traces of Xiao Jiming’s illness to be seen from the way he was all neatly dressed in his regular wear. He looked far into the distance at Hongyan Mountains. “When A-Ye returns in triumph, Libei shall have to give our proper thanks to Zhongbo.”

“Amu’er has wild ambitions. If we don’t wipe him out in one fell swoop, he will still stage a comeback again in the future, and when that time comes, Duanzhou will be the first to bear the brunt of his attacks. This punitive expedition is also for Zhongbo’s sake.” Shen Zechuan turned aside. “Furthermore, the tenth month is when the common folks have the spare time to supplement their family expenses and when the six prefectures can focus on the construction of fortifications. A-Ye’s deployment of troops now will not hold the commoners up from plowing the lands, at least not until the third month next year.”

The caress of the wind sent Xiao Jiming's sleeves and robe fluttering, revealing the arm guards on both his wrists. "He is already a chief commander now."

Shen Zechuan could often feel Xiao Chiye stroking his cheek every night. No matter what tasks the latter had, as long as it was unnecessary, Xiao Chiye would rather remain at home.

He wanted all too much to gaze upon Lanzhou day and night.

"The sharp edge of a treasured sword comes from honing it."<sup>82</sup> The expression in Shen Zechuan's eyes was complicated as he looked at Hongyan Mountains. "My only concerns are the complex terrain and bad weather. The expedition will prove arduous beyond imagination."

"There's Lu Guangbai at the side to assist A-Ye. You don't have to over-worry." Xiao Jiming looked at Shen Zechuan. "I heard from Yizhi that you were bedridden after the battle of Duanzhou, having been badly injured. With the sudden decrease in the Libei Armored Cavalry now, all that's left to watch over Duanzhou is Wu Ziyu who is stationed in Mount Luo. If anything were to happen, you can only go to him for reinforcements."

Of the 120,000 Libei Armored Cavalry, only 30,000 remained. Dajing was a large territory, and the various camps did not have enough manpower remaining for defense. It was also quite laborious to mobilize and assemble the forces, so before Xiao Chiye returned, Shen Zechuan only had the Dunzhou Garrison Troops, Imperial Cavalry, and 5,000 Imperial Army for self-defense.

Shen Zechuan's brows creased slightly into a frown as he asked, "Has *dage* heard rumors?"

"When the noble clans interfered in state affairs in the past, they had the exceptional talents of Qudu suppressed in places you can't see, and now," Xiao Jiming smiled at Shen Zechuan, "it's time for them to step forth and show their worth."



Dripping the melting candle, Qiao Tianya drew out a rabbit from the edge of the candlestick. From time to time, he cast a glance at the inner chamber. Gao Zhongxiong was sitting in there too.

Yao Wenyu was always wielding his brush writing with fervor of late. The time he spent sleeping grew increasingly shorter. Several times Qiao Tianya lifted the hanging screen to enter, and all he could see was Yao

Wenyu bent over the table until daybreak. The pages on the table were all a mess, although the bookshelves at the side grew increasingly packed.

“The reason the Imperial College assisted Xue Yanqing is that he removed the noble clans from office,” Yao Wenyu said. “The situation in the tenth month is still an unknown, but if Second Master’s expedition goes smoothly, then by the eleventh month, Qudu will no doubt issue an official denunciation and call to arms.”

Gao Zhongxiong said, “When the time comes, they will definitely make a big issue of Shen Wei’s troops’ defeat.”

“That’s right.” Yao Wenyu dipped his brush in ink, but did not put it to paper.

The difficulty here lay in the fact that Shen Wei’s military defeat was conclusive beyond doubt. So unless Shen Zechuan was willing to twist the narrative and shove the responsibility for Shen Wei’s crimes onto Hua Siqian, he would have to suck up the denunciation in both words and writing, no matter how he refuted it.

“I spoke to Mister Chengfeng earlier about this matter, but made no headway.” At this point, it was in the dead of night, and all was silent. With his arm resting on the desk, Gao Zhongxiong sighed at Yao Wenyu. “If ‘Shen Wei’ were to be replaced with ‘Ji Gang’, we can claim that His Lordship is Ji Gang-shifu’s youngest son. Back then, when Duanzhou was attacked by the enemies—”

Yao Wenyu waved his hand and said, “Back then, Xiao Jiming rendered assistance to Duanzhou and personally verified His Lordship’s identity. The Imperial Bodyguards later went to Dunzhou to investigate it thoroughly. His Lordship’s name is on the Shen clan’s clan register. Besides, His Lordship resembles his mother, and there will always be former acquaintances in Qudu who still remember Bai Cha’s charms.”

“Then what can we do?” Gao Zhongxiong asked. “It will be off to a bad start for us when the denunciation is released and public sentiment gets whipped up to an all-time high.”

Several times, Yao Wenyu wanted to put brush to paper, but he did not move. Ink dripped onto the paper.

“Let me think about it,” he said.

It was getting late now, and Gao Zhongxiong could not hold Yao Wenyu up from resting any further. He stood up and prepared to leave, but on seeing Yao Wenyu deep in silent thought, he advised, “The cart will find

its way round the hill when it gets there.<sup>83</sup> Look at how unwilling the people of the six prefectures were to acknowledge His Lordship initially, but they are now completely won over, aren't they? Clearly, there will be a solution to this matter!"

"That's because His Lordship defended the city gates. He was willing to undergo hardships together with the six prefectures." Yao Wenyu set down the brush. "It's late. You should return early. It's not too late to discuss again tomorrow."

So Gao Zhongxiong bowed and excused himself.

The beaded curtain swayed gently. The candle in Qiao Tianya's hand was about to burn out. Seeing Yao Wenyu remaining fixed in place, he said, "It's true that His Lordship is a descendant of the Prince of Jianxing, but it's also true that His Lordship has reclaimed the wastelands in the six prefectures and implemented the census registers." Drop after drop, the melted candle swallowed up the candlestick. He continued, as if off-handedly, "However, the authenticity of the current emperor's origins is a different story altogether."

The gears in Yao Wenyu's mind clicked in place. He turned his head over.

"The thing about playing chess," Qiao Tianya blew out the candle, "is that you have to seize the advantage by making the first move."



Qudu was stiflingly hot in the ninth month. After being dismissed from court session, Cen Yu saw Chen Zhen at the entrance of the palace. He walked over and said in surprise and doubt, "I don't usually see you around, and yet you're waiting for me here today. Is something the matter?"

On hearing him, Chen Zhen raised an arm and gestured for Cen Yu to get on his horse carriage first. Once both men settled down in their seats, he stroked the beard he had grown and said, "I'm here to sound you out. A month ago, the Eight Great Training Divisions recruited new soldiers and enlisted the young and strong from the eight cities. There are currently 40,000 Capital Command Troops. What plans does Boran have for these 40,000 Capital Command Troops?"

Cen Yu gathered up his sleeves and said curiously, "Then you should go look for him. The commander of the Capital Command Troops is supposed to be nominated by your Ministry of War to begin with. Why? You have no candidate?"

“I’ve assumed office as the Minister of War for nearly thirty years. Whether it’s the Four Generals of Yongyi or the Four Generals of Xiande, they all come recommended by me, so how could I not have a candidate in mind?” Chen Zhen looked to be in a spot. “It’s just that the situation is different this time.”

“Different how?”

“This person I’m planning to recommend,” Chen Zhen said, “is a steamed bun seller.”

Even Cen Yu himself looked astonished.

“Xunyi, this matter is of utmost importance. I hope you can work with me to persuade Boran. Hua Siqian persecuted the loyal and the virtuous, so it indeed can’t be helped that Qudu has no generals. Now that the new emperor is sensible and wise, she will surely be able to exonerate former ministers who have suffered injustices!” Chen Zhen had always been cautious and meticulous when he carried out his duties in the emperor’s presence. He lifted the hem of his robe and bowed to Cen Yu in the cramped, narrow interior of the carriage. “During the reign of Yongyi, the Hua and Pan factions colluded with Ji Lei to frame the Eastern Palace for conspiring against the state. The crown prince slit his own throat in Zhaozui Temple, and there were countless casualties, injured and dead, among the Eastern Palace subordinates. Former officials from the Ministry of War also had their entire families executed and properties confiscated for this reason. Wasn’t that exactly the case for Shao Chengbi and Qiao Kanghai?”

“The empress dowager is already dead. I fear even Her Majesty will have misgivings bringing up and overturning the verdict for the old Eastern Palace case! Moreover, no one from the Shao and Qiao clans survived. What are you going to do?” Cen Yu suddenly remembered something. “Xingzhi, don’t tell me you...”

“Shao Chengbi is my elder brother-in-law.” Chen Zhen set his hands on both knees. His eyes, when raised, were pitch dark. “When the family properties were sealed off for confiscation, I bribed a warden from the Ministry of Justice and had him hidden in Qudu.”

The color drained from Cen Yu’s face.

“He endured humiliation and dragged out an ignoble existence for twenty-seven years—all just for this day.”





**Author's Note:**

For the relationship between the Shao clan and Chen Zhen, refer to [chapter 145](#).

Thank you for reading.

(Or just use the [character search](#) :V)

## ◇ CHAPTER 265: CHENGBI ◇



Under cover of night, Ge Qingqing went to the steamed bun stall at Zhaozui Temple he had to pass by to buy buns. He stood before the stall and set aside a few coins from his palm. “Old sir, please give me two buns.”

The old man of this steamed bun stall had poor vision, with one eye blinded. He turned his head aside slightly, as if trying his best to listen to what Ge Qingqing was saying. When Ge Qingqing was done, the old man lifted the lid of the steamed bun bamboo steamer<sup>84</sup> and wrapped up the last two steamed buns with the oil paper before handing it over.

“Thanks,” Ge Qingqing said.

The old man’s voice was very hoarse as he said, “For an old customer. No charge.”

Ge Qingqing was in the midst of giving him the money when he froze in mid-action. He jerked his eyes up to stare at the other man. More than half of the lanterns on the streets had gone out, leaving only a lantern in the last throes of its life hanging a short distance away, casting a long oblique shadow from the side of the steamed bun stall.

Back then, when Ge Qingqing was in Qudu, he loved to come here to buy steamed buns as a treat to his fellow comrades. It wasn’t that the steamed buns here were delicious, but because he could head directly to Zhaozui Temple from here. He had grown himself a short beard stubble now, and was no longer as delicate and clean-cut as he had been before. Most of all, he carried himself differently, no different from the common merchants, but this blind old man could still tell who he was.

“Oh, you remember me?” Ge Qingqing looked as if he was asking off-handedly.

Holding the steamed bun steamer in his arms, the old man hobbled—he was a cripple to boot. He set the steamer back in place, dragged out the water basin under the table, and bent over to toss all the dirty bowls and chopsticks in.

“You came here yesterday,” he answered.

Ge Qingqing took a bite of the steamed bun. “You’ve got the wrong person.”

The old man washed the bowls and did not answer again. Ge Qingqing simply stood here and finished up the buns before fishing out a handkerchief to wipe his hand as he walked. The wind, carrying with it a faint fragrance of rouge, sent the remaining lantern swinging noisily. Right before Ge Qingqing’s figure was about to enter the darkness, he turned around and tossed the copper coins in his palm over. The copper coins clinked crisply as they landed on the greasy tabletop. He stuffed his handkerchief back in place and left.

The old man washed the bowls alone. Only when it was almost dawn that he put the bowls and chopsticks neatly away. The vegetable vendor next to him pushing a single-wheel cart<sup>85</sup> greeted him and shouted, “Uncle Cheng, opening for business so early?”

The old man pulled off the towel on his shoulder and wiped his sweat as he said, “I’m quitting.”

“Quitting?” The vendor set down the cart, rested his arm against the edge of the table, and asked, “Why, though?”

The old man tossed the towel onto the table, but did not touch the money Ge Qingqing left. He looked at the end of the street. “I have another job now.”



Li Jianting dozed off, and the book in her hand slipped down to her lap. A sudden weight on her shoulders instantly jolted her awake. She slapped away Fuman’s hand and bellowed, “The audacity of you!”

With the blanket in hands, Fuman kneeled and raised his hand to give himself a slap on the mouth. “This humble slave deserves a slap for disturbing Your Majesty’s rest! I ought to be slapped!”

Seeing that it was Fuman, Li Jianting tilted her face back as if relieved.

After Fuman was done hitting himself, he sneaked a glance at Li Jianting and said, "There are ice basins prepared in this hall, so it's very cool. If Your Majesty is tired, this humble slave will help you inside for a rest."

Without waiting for Li Jianting to answer, Fuman made to stand up to assist her.

"Kneel!" Li Jianting hissed through clenched teeth.

Fuman hurriedly kneeled back in place with both hands carrying the blanket. Aggrieved, he said, "Your Majesty, Your Majesty, please be appeased. This humble slave only did so in a moment of anxiety, as concerned as I am for Your Majesty's esteemed health."

Hearing Fuman's voice reminded Li Jianting of men. She moved to pick up the book in her lap, only to realize that her hand was trembling.

Fuman moved forward on his knees and said in an attempt to ingratiate, "Your Majesty mustn't get angry because of this humble slave. Your health is of utmost importance."

Li Jianting composed herself and schooled her expression, making it such that she would not need to go to the extent of standing up and withdrawing in avoidance. She clutched the book tightly, her expression slightly softening as she said amicably to Fuman. "I had a nightmare from which I had yet to fully wake up from earlier. I must have frightened you. You may rise."

It was only when Fuman saw Li Jianting's neutral expression that he set his mind at ease and stood up. "It's cold here. The next time Your Majesty feels tired, just summon this humble slave."

"Teacher is coming in a while." Li Jianting tossed the memorials to the side before Fuman went up to her. "Why aren't you waiting in attendance at the office compound?"

All Fuman was thinking of was landing a promotion and making a fortune, so he did not notice Li Jianting's actions. He bowed in congratulation. "This humble slave is here to report the good news to Your Majesty!"

"The grains and tax ledger from Juexi are here?" Li Jianting asked.

"Not yet. The relay station said it's already on the way, so presumably, these couple of days," Fuman said. "What this humble slave wants to tell Your Majesty is that the monthly accounts the palace granaries worked out reveal an earning of 80,000 taels of silvers for Your Majesty."

Li Jianting did not expect this. Surprised, she asked, "... Didn't the custodian of the palace granaries just assume office?"

"That's right, Your Majesty, and he was recommended by this humble slave." Fuman beamed with joy. "He's His Excellency Xue Xiuyi, who formerly held a post in the Ministry of Revenue."

*Xue Xiuzhuo's eldest brother.* The expression in Li Jianting's eyes grew slightly darker.

"If you ask me, the work His Excellency Xue did in the past was really a waste of his talents!" Fuman said. "He has only just assumed office, and already, he knows to tap new sources of income and reduce expenses. He even keeps the officials and merchants from the other regions who enter the capital in line."

"How so?"

"Your Majesty, anyone who brings goods into the capital has to pay taxes." Fuman bowed over to whisper to Li Jianting. "This account is not an easy one to collect. There are too many dishonest people defaulting on their taxes. But as it turns out, Excellency Xue has a way to deal with them. He not only collected all the debts, but also made arrangements to bring in many a number of rarities into the palace."

The palace granary custodian managed the tributes that the various regions sent to Qudu every month. Half of the fruits and vegetables that the emperor in the palace ate came from here, and the custodian had to deal with the various merchants and local officials. The tax that Ge Qingqing paid when he entered the capital went here too. The palace granary was not high of rank, and the tax collectors under it were all minor functionaries who had close dealings with the eunuchs. Over time, the eunuchs came to have the final say.

"So much?" Li Jianting asked.

"This is still too little." Fuman worked it out for Li Jianting as he counted with his fingers. "Leaving the merchants from the eight cities aside for the time being. The merchants from the thirteen cities of Juexi and Hezhou are practically swimming in money, Your Majesty. Now that the rebels are running amuck, these opportunistic merchants are heading over to Zhongbo to do business, where they no longer need to be such a stickler for the rules of etiquette and the distinction between social ranks. They are even more extravagant with their food and clothes than the officials from the capital. These people bear to spend money on themselves, but they

begrudge handing money to the imperial court. They need someone to teach them a proper lesson and put them in their places.”

“Xue Pingjing is that impressive?” Li Jianting feigned ignorance. “I never heard of it before.”

“That’s because he was not put to appropriate use in the past.” Fuman flattered, “It’s all thanks to Your Majesty’s discerning eye for talents!”

Li Jianting saw Fengquan passing by the window and so knew Kong Qiu was here; thus, she said quietly to Fuman, “You did well on this matter. I shall meet him some other day.”

Fuman visibly beamed with pleasure as he retreated with the blanket in hand. When he stepped out, he only bowed to Kong Qiu while giving Fengquan a slight nod.

Outside, Fengquan respectfully announced, “Your Majesty, the Grand Secretary is here.”



Ji Gang rested his head against the rattan chair and slumbered in the courtyard. Xiao Xun and Jiran leaned over the sides of the rattan chair, stealthily drawing a mustache on Ji Gang’s face with a brush.

“*Anitabha*,” Jiran whispered. “A big tiger.”

“Grandpa is mighty, and the tiger is the mightiest.” Xiao Xun gave the mustache uplifted corners.

Feeling his nose itch, Ji Gang let loose an earth-shattering sneeze, and the two children immediately hid behind the rattan chair. Not at all anxious to wipe his face, Ji Gang lifted Xiao Xun by the back of his collar and feigned anger as he pinched his own real mustache. “Disrupting my sweet dream. Watch how I deal with you both!”

Xiao Xun thought Ji Gang was going to hit him and hurriedly covered his head with his arms. Unexpectedly, Ji Gang raised him high and nuzzled his mustache that seemed to be dipped in ink against Xiao Xun’s cheek, smearing it all black.

When Huo Lingyun entered, he saw Xiao Xun and Jiran running wild around the rattan chair. He made his way under the eaves along the long walkway, where Fei Sheng was watching the boisterous scene with his arms folded.

“Look at the Hereditary Prince.” He said to Huo Lingyun. “He was so fair and clean when he came.”

Huo Lingyun nodded to acknowledge the sight and asked, “Is the advisor inside the room?”

It was then Fei Sheng retracted his gaze to look at Huo Lingyun. “Something’s the matter?”

Huo Lingyun took out the letter in his sleeve pocket. This was Ge Qingqing’s letter to the Imperial Cavalry, packed with information on the movements in Qudu. It had already been opened and read.

“Take a look,” he said.

Fei Sheng took the letter and read it.

Sunlight in the courtyard shone upon the eaves, accentuating the vibrancy and brightness of its new coat of paint and concealing the agedness of this residence.

Fei Sheng finished reading the letter. His expression was calm as he continued to ask, “Have you shown it to Qiao Tianya?”

“I haven’t seen him,” Huo Lingyun answered. “He led Squad Three out of the city first thing in the morning.”

“Hold on.” Fei Sheng folded the letter, then turned around to lift the bamboo blinds. Once he entered, he bowed and reported, “Master, Ge Qingqing’s letter is here. It’s about the transfer to the post of Viceroy of the Capital Command Troops<sup>86</sup> in Qudu. The Imperial Cavalry dare not take the decision into their own hands without Master looking it over first.”

Gao Zhongxiong stopped speaking, and Shen Zechuan raised his folding fan to gesture for Gao Zhongxiong to sit. His right hand, which had seen the bandage removed in recent days, nudged the folding fan as he said to Fei Sheng, “Present it to me.”

Fei Sheng opened the letter and set it down beside Shen Zechuan’s hand.

“Shao Chengbi...” Shen Zechuan said. “I remember no such person among the appraisals that were carried out during the reign of Xiande. Was Chen Zhen the one who vouched for him?”

“Master,” Fei Sheng turned to the side and reminded him. “It’s Shao from the Ministry of War.”

Shen Zechuan’s relaxed expression curbed a little. He read it again. “Shao from the Ministry of War during the reign of Yongyi?” He looked at Fei Sheng and swiftly thought back. “... This is Shao Chengbi, the Vice Minister of the Ministry of War who was thrown into prison when Ji Lei framed him after the Eastern Palace incident?”

“Master has an excellent memory. That’s him, all right,” Fei Sheng replied. “The Eight Great Training Divisions changed their name to the Capital Command Troops this time, and all military officers sixth-grade and above were dismissed from office and replaced. Candidates for the posts were to be recommended by Chen Zhen, the Minister of War, and vetted by the Grand Secretariat ministers, and the viceroy position was granted to Shao Chengbi, who has changed his name to ‘Chengbi’ now. Ge Qingqing said that this man has never left Qudu all these years; instead, he remained next to Zhaozui Temple selling steamed buns.”

“Shao Chengbi is Chen Zhen’s elder brother-in-law. It’s only reasonable for Chen Zhen to want to save him. But Shao Chengbi ought to be over sixty years old now.” Shen Zechuan closed the folding fan again. “Qudu tells him to take up post, but can he still get on a horse and wield a spear?”

“Not only that. Master, to pull the wool over others’ eyes, he muted himself with poison and even blinded himself in an eye,” Fei Sheng said.

As the Minister of War, Chen Zhen had a stable of able generals to recommend. This person was just like Cen Yu—they were both Bo Le with a discerning eye for talents.<sup>87</sup> However, Qudu was at its most critical period now. Did he give the position of Viceroy of the Capital Command Troops to the aged Shao Chengbi because Qudu indeed had no general to choose from, or because Shao Chengbi indeed had the capabilities to speak of?

“By using a former minister,” Zhou Gui looked at Shen Zechuan, “the emperor meant to redress the injustice the Eastern Palace suffered during the reign of Yongyi.”

“It’s not that easy,” Kong Ling said,

“The eight cities have still yet to eradicate the latent threat. If the emperor were to overturn the verdict for the Eastern Palace Crown Prince at this moment, she has to first take down the remaining members of the noble clans.” Yao Wenyu covered the teacup with the lid. “She has only just stabilized the situation. She cannot take this risk.”

Li Jianting made an example out of others as a warning, using the flogging punishment to frighten the Marquis of Helian so much he was paralyzed in bed. The other clans, too, immediately made up for part of their arrears in field taxes of their own initiative. Qudu had just gotten a breather and was now sparing some energy to rebuild the Capital Command Troops. If Li Jianting were to overturn the case at this moment, it would only prove to be detrimental to Qudu.



“The old case of the Eastern Palace implicates countless officials. To overturn the verdict, there have to be procedures in place and time to spare.” Yao Wenyu continued, “It must not be rushed.”

By this, he was also tactfully reminding Shen Zechuan not to rush it. The old case of the Eastern Palace was even thornier than the case of Shen Wei’s troop defeat.

“The Shao clan has been lying in hiding for a long time,” Shen Zechuan said. “We have to ask Qiao Tianya about this.”

Qiao Tianya returned at the hour of hai and removed his armor in the side hall before heading over to the principal room to meet Shen Zechuan. He read Ge Qingqing’s letter and said, “If it’s really Uncle Shao, the Beiyuan military drill grounds will have to increase its troops.”

“The Shao clan is affiliated with the Ministry of War, and Shao Chengbi was even its Vice Minister. He’s not only familiar with the deployment details of the various lands but also Zhongbo’s topographic map.” Shen Zechuan brushed aside the tea foam with the lid. “Ce’an just left, so Qudu will not dare to mobilize troops at this time, but we have to return to Cizhou before the tenth month.”

If Yin Chang was still alive, Shen Zechuan could remain firmly in place in Duanzhou. Without Yin Chang, Shen Zechuan had to head over to Cizhou to coordinate the deployment of Cizhou’s and Dunzhou’s garrison troops.

“That’s right.” Qiao Tianya casually folded the letter into a paper crane. “The Shao clan was already considered a military general household during the ‘Three Yao’ period. The Ministry of War is not like the other five ministries. Uncle Shao was promoted by the Grand Mentor to the position of Vice Minister. He had real capabilities to speak of.”

The “Three Yao” he spoke of referred to the three ministers of importance in the Grand Secretariat during the reign of Emperor Yong’an, all three of whom came from the Yao clan of Jincheng. Of them, Yao Wenyu’s paternal grandfather was the mainstay. That was the Yao clan’s golden age, and also the beginning of the Yao clan’s swift retreat whilst still at their peak.

“In his bid to seek peace and safety, my father switched sides to the Hua clan after the Grand Mentor was imprisoned. Uncle Shao thus broke off all ties with my father.” Qiao Tianya moved the paper crane to the side

of the candle and burned it. “When I left Qudu, I heard he had already been beheaded.”

“Since Shao Chengbi was promoted by the Grand Mentor, he should have addressed the Grand Mentor as ‘Teacher’,” Fei Sheng said. “Master is the Grand Mentor’s pupil. Looking at it this way, we have some connection to him too.”

“The number of people who have been promoted by the Grand Mentor during the reign of Yongyi is too many to count. Uncle Shao might be one of them, but he did not have any contact with the Eastern Palace or with the Grand Mentor. Besides, the Shao clan had a criminal charge slapped on them because of the Li clan, so naturally, it should also be the Li clan to redress the injustice they suffered.” Qiao Tianya wiped away the soot on his hands.

“But,” Zhou Gui said dubiously, “didn’t Yuanzhuo say that the emperor can’t take the risk at this time?”

“She is indeed ill-afforded to take the risk at this moment.” The teacup in Yao Wenyu’s palm had gone cold. “She only has to wait for Shao Chengbi to defeat Zhongbo’s Garrison Troops. Without external threats, won’t she then be able to get rid of the domestic threat that is the noble clans?”

Xiao Chiye was advancing east, Libei was empty, and Zhongbo had no reinforcements. If Qudu did not attack now, then when?

“If we really come to blows,” Zhou Gui said, “we still have Tantai Hu!”

“Laohu is impatient and rash by nature. He needs someone by his side supervising him.” Shen Zechuan perked up. “... Fei Sheng, give *shifu* a heads up. We are heading back to Cizhou.”



Credit: Thank you Lin for spotting the typos! <3

## ◇ CHAPTER 266: YOUJING ◇



Tantai Hu stood with his hand on his blade and listened as the messenger soldier finished his report, then nodded his head and turned around to enter the military tent. A few Dunzhou soldiers were inside smoking a pipe, and they were all Tantai Hu's trusted subordinates.

"His Lordship has orders," one of them asked, "but why is the general unhappy?"

"Stop smoking the damn pipe now. It's fouling up the air!" Tantai Hu took off his blade. "His Lordship wants me to mobilize troops to the Beiyuan military drill grounds."

The few soldiers did not dare to mess around when they saw Tantai Hu's dour expression and quickly snuffed out the pipe. The young man with the brittle, yellow hair who spoke earlier was called Liu Kong, who had been recruited from Fanzhou. He was a smooth talker, which was how he got into Tantai Hu's good graces and ended up following at Tantai Hu's side.

Liu Kong lifted the tent flap open to disperse the smell and walked over to Tantai Hu's side. With a grin, he said, "His Lordship's willingness to use the general means that he did not take Wang Xian's words to heart. He still believes the general."

"Of course His Lordship believes me." Tantai Hu set the blade on the table with a *clang*.

"So why is the general still angry?"

"His Lordship is sending Yu Xiaozai over to supervise the army. He's already on the way and should be able to arrive the day after tomorrow."

The blade scar on Tantai Hu's face twitched uncomfortably. "Second Master never had this rule before."

"The general is the second master's trusted aide." Liu Kong reined in his merry expression. "Not quite the same as His Lordship."

On hearing this, Tantai Hu's expression turned even more grave. After Xiao Chiye reprimanded him, he apologized to Shen Zechuan in Duanzhou and even subsidized the *yamen*'s public funds on his return to Dunzhou. If there was no war at the start of spring next year, his soldiers had to help the Dunzhou's *yamen* till the land. This was no big deal, but he could not forget that day. He was always worrying that Shen Zechuan would disdain him because of this incident and stop using him in the future. But now that Shen Zechuan was continuing to use him, he sent over a military inspector.

"General," Liu Kong lowered his voice, "His Lordship is skilled in the art of checks and balance—that is the art of the sovereign.<sup>88</sup> His Excellency Yu Xiaozai is the Surveillance Commissioner of the six prefectures. In coming here, his authority of office is immense, and he outranks you. Bear with it first, General. Wait for Second Master to return, and there will naturally be a chance for you to plead your case."

Tantai Hu felt increasingly uneasy upon hearing this. "Second Master is wholeheartedly devoted to His Lordship. He will not listen to me. I fear I might just end up adding fuel to the fire."

"How muddleheaded you are, General." Liu Kong laid it out for Tantai Hu. "It is for the precise reason of having you guard Cizhou that His Lordship transfers you to the Beiyuan military drill grounds. You are so brave and valiant, you will definitely emerge victorious, and Second Master will naturally be pleased when you win the battle. When you bring up the subject of removing the military inspector with Second Master again then, he will surely agree."

Feeling uncertain, Tantai Hu said, "It will probably be next year when Second Master returns."

"Isn't that just perfect? The safety of the six prefectures lies in the general's hands. What a meritorious service this is!" Liu Kong saw Tantai Hu's expression clearing up a little and continued, "Besides, even if Yu Xiaozai comes, you don't have to really fear him. He's an official from the capital, and he's a pupil of Cen Yu of the Chief Surveillance Bureau. Who knows if his loyalty to His Lordship is genuine? I'm not saying that you

judge the heart of a gentleman with the yardstick of a petty man, but with the war at hand, you can't help but be on guard."

"Youjing..." Tantai Hu was momentarily tongue-tied.

That was right. Yu Xiaozai was Cen Yu's pupil. Instead of returning to continue serving as an official of the capital, he remained in Zhongbo. His Lordship had utmost trust in him, but what if he was a spy sent by Qudu? Wouldn't His Lordship be in danger?

"You're right." Tantai Hu looked at the blade on the table. "Second Master entrusted the six prefectures to me, so I have to ensure the safety of His Lordship and Cizhou. There can only be one outcome for this battle, and that is—victory. If there is something amiss with Youjing when the time comes... I must never, never condone him!"

Liu Kong lit the pipe for Tantai Hu and handed it over to him. "I'll keep an eye on him for you, General."



With his head pillowed upon his arms, Xiao Chiye lay on the barren, deserted sand and listened to the lapping sound of the Chashi River. Silently, he counted the stars before his eyes.

He finished counting them once—it was Shen Lanzhou.

He counted them again—still Shen Lanzhou.

Lu Guangbai added a few firewoods to the campfire and turned his head to look to his left, which was quiet. "Did you bring along the warriors from the Huiyan Tribe to negotiate with Amu'er's six tribes?"

"There's no negotiation to be had with Amu'er." Xiao Chiye cast a glance at Lu Guangbai. "Second Master is now invincible. If there's to be any negotiation, he's the one who should come to me."

"You haven't grown taller," Lu Guangbai said, "but you've gotten a lot more arrogant with your manner of speech."

"Grow any taller, and I'll be towering into the sky." Xiao Chiye heaved a long sigh. "I'm already tall enough."

"The scout said that the Liaoying tribe stationed near Gedale has also withdrawn." Lu Guangbai picked up a sweet potato among the embers. "Amu'er is planning to concentrate his troops deep in the desert to deal with us."

"Right?" Catching a whiff of the sweet potatoes, Xiao Chiye abruptly sat up. Heedless of the scalding heat, he picked out a nice-looking one.

"Amu'er focused his entire army on Hasen as its core. Now that Hasen is

dead, how would the rest of the tribes still be willing to fight battles for him in the warring zone?”

“Evidently, military grains pose a headache to everyone,” Lu Guangbai said. “Without Hasen, the Hulu Tribe has to make plans for themselves. Even if they don’t submit to Amu’er, they can return to the banks of Lake Chiti to continue with their lives—I haven’t eaten yet, man.”

In order to compete with that last sweet potato with Lu Guangbai, Xiao Chiye ate too fast. It was so scalding hot that both of them were huffing.

“It’s all the same with or without the Hulu Tribe.” Xiao Chiye sucked in a light breath. “The oasis of the Hulu Tribe can’t afford to feed Amu’er’s troops from the six tribes. Why else would he be farming in Gedale? He means to have a quick battle as soon as Zhongbo’s supply transportation route is severed.”

“Same goes for mobilizing troops.” Lu Guangbai propped both hands on his knees, unable to bear the scalding heat. His tongue felt numb. “This is way too scalding.”

Chen Yang came over, carrying the water bags in his hands. Seeing that there were no more sweet potatoes in the fire, he tossed the water bags to them. His expression was indescribable as he said with mixed feelings, “My dear lords... there are still over ten of us here out in the cold...”

Xiao Chiye downed the cold water and reverted to his usual self. “The moment Hasen died, the Hanshe Tribe is no longer the same as they were before. If Amu’er wants to regain his reputation, he has to win battles to prove himself to the other tribes. He wants to be the great ruler of the desert, but so do others. The Hanshe Tribe has been lording it over in the desert for so many years. It is also for self-preservation that Amu’er is urgently transferring troops now that they have suffered a heavy blow.”

Lu Guangbai laughed in understanding. “You meant to have the Huiyan Tribe negotiate with the rest of the tribes with the intention of cutting off Amu’er’s external assistance while he is amassing his forces. You want to join forces with the other tribes to encircle and annihilate him.”

“The Huiyan Tribe has been benefitting from the mutual trade market all these years.” Xiao Chiye sealed the water bag tight. “They are no longer a small tribe.”

Holding his own water bag, Lu Guangbai watched the boundless expanse of wilderness together with Xiao Chiye. The sounds of waves from

the Chashi River roared incessantly—this was the echo of the lands throughout the ages.

“Once this battle is over,” Lu Guangbai said, “I’ll return to Qidong.”

“What?” Xiao Chiye said with a laugh. “Too used to eating the sands of Biansha?”

Lu Guangbai nodded, as if it was really the case. “The sands of your Libei are mixed with mud. It’s like drinking gruel.”

Having said that, both men looked aside at each other and promptly burst out into laughter.

Lu Guangbai drank a mouthful of water. “I admired your father the most in my youth. Every time I saw him, I always wanted to go over to your Libei and become a Libei Armored Cavalry. A pity my brothers at home all died later. My father was an old man at that time, and he was still rolling and crawling around in the sand. Other than me, there was no one else willing to remain in the Bianjun Commandery.”

Xiao Chiye bent his long legs to prop his arms up on them. “If it were me, I’d have long run away.”

“I really had that thought. Every time Qudu refused to give grains, I’d think of running. During the fourth year of Xiande, when we entered the capital, the emperor made me kneel at the entrance. At that time, I thought, *shit, if this goes on, I will become Shen Wei Number Two.*” Lu Guangbai sighed deeply. “Who knew I’d really run for real in the end.”

Remembering this incident, Xiao Chiye looked at Lu Guangbai. “At that time, Secretariat Elder Hai transferred grains to cope with the emergency, but the grains Qudu gave the Bianjun Commandery were all moldy grains. Lanzhou and I can’t figure it out. We thought Xue Xiuzhuo was the culprit, but the more we thought about it later, the stranger it felt to us.”

“I can’t figure it out either.” Lu Guangbai set down the water bag. “He forced Libei into revolting. There was no reason for him to force the Bianjun Commandery into revolting again.”

“If the Scorpion has the ability to swap out the grains,” Xiao Chiye said, “you must have come across them before.”

“I haven’t met that many officials in Qudu,” Lu Guangbai said. “On the other hand, I’ve met a bunch of eunuchs.”

Both men fell silent for a moment after he was done speaking.

Lu Guangbai jolted to his feet, and the water bag fell onto the ground.  
“The army-inspecting eunuch!”



Xue Xiuyi reclined in the *taishi* chair.<sup>89</sup> There were people beside him doing the accounting. He only had to sit and watch the entire process, and he would have been considered to have done his job. He rotated a pair of glass spheres<sup>90</sup> in his hand—this was an exquisite little plaything he had just obtained, a tribute the merchants specially offered to him.

“Soliciting help from potential backers?” Xue Xiuyi said. “Then why are you hiding in the back? Come over and make yourself clear. Which *yamen* do you want to work in?”

The eyes of the beardless man with head covering swiveled around. He moved in closer to Xue Xiuyi and covered his nose and mouth to whisper, “I’d like to implore Your Excellency to pass a message to the *Lao-zuzong*.”

On hearing this voice, Xue Xiuyi asked, “You’re a eunuch too?”

The man started acting self-consciously and hemmed and hawed.  
“Yes...”

Xue Xiuyi straightened up a little and had the people around him withdraw. He scrutinized the man with suspicion. “Stop covering yourself up. You have to let me see what you look like. If you look ugly as sin, however, a re-negotiation will be in order.”

The man moved his headscarf away and waited meekly for a moment. He did not hear a sound from Xue Xiuyi, so he raised his head and said with finesse, “Your Excellency doesn’t recognize this humble slave? Your Excellency, this humble slave is Yingxi, who served the *Lao-zuzong*. During the reign of Tianchen, the former emperor appointed me as the army-supervising eunuch in Qidong!”

Xue Xiuyi indeed did not recognize him. He was an insignificant, low-ranking official in the past, so how would he have the chance to come into contact with these eunuchs? Thus, he hedged his way through, “Oh yes, yes. I’ve seen you before.”

Xue Xiuyi’s eyes twinkled, but then, he recalled in a split second that the army-supervising eunuch to Qidong had been detained by Qi Zhuyin and had been long dismissed from office after his return to Qudu. He instantly turned hostile. “Weren’t you arrested by the Ministry of Justice?!”



“Oh, goodness.” Yingxi was so anxious he nearly stomped his foot. “That’s old news. There’s already a new emperor now. That bit of crime this humble slave had is already ancient history!”

Xue Xiuyi was doubtful. For starters, he was afraid that Yingxi was lying to him, and he would end up creating trouble for the *Lao-zuzong* if he were to get Yingxi into the palace. He was also afraid that Yingxi had yet to be fully exonerated of his crime, and if the Ministry of Justice were to investigate and trace it back to him later, he would be inviting trouble to himself for nothing, wouldn’t he?!

“It’s on the *Lao-zuzong*’s orders that this humble slave has come looking for Your Excellency.” Yingxi took out an authority token from under the folds of his clothes on his chest and presented it with both hands to show Xue the Eldest. “Your Excellency, please take a look. This is a token from the inner court.”

Xue Xiuyi carefully looked over the token with help from the candlelight. There was really the name “Yingxi” behind it. He clutched the token, and without returning it, asked, “Have you already cleared the Ministry of Justice? Entering the palace is not like going elsewhere. If anything goes wrong, even the *Lao-zuzong* himself can’t save you, much less me.”

“It’s cleared.” Fearing he would not believe him, Yingxi continued, “Can the person the *Lao-zuzong* find be fake? If so, this humble slave would not be standing before Your Excellency.”

Xue Xiuyi did not want to offend the eunuchs. If this Yingxi was really Fuman’s adopted son or grandson, he would be hard-pressed to explain himself to Fuman if he were to stop Yingxi outside the palace. After a moment of hesitation, he said, “Wait for the time being. A *gonggong* will be coming out a few days later to make purchases. He will be coming to our palace granary to select seasonal vegetables. If it’s convenient then, you can follow him in.”

Delighted, Yingxi nodded repeatedly.

Feeling uneasy, Xue Xiuyi pressed, “This is the *Lao-zuzong*’s arrangement.”

“Rest assured, Your Excellency.” Yingxi stuffed a bag of gold into Xue the Eldest’s hands. “This humble slave is clean. I guarantee I won’t give you or the *Lao-zuzong* any trouble.”



A drizzle descended upon Dunzhou a few days later. Rain pelted against the green leaves, drenching the stone slabs on the bridgeway, until they turned a shade darker. Tantai Hu waited at the entrance for a long while with Liu Kong holding up an umbrella for him. He bristled in irritation.

“They said this morning he’d be here soon; why isn’t he here yet?!”

“Perhaps there was a delay on the way.” Liu Kong craned his neck to look around and saw a horse carriage coming their way through the rain.

“General, His Excellency Yu is here!”

Drenched by the rain, the horse’s mane was dripping wet; it stopped in front of Tantai Hu and shook its mane. Tantai Hu raised a hand to pat the horse on its neck, then said to the carriage driver, “It’s been a long journey. Lead the horse to the stable later and give it a good treat.”

As he spoke, he suddenly saw the curtains of the carriage lift slightly. Yu Xiaozai poked his face out and held his hands out together in greetings<sup>91</sup> towards Tantai Hu.

“We are all well-acquainted. There is no need for such pretentious greetings.” Tantai Hu glanced into the carriage as he spoke. “Wang Xian didn’t come?”

“His Lordship has returned to Cizhou, and Duanzhou still has to supply grains to Second Master. Someone has to be present to keep an eye on it, so he stayed behind in Duanzhou.” Yu Xiaozai got off the carriage, and the soldier by the side moved to hold up an umbrella for him. He took it over and held it up himself, shielding Tantai Hu as both of them walked in together.

“You are a general of Dunzhou, and he is the treasurer of the six prefectures,” Yu Xiaozai said. “Laohu, you can afford to offend anyone but not the money-keeper.”

As the rain drummed noisily against the oil paper umbrella, Tantai Hu said, “How would I dare offend him? When he comes to my Dunzhou in the future, I will deploy a procession of troops ten *li*<sup>92</sup> long to welcome him and ensure that I speak to him with utmost gentleness.”

Yu Xiaozai knew he was still sulking, so he said in persuasion, “Laohu, please don’t think that we make little of military officers; that’s all on the bad practices in Qudu. Now that the six prefectures are stabilized, all the various departments have to go by the book. Let me speak out of turn to say a word to you. When it comes to the military grains preparations, you are too easily blinded by your own concern for the matter. You take the military

grains into consideration because of your loyalty to Second Master. No one would bear to reproach you had it been anyone else, but since His Lordship clearly designated Brother Minshen to handle it,” The rain drenched Yu Xiaozai’s sleeve. He swapped over to the other hand and turned around to continue, “that means it’s a legitimate assignment he has been appointed to carry out. You asked him on the court of the *yamen*, but how can he answer you there? The grains and land tax ledgers are confidential *yamen* documents. You can’t lay them out in the open for a discussion.”

Tantai Hu could tell that Yu Xiaozai was here to play peacemaker in an attempt to clear the air between him and Wang Xian. Not that he had to keep dwelling on this matter; he just felt what Wang Xian did to be unethical. Couldn’t Wang Xian just say something in Dunzhou itself? He was still acting all affable when he left, but then he turned around and lodged a complaint about him to His Lordship!

“Brother Minshen is an official from the capital. He’s new here, and there will inevitably be some people who can’t accept him.” Yu Xiaozai spoke effusively. “You’re Second Master’s trusted aide, so he naturally does not dare to contradict you on the spot; he simply spoke the truth to His Lordship. He has rendered meritorious service in making preparations for the military provisions, and he is well-versed in economics and governmental affairs. His Lordship will most certainly put him with military administration. You are bound to run into each other often in the future. After all, when you mobilize troops in the future, you will have to discuss military provisions and military expenses with him. It’s inadvisable to let the situation deteriorate to the point it ends in a deadlock.”

Yu Xiaozai had a point, but his words left a bad taste in Tantai Hu’s mouth. Yu Xiaozai was clearly speaking up for Wang Xian for the unfair treatment the latter had received. It had not been easy for Wang Minshen, given that he was new here, but did that mean that he, Tantai Hu, deserved to suffer such humiliation? Just thinking about the grains and land tax ledger incident really made him fume. Wang Xian did not say a single word to him before he left, and no one in the Dunzhou *yamen* mentioned the public funds when he rewarded the garrison troops with a feast. He finally realized in hindsight that the Dunzhou *yamen* was using Wang Xian to marginalize him.

Yu Xiaozai understood it too. The Dunzhou *yamen* did not dare to stir up trouble with Tantai Hu head-on, so they kept humoring him. Tantai Hu

was the commanding general of Dunzhou, yet he had not even seen Dunzhou's grains and land tax ledger. This was the *yamen* officials setting him up for a fall, wasn't it? He was suffering in silence, unable to voice his grievances before Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye. His reprehensible deed in setting up that ostentatious feast, too, had mortally ashamed him.

But these were extraordinary times, and it was inadvisable to delve further into this matter.

Yu Xiaozai handed the umbrella into Tantai Hu's hand and spoke in all earnestness, "Laohu, you are straightforward by nature, and you only know how to advance but not retreat, so you will inevitably be on the losing end in matters like this. They are making things difficult for you for no other reason than because you have military power in hand. Let me give you a word of advice again. If you have no intention of being an official of the *yamen*, then don't mess with them in these waters. You have illustrious military merits to your name, so His Lordship will not let you suffer a genuine grievance. Do you think His Lordship can't see what is going on this time? Second Master flew into such a rage, but His Lordship still let you return to Dunzhou untouched. Is he not backing you up by that? His Lordship is giving them a good rap on the head on your behalf! Don't you go getting into a sulk with His Lordship. Acknowledge your mistakes with respect and humility, and make up for the public funds in all conscientiousness. As long as you're willing to write a letter to bury the hatchet with Brother Minshen, I guarantee you that His Lordship will reward you within half a month."

Was it so easy to be an official of the capital? Those who said being officials of the capital was a cushy job had all been deceived by rumors in the streets. Any official who could gain a foothold in Qudu, regardless of seniority and family background, were all figures who had been through the period during the reign of Yongyi and Xiande when the Hua and Pan clans interfered in state affairs. They were discerning men who knew best to adapt to current circumstances. Yu Xiaozai was of humble origins. When the noble clans were in power, he worked in the localities, where he dealt with all sorts of local lowlifes. His appraisals were all outstanding. Cen Yu had promoted so many pupils, but only Yu Xiaozai could repeatedly undertake heavy responsibilities. His words to Tantai Hu were all heartfelt.

Tantai Hu's lips moved soundlessly, his anger all but choked in his throat.

Seeing Tantai Hu's gloomy expression, Yu Xiaozai knew he could still not swallow this anger. Hitting on a brainwave, he said, "If you could humble yourself to make peace with Brother Minshen, you'd be shutting up the others' mouth, wouldn't you? They ridicule you for being an ignorant and illiterate person like General Lu Meng from the southern state of Wu,<sup>93</sup> so don't let them get their way and show them what you are made of!"

Tantai Hu was impatient by nature, so it would not do to provoke him. However, he was simple-minded and bore no ill will. Once he was enlightened, he would be willing to do as advised. He tightened his grip on the umbrella and said in a rough voice, "Second Master disciplined me, and I know where my mistake lies. I shouldn't have held the banquet as I did, and I definitely have to make up for the public funds. I've even kowtowed back in Duanzhou, so apologizing to Wang Minshen is no big deal." He raised an arm to rub his scar. "I'll write a letter to Wang Xian tonight."

There were many puddles on the ground, and the clamor of the rain was so noisy Liu Kong could not hear their conversation. He held up the umbrella, unable to get too close. All he could do was follow them the entire way. Fortunately, it was not a long journey to make. Before he could keep away the umbrella upon arrival at the camp, Tantai Hu sent him off to prepare the pot.

"It's cold, and the journey is arduous. You and I still have to leave again for Cizhou tomorrow." Tantai Hu removed his outer robe and rolled up his sleeves. "Let's have hotpot tonight to warm ourselves up. Liu Kong, go get those rabbits I've hunted ready. Youjing and I will have them with wine."

Liu Kong acknowledged his orders. With deft moves, he helped Yu Xiaozai to remove his outer robe and hang it up on the small clothes rack inside the tent.

Rubbing his hands, Yu Xiaozai surveyed the tent and said cheekily to Tantai Hu, "This living quarter of yours is a tad too simple, isn't it?! I thought..."

Liu Kong retreated to the door and let down the tent flap, blocking out Yu Xiaozai's voice.



The roads were wet and slippery on rainy days, and the bridleway was bumpy. Shen Zechuan was initially playing chess with Yao Wenyu, but midway through the game, he got so dizzy he felt terrible. Fei Sheng lifted

the screen of the carriage a little, and it was only after he leaned against the window that he regained his composure.

“Youjing is quick-witted and resourceful.” Yao Wenyu looked at the rain. “He’s witty with his words, and he doesn’t put on airs. There is no better person than him to supervise the army; Your Lordship had made the right choice in sending him over.”

“Youjing can provide amusement when time permits, but he will never err when it comes to what’s crucial.” Shen Zechuan had broken out in a bit of a cold sweat as he leaned against a soft pillow. “He doesn’t speak outright in black and white terms as Zhou Gui does. He’s more diplomatic.”

Yao Wenyu gathered up his sleeves to put away the chess pieces.

Shen Zechuan listened to the damp and dense sound of the rain by the window, still pinching a chess piece between his fingertips as he tapped it against the edge of the table in tandem with the sound of the rain.

After a while, he said, “Water that is too clean has no fish, but it’s also vexing when it’s too murky.”<sup>94</sup>



## ◇ CHAPTER 267: CHRYSANTHEMUM TRIBUTE ◇



Qudu was due to appreciate the chrysanthemums in the ninth month,<sup>95</sup> but as Yongcheng was hit by a drought and the imperial court still owed part of the capital officials' monthly salaries, everyone inside and outside the palace complied with Li Jianting's decree and did not brazenly organize a chrysanthemum appreciation banquet.

Fuman had initially found some people to cultivate several hundred pots of precious chrysanthemums in his own residence, but now, he dared not send them in anymore.

During the third quarter of the hour of yin, Fuman woke up. As the junior eunuch waited on him, he rinsed his mouth and changed his clothes. Eunuchs had to stay close to their master's side to serve at all times, so naturally, they could not have any odor on them. Their collars were all false collars, so they could immediately swap them out when they got stained with sweat. Their socks and shoes were velvet with tight openings that did not make any sounds when walking.

Fuman cleaned himself up and dressed neatly, then set his authority token before his waist and strode out of the door. He saw there were still stars in the sky, so he went to the duty room close to Mingli Hall and asked a eunuch who waited in attendance in the bedchamber last night, "Did Her Majesty sleep well yesterday?"

The eunuch was in the midst of having breakfast with tea. Eunuchs like them did not dare to eat as they pleased while on night watch, for fear they

would need the lavatory at night and their breath would stink, so they only dared to have some snacks to fill their tummies before they went in. The eunuch was famished, but when he heard Fuman's inquiry, he hurriedly stood at attention with hands respectfully by his sides and replied, "To answer the *Lao-zuzong*, she slept decently yesterday, turning over four times. Contrary to expectation, she did not call for this humble slave."

Fuman estimated the time and reckoned that Li Jianting ought to have woken up by now, so he stood under the eaves and waited to be summoned. After a while, he saw Fengquan stepping out. Even so, Fuman merely smiled and nodded as a greeting of sorts.

As if he did not notice this, Fengquan bowed to him as per etiquette.

"Her Majesty had the mind last night to summon the *Lao-zuzong* to wait upon her." Bowing, Fengquan said unhurriedly to Fuman, "*Lao-zuzong*, a double blessing is about to descend."

Fuman could not figure out what Fengquan had up his sleeve. His suspicions were roused, and he did not dare to answer without thinking, so he merely gave an ambiguous reply, "I hope it is as you say."

Having said that, he did not wait for Fengquan to continue before he lifted the hem of his robe and entered Mingli Hall.

The hanging drapes in the bedchamber had just been bundled up, and the windows all around were wide open. Fuman could sense the chill from the falling frost in the early morning. With small, quick steps, he walked over to the bronze mirror, where he saw that Li Jianting was already done dressing and dolling up. Under normal circumstances, he was most certain to sing praises at this moment, but he was cautious today and merely said, "Your Majesty, breakfast is ready."

Li Jianting wore her usual expression, the flower embellishment between her forehead eye-catching as she held up the golden hairpin. "Just a light meal is fine."

"This humble slave dare not forget Your Majesty's instructions and has specially gotten the Court of Imperial Entertainments to choose the simple dishes to make." Fuman bowed and made to support Li Jianting. "It's just mini steamed twist rolls and silky jade tofu."

Li Jianting stepped out of the bedchamber. The memorials on her desk were all newly endorsed last night. She relooked over the pile that she had specially picked out.



“Tell the Grand Secretary later,” Li Jianting pried apart the twisted roll, “that the Grand Secretariat can skip the memorials paying obeisances; there’s no need to pass them on to me. Like this You Tan of Liuzhou in Juexi. He is so tediously long-winded in his memorials, and all he goes on and on spouting are words of flattery. What a waste of time.”

On hearing this, Fuman, who was serving Li Jianting as she had her meal, said with a smile, “This humble slave has also heard of this Excellency You. I heard this is how his memorials are. Even Secretariat Elder Hai couldn’t stand to read them in the past.”

Li Jianting did not answer. She finished her breakfast and hurried to attend the morning court session.

The topic of Libei’s advancement east was broached during the morning court session. The scouts in Dancheng had reported the increment of troops at the Beiyuan military drill grounds. However, before the Ministry of War was done presenting their military report, the Ministry of Personnel started bickering with the Ministry of Revenue, wanting the Ministry of Revenue to hurry up and pay out the arrears in monthly salaries. The Ministry of Revenue was at their wit’s end; they had no money, and they could not push the issue to Li Jianting. All they could do was endure the scoldings in silence. Midway through the rebuke, an imperial censor from the Chief Surveillance Bureau impeached the local officials for dereliction of duty in their negligence to administer public order—the new prefectural prefect of Huaizhou had not even taken office for half a month, and already a riot had broken out in Huaizhou.

“The monthly salaries were docked to provide aid relief to Yongcheng,” the official from the Ministry of Revenue said. “In times of national crisis, we ought to work as one for a common purpose. Your monthly salaries have not been issued, but the same can be said for the rest of us from the Ministry of Revenue. All of us are starving. How can you just rebuke us?!”

“You people have been auditing the accounts, and you have checked Dancheng and Wucheng. The properties of the Pan and Han clans have been sealed off for confiscation, and with the Fei clan of Chuancheng taking the lead, the rest of the remaining cities are now making up for the field taxes.” The official from the Ministry of Personnel retorted, “Going by the budget at the start of the year, there is enough to pay out the monthly

salaries at this point. So where's the money? Where has all the money gone? You have to give us an explanation!"

"First we have the passing of Her Majesty the Empress Dowager, followed by the ascension of Her Majesty the Emperor, so ask the Ministry of Rites, where has the money gone? They have all been used right where they are needed! There's also the renovation of the Imperial Ancestral Temple, and the reconstruction of the residential district. The Ministry of Works..."

"Stick to the topic of the monthly salaries," the official from the Ministry of Works butted in sharply. "Why digress?"

"We are upright men who fear no gossip. The accounts we investigated were all reviewed by the Ministry of Justice and the Court of Judicial Review, then audited by the Grand Secretariat and reported to Her Majesty. We have held nothing back." Liang Cuishan bowed to Li Jianting. "Your Majesty, the Ministry of Revenue's accounts are all submitted to the Grand Secretariat every month, with memorandums issued by the Grand Secretary and endorsement by Your Majesty. Every process goes strictly by the book and is carried out in stringent accordance with the rules..."

"Goes strictly by the book? Your Excellency Chongshen, I doubt that's the case." The imperial censor from the Chief Surveillance Bureau raised his hands to pay his obeisances. "Your Majesty, this humble subject is just about to impeach Xue Xiuyi, formerly of the Ministry of Revenue, for taking bribes!"

This one shout brought a solemn silence upon the entire hall. The few bunches of people who had started arguing all turned their heads over.

Xue Xiuzhuo stood silently among the crowd of ministers, his eyes never even twitching once.

Li Jianting cast a glance at Xue Xiuzhuo. After a moment's pause, she said, "Isn't Xue Xiuyi now the custodian of the palace granaries?"

"To reply Your Majesty, that is correct. This person has been bungling his work ever since he was in the Ministry of Revenue. He has slandered the imperial court repeatedly and has never been entrusted with heavy responsibilities." The imperial censor lifted the hem of his robe and kneeled before continuing, "That is, until a few months ago when Xue Xiuyi colluded with the merchants and took advantage of the general amnesty Your Majesty granted to bribe the palace eunuchs and obtain the post of palace granaries custodian."

The golden butterfly at Li Jianting's temple swayed lightly as she straightened up on her throne.

"Xue Xiuyi brazenly made a fortune in this position and gained himself three courtyards on Donglong Street. This person is shameless. He even collaborated with the palace eunuchs to falsify accounts and resold the treasures he pilfered from the palace granaries for a grand total of 200,000 taels!"

A clamor instantly broke out in the hall. Yongcheng's aid relief was merely 100,000 taels, and Xiao Chiye's bribery case that involved the Quancheng's silk during the reign of Xiande was only 8,000 taels. Who could have expected Xue Xiuyi to embezzle 200,000 taels less than three months after he assumed office?!

"R-rat..."<sup>96</sup> The long-time Grand Secretariat officials felt dizzy.

Li Jianting's expression grew increasingly darker. The treasures Xue Xiuyi resold netted 200,000 taels, but he had Fuman report 80,000 taels to her, which meant that they had misappropriated all the remaining 120,000 taels.

"This humble subject also wants to impeach the Vice Minister of the Court of Judicial Review, Xue Xiuzhuo!" The imperial censor switched targets and pointed directly at Xue Xiuzhuo. "Xue Xiuzhuo abuses his power and exploits public office for private gain! He is high of rank, yet he reflects not upon himself. He is in Your Majesty's favor, and yet he understands not Your Majesty's heart. He lets a rat into the granaries and acts in cahoots with Xue Xiuyi. He is truly most abominable, reprehensible, and condemnable!"

"The audacity!" Li Jianting snapped.

Everyone in the hall fell to their knees. It was so silent one could hear a pin drop.

Li Jianting stood up and turned to the side before the throne, saying as she pointed at the imperial censor, "As an imperial censor responsible for the important task of supervising and impeaching the various officials, you ought to verify the facts! You are keenly aware that you hold sway over the narrative presented to the imperial court, yet you use this as an excuse to discriminate against those who hold dissenting opinions from you. If you ask me, you're the abominable one!"

The rank of an imperial censor was not high, but he was a deterrent force to behold from top to bottom. Even Emperor Guangcheng did not dare

to rebuke the imperial censors back then; it was a one-way street where only the imperial censors could reprimand him, not the other way round. Except for that punk Li Jianheng during the reign of Tianchen who, in order to stabilize the situation during the bribery case, lost his temper at Fu Linye. Other than that, there had never been an emperor in Dazhou who dared to offend the imperial censors on the imperial court.

Sure enough, the imperial censor immediately said, "This humble subject has conclusive evidence, yet Your Majesty insists on siding with the criminal minister. Is that not a failure to distinguish between right and wrong, good and evil—"

"Xue Xiuzhuo is the Imperial Preceptor!" Li Jianting said frostily. "How can I allow you to bring such false accusations against my teacher?!"

Kong Qiu's heart sank. As he prostrated himself, he exchanged a glance with Cen Yu.

"Xue Xiuyi took bribes and perverted justice. I am now ordering the Ministry of Justice to investigate. You must get to the bottom of the matter as soon as possible. As for Xue Xiuzhuo," Li Jianting left with a flick of her sleeve, "It's all a bunch of crocks!"

"Your Majesty," the imperial censor said sorrowfully, "the Xue clan, if not eliminated, will go on to become a faction! He, Xue Xiuzhuo, is clearly the next Hua Siqian..."

Xue Xiuzhuo lay prostrated over the ground with his head lowered, never once saying a word.



As evening approached, it began to rain in Qudu too.

Fengquan waited in attendance outside Mingli Hall and vaguely heard Kong Qiu in the midst of remonstrating.

"Xue Xiuzhuo may be Your Majesty's teacher, but he's implicated in Xue Xiuyi's bribery case. According to the law, he has to be suspended pending investigation too," Kong Qiu said. "Your Majesty rebuked the imperial censor on the imperial court today, which runs counter to the late *Taizong's*<sup>97</sup> precepts. That truly should not have happened."

Li Jianting had remained silent after dismissing the court session. No matter how Kong Qiu spoke with urgency, she did not answer. Kong Qiu got up and bowed down. Seeing that Li Jianting had no wish to answer, he straightened up and bowed again.

“I have already made up my mind,” Li Jianting said. “The Grand Secretary need not persuade me any further. Fengquan, help the Grand Secretary away!”

The drizzle in Qudu continued uninterrupted. Fengquan supported Kong Qiu by the arm and personally held up the umbrella for him. Kong Qiu strode out of Mingli Hall. The strong wind stirred up several fallen leaves. He turned all of his exhortations into a single sigh and gently pushed Fengquan aside. Without even wanting the umbrella, he stepped into the rain by himself. Fengquan hurriedly lifted the hem of his robe and chased after him, holding the umbrella up high as he sent Kong Qiu all the way out.

On hearing the wind, Fuman, who was on the other side, hurried to Mingli Hall, where he kneeled even before he stepped through the door. The instant he kneeled, he wiped his tears with his sleeves. He wanted to cry injustice through the hanging screen, but he had not even opened his mouth when a teacup suddenly came hurtling towards him from the interior and smashed to pieces on the ground before him.

“You hanker after fame and position, and you colluded with an imperial court official to misappropriate treasures from the palace.” Li Jianting rebuked through the curtain. “Men, drag this deceitful jerk out!”

Fuman had heard the details of the dispute during the morning court session from his informant in the duty room. He hardened his heart and kneeled on those shattered porcelain pieces. With hands on the ground, he hastily kowtowed, “Your Majesty! Your Majesty, please hear this humble slave out. That Xue Xiuyi was transferred on the recommendation of the excellencies from the Ministry of Personnel. What has it got to do with lowly people like this, this humble slave? Oh, Your Majesty,” he cried out miserably, “what have I done to deserve such injustice?!”

Li Jianting brandished her sleeves and said nothing, looking as if she was still furious.

Fuman then kowtowed with loud thuds as he cried, “This humble slave’s lowly life is nothing to bemoan about. Your Majesty may just go ahead and punish me. However, the lords on the imperial court are all men well-versed in the classics. How can they trample upon this humble slave like this?!”

Fuman already had someone to clear away the stuff that Xue Xiuyi had paid tribute to him. He was usually cautious, so he would not send all the

good stuff into the palace; instead, he had them hidden all in his residence in Qudu, with his godsons looking after them. Now that this had happened, the Ministry of Justice was definitely going to investigate the case and check him out; thus, he had immediately sent someone to pass on the tip when he was still back there in the duty room.

On hearing Fuman's wretched cries, Li Jianting looked as if her sense of compassion had really been evoked.

Fuman seized the opportunity and was about to recriminate the Chief Surveillance Bureau for seeking credit for themselves under the pretense of remonstrating when he saw Fengquan hurrying back.

Fengquan stood under the eaves and kept away the umbrella. As if he did not see Fuman pleading his case, he reported to Li Jianting, who was inside the chamber, "Your Majesty, while on the way, this humble slave saw several junior eunuchs hurrying along with flowers in their arms. It was only after questioning them I found out they were delivering those flowers to Mingli Hall."

Fuman found those few eunuchs familiar. Each of them was carrying expensive chrysanthemums in their hands. He then looked again at Fengquan, who was standing with head held high, and suddenly felt an ill sense of foreboding.

Li Jianting lifted the hanging screen and walked out. With a frown on her brows, she asked, "I've already given the instructions not to waste time and energy planting these chrysanthemums. Who was the one who sent them in as tributes? The duty room never reported them either."

The eunuchs kneeled and kowtowed, "To answer Your Majesty, *Fugonggong* was the one who gave the instructions."

Fuman was burning with anxiety as he refuted, "How dare you spout nonsense with the Son of Heaven here! It's my turn to be on duty today, so when have I ever instructed you to do such a thing?"

The palace still owed the outer court ministers their monthly salaries. Li Jianting kept up with the order she issued when Yongcheng was hit by a drought. The palace still pursued a policy of frugality, and there were signs of doing away with the customary need for extravagance. What's more, Fuman was currently implicated in the pilfering of the palace granaries, and this was right when he feared getting caught up in trouble. By piteously pleading his case here, he meant to abandon Xue Xiuyi and make him the scapegoat. He wanted to make a big issue of how he himself did not dine on

delicacies and was instead consuming soybeans every day, but he did not expect the sudden turn of events and found himself in even more of a predicament.

“Castrated traitor, shut your mouth!” Li Jianting’s expression grew increasingly grim as she said to the eunuch in an icy voice, “Tell me the truth.”

The eunuch answered in terror, “Last night, *Fu-gonggong* sent someone to pass on instructions to this humble slave. He said the chrysanthemums from his manor were sent into the palace together with the ones purchased by the Court of Imperial Entertainments. These flowers, being valuable, all have to be well taken care of. Once Your Majesty gets off court session today, we should send them to Mingli Hall to relieve Your Majesty’s boredom—”

Fuman’s limbs were icy cold. In a flash, he snapped, “How dare you frame me without proof! Since you say I was the one who sent someone over, where is the note? Where is the authority token?”

The eunuch raised an arm to wipe away the rain. Fuman’s interrupting bellow gave him such a fright that he nearly slumped paralyzed to the ground. “... The person who came looked familiar; he is th-the *Lao-zuzong*’s godson. How would this humble slave dare demand a token?”

Fuman clenched the porcelain piece, which dug into his palm and turned it into a mangled pulp of flesh and blood. The moment Fuman heard that the eunuch did not have an authority token, he replied immediately, “So it’s really a load of bullshit! I have served the nobility in the palace for nearly twenty years, and even though I may be stupid, I know the rules. No one does their duties and errands without a token. Your Majesty, Your Majesty!” He held up his own authority token and shuffled forward on his knees, looking at Li Jianting as his cries grew increasingly louder. “Even if this humble slave dies today, it has to be a justified death!”

“Your Majesty, this humble slave also finds this matter odd.” Fengquan lifted the hem of his robe to kneel before Li Jianting. “*Fu-gonggong* helms the affairs within the palace and is Your Majesty’s trusted right-hand man. It would absolutely not do to let him be framed with false charges. We have to first ascertain the truth.” He looked at Fuman, “Why don’t we summon that ‘godson’ who passed on the *gonggong*’s order before Your Majesty so that Your Majesty can see what’s really going on?”

Fuman deciphered derision in that delicate, handsome face. Without waiting for Fuman to respond, Li Jianting commanded the guards, "Go. Find and bring the *lao-zuzong*'s son over."

She stressed the words "*lao-zuzong*" so heavily that it chilled Fuman to the bone.

Within a few moments, the guards brought the man to the front of the hall. Rainwater washed over the steps. This godson lowered his head and prostrated himself over the ground in the rain, shivering all over.

Unable to get a clear look, Li Jianting said, "Lift your head."

He let loose a whimper and clung close to the ground, shaking his head frantically as if he had been given a scare. The guards at the side pressed him down by his shoulders and lifted his head up.

Li Jianting did not recognize him, but the junior eunuch in the rain said, "That's him, Your Majesty. It's Yingxi-*gonggong*!"

"Yingxi, the army-supervising eunuch during the reign of Tianchen." Fengquan quietly reminded Li Jianting. "The Prince of Donglie held him in custody and brought him into the capital. He has long been imprisoned in the Ministry of Justice's prison."

Fuman looked at Yingxi, stunned. As the guards approached him, he snapped to his senses and shouted, "This humble slave has been wronged... Your Majesty... this person is definitely not..."

Chafing against the ground, Yingxi started bawling. He clung to the ground, choking and crying, "*Lao-zuzong, Lao-zuzong*, save me, save this son of yours!"

Li Jianting yanked away the hem of the skirt that Fuman touched and looked at him. "How very capable of you. You can even extricate a eunuch the Ministry of Justice convicted. As expected of the '*Lao-zuzong*' thousands of people look to for backing."

A chill spread all over Fuman's body. He knew death was certain this time. "Your, Your Majesty," he murmured, "please show mercy on account of old ties..."

"You and I are merely master and servant in the palace," Li Jianting said, "so where are there old ties to speak of? I showed you great favor, yet you do not know to feel gratitude. You committed such a grave mistake that I am well-justified in killing you."

As the guards dragged Fuman, Fuman's round collar choked him by the neck. Panicking, he kicked out with his legs and struggled. "Your Majesty!



Your Majesty—”

Fengquan signaled the guards with his eyes, who promptly gagged Fuman and dragged him out the fastest they could.



“It didn’t work?” Shen Zechuan looked back and glanced at Fei Sheng.

Fei Sheng nodded. “Allegedly, the emperor rebuked the imperial censor in anger on the imperial court, causing such a stir that it became the talk of the town. Master, didn’t she reward Jiang Qingshan earlier for the sake of pitting herself against Xue Xiuzhuo? This is such an excellent opportunity, so how did teacher and pupil become on such good terms again?”

Shen Zechuan looked askance at the bright mirror. The jade earring on his right ear was dark and obscure. He contemplated it over for a moment. “I have underestimated the emperor.”

Yao Wenyu watched under the eaves as the raindrops dripped. He suddenly brandished his arm and brushed away the entire chessboard of chess pieces. The black and white pieces instantly splashed into the rain, where ripples soon covered them up. Feeling the metallic taste of blood in his throat, he coughed a few times. “The tree that stands above the forest will be blown over by the wind; the soil that jutted out of the riverbank will be washed away by the rapids.<sup>98</sup> From what the emperor said on the imperial court, she meant to both use *and* depose Xue Xiuzhuo.”



Credits: Neon Starrzzify for pointing out the typo! <3

## ◇ CHAPTER 268: BODHI ◇



Xue Xiuyi's legs felt weak. He braced himself against the doorframe as he slid to the ground, where he sat and watched as his wife, concubine, and maidservants pack up the valuables with harried expressions. He muttered, "Can't leave... I haven't gotten Jin-ge'er back..."

The sound of footsteps rang out beyond the courtyard. The guard guarding the compound craned his neck for a look and got the fright of his life when he saw that it was all the Capital Command Troops. The door to the courtyard slammed open with a crash. As the Capital Command Troops swarmed in, Xue Xiuyi waved his arms and cried, "The imperial censor slandered me. I was wrongly accused!"

The newly appointed general of the Capital Command Troops fished out an authority token and document from under the folds of his clothes and said, "The writ from the Ministry of Justice comes with Her Majesty's inked approval." He surveyed the courtyard. "Take the rest of them away."

The Capital Command Troops hoisted Xue Xiuyi up, his feet slipping on the ground as they gagged him.

With Fuman imprisoned, a batch of eunuchs had been removed from office. That very night, Li Jianting swapped out all the key officials from the palace affairs *yamen*. The guards who went knocking on doors did not even wait for the parties involved to refute; they simply gagged them outright and arrested them, moving even faster than they did the time Li Jianting was poisoned. The sounds of footsteps prevailed everywhere in the palace, and innumerable guards stood in the shadows at the foot of the walls. Eunuchs and palace maids who were still on shift duty moved and

spoke with caution. Everyone of them kept their hands to themselves and lowered their heads, not daring to look around as they pleased.

Xue Xiuzhuo did not sleep. With his clothes draped over him, he stood by the window and listened to the flurry of running footsteps beyond the high wall. The overcast clouds had just dispersed after the rain stopped, and the cold, clear moonlight bathed him within. Shadows of the bamboo before the window fell upon his side profile.

“Uh, uh.” Ya-er rubbed his nose roughly and urged Xue Xiuzhuo to rest.

Xue Xiuzhuo looked back and asked, “Is Jin-ge’er sleeping well?”

Ya-er nodded and pointed in the direction of Xue Jin’s room as he uttered “uh-huh” in a reply of sorts.

Xue Xiuzhuo thus said, “You may go to bed.”

Ya-er was unwilling to. He beckoned to Xue Xiuzhuo with a hand, indicating for him to eat something.

Xue Xiuzhuo did not answer. He lowered his fingers to pick up the chess piece on the chessboard and scrutinized it, as if he could not figure out something. Ya-er looked resigned when he saw Xue Xiuzhuo remaining still in place, but instead of leaving, he sat down at the entrance of the room.

A long time passed before Xue Xiuzhuo tossed the chess piece back into the chess container.



The next day, after the morning court session, Xue Xiuzhuo waited outside Mingli Hall for Li Jianting to summon him. There were countless memorials impeaching him today. The moment Xue Xiuyi was imprisoned, the charge of corruption and bribery against him was substantiated. Rumors on the streets kept in step with the course of events, and subsequently, the number of students from the Imperial College sending visiting cards<sup>99</sup> to Xue Xiuzhuo saw a decline too.

“Xue Xiuzhuo’s taking of another man’s son indeed runs counter to feudal ethics.”<sup>100</sup> An imperial censor knelt before the emperor’s desk. “No matter what, Xue Xiuyi is his elder brother of lawful birth. Your Majesty, since time immemorial, there has never been a case where the younger brother of common birth seized the legitimate first-born son of his older brother of lawful birth. What’s more, as the Imperial Preceptor, he ought to lead by example. By acting in such a way, isn’t he teaching the

whole world to show contempt for the rules of propriety and to disregard one's clansfolk?"

Li Jianting closed the memorial. "Xue Xiuyi favors his concubine and neglects his wife, and he hankers after wealth and is given to extravagance. On the contrary, I think that in doing so, Xue Xiuzhuo has acted exactly in accordance with propriety. He is doing it in consideration of his Xue clan's legitimate lineage. There is nothing improper with it."

This imperial censor was almost seventy of age. He tottered unsteadily as he kowtowed and continued, "This old subject thinks otherwise. If his elder brother has done wrong, he can openly admonish and exhort him. This is what it means by showing love and respect as brothers should..."

Li Jianting, having heard an entire morning's worth of tenets on propriety, promptly rose to her feet.

"... As the saying goes, *appoint the virtuous, and stability will prevail; appoint the unvirtuous, and turmoil will reign.*<sup>101</sup> What is a person of virtue? He is one who can distinguish between the noble and the humble and abides by the rules of propriety... Your Majesty, just as fine medicine that cures is bitter on the tongue, sincere advice that benefits is often jarring on the ears."

Unable to take a stride forward, Li Jianting sat back down.

The sunny weather that followed the rain was stifling hot, so scorching that the flowers planted before the hall wilted a little. The imperial censor rested for a moment, drank a cup of tea, and continued with his exhortations all without waiting for Li Jianting to speak, and so Li Jianting sat there from the time she got off morning court session until the hour of you.

After drinking the nth cup of tea, the imperial censor said genially to Li Jianting, "Your Majesty, the more intelligent and knowledgeable one is, the more one has to keep their eyes and ears open..." he smacked his lips and took a couple of breathers, "and hence..."

"Listening to your sermon today trumps studying the classics for ten years." Li Jianting got up and came over to personally help the imperial censor up. The flower embellishment on her forehead made her face appear all the more vibrant and beautiful. With an amicable countenance, she said, "I shall have to ask you to share these most sagacious, famous sayings with the students of the Imperial College another day. It's late today, and I can see the signs of weariness on your face. You should head back first for a rest."

The imperial censor answered, "I am not worthy" as he walked, but even right before he stepped out of the door, he still had to add, "The wise sage nips the trouble in the bud."<sup>102</sup> Xue Xiuzhuo..."

Discerning enough to read the scene, Fengquan came over with a bow to help support the imperial censor. With a smile, he said, "The ground before the hall is slippery. Your Venerable Excellency, please watch your steps. This humble slave shall support you as you walk."

The imperial censor let Fengquan support him and walked off into the distance. The sunset glow of the setting sun cast a reddish-orange sheen over the potted plants before Mingli Hall, its brilliance causing the golden hairpin by Li Jianting's temple to sparkle. She turned to the side and gazed at Xue Xiuzhuo, who was standing at the foot of the hall. Xue Xiuzhuo's back was as straight as a ramrod, his shoulders bearing the last of the light, his official robe shrouded under the remaining rays of the setting sun. Li Jianting could not get a clear look at his expression.

"Teacher," Li Jianting raised a hand to lift the beaded curtain, "this way, please."

There were no lamps lit in Mingli Hall, nor was there anyone waiting in attendance. Upon entering, Xue Xiuzhou knelt before the emperor's desk, but Li Jianting did not return to the throne. She stood at the side of her desk and looked at the calligraphy painting on the wall.

"Xue Xiuyi's transgressions have nothing to do with Teacher," Li Jianting said. "If Teacher is here to apologize, it is not at all necessary."

"Xue Xiuyi is corrupt and took bribes. The Ministry of Justice has ordered the arrest of the Juexi merchants who are involved in this case. They have, however, turned up empty." Unlike the others who prostrated themselves over the ground, Xue Xiuzhuo knelt with his back straight, just like the way he did when he was teaching Li Jianting in his residence. "Your Majesty has ordered the Capital Command Troops to assist in this case. Naturally, this has nothing to do with this humble subject."

"The numbers of memorials impeaching Teacher of late are as numerous as the numbers of hairs on an ox. Over ten criminal charges against Teacher are listed. But Teacher sounds to me to be civilized and composed," Li Jianting gazed at the painting. "Presumably, you must have long anticipated it."

"One tends to think of change in times of adversity,"<sup>103</sup>

The light in Mingli Hall disappeared, hiding both of them under the obscure darkness. The palace lanterns hanging under the corners of the eaves outside the hall were not lit, and the entire palace seemed to be in a deep sleep. The towering palace rested against the backdrop of faint light on the horizon. There were no songs of the birds to be heard, nor human voices.

“You once saved the thirteen cities of Juexi with Jiang Qingshan, and took down Hua Siqian with Hai Liangyi. You also went without sleep and rest in order to investigate the eight cities’ field taxes. There is no one else in this world who understands better than you just how tough it is to eliminate the chronic ailment that is the noble clans.” Li Jianting raised a finger to touch the calligraphy painting with Emperor Guangcheng’s imperial seal on it. “You insisted on pursuing the accounts in spite of opposition on the imperial court, and you did it all just to give me an opportunity to win over the long-time ministers.”

Every matter had an order of importance and urgency. Han Cheng and the Empress Dowager fell from power one after another, and the noble clans had no one else to take up the mantle. They were already showing signs of self-defeating fatigue, one that would lead to its own collapse, and Xue Xiuzhou understood it better than anyone else.

“You successively submitted memorials requesting to rescind the Fei clan’s former rank of nobility, seal their properties for confiscation, and execute their entire clan,” Li Jianting slid the pulp of her finger around, dragging out fingerprints on the painting, “which consequently caused the noble clans to be particularly resentful towards you, and you did that also to give me the opportunity to share a common enemy with them.”

The Fei clan of Dancheng, the Han clan of Wucheng, and the Hua clan of Dicheng—these were the main forces of the noble clans the Grand Secretariat and Xue Xiuzhuo assisted Li Jianting before and after her ascension to the throne to expel in one go. Now that they were forced to de-escalate the tension with the noble clans owing to the threat from Zhongbo, someone had to shoulder the responsibility for their past feud.

Li Jianting looked back and said, “Teacher means to sacrifice himself to help me secure my throne.”

The palace lanterns at the corners of the eaves were finally lit, and the faint light peeked through the beaded curtains to shine upon Xue Xiuzhuo’s back in a mosaic of mottled light. His back was skinny, and his official robe

was old. He was like a pine nailed to Qudu, standing unwaveringly in the wind.

He gazed at that painting and said, "To safeguard the state, one should not begrudge the sacrifices made."

It was said that those who posed a threat to the emperor at the top and lorded it over the imperial court at the bottom were ministers in power. Majority held a tight grip on an enormous amount of power and did not comply with the rules of propriety. They overstepped their authority and formed cliques. In this vein, Hua Siqian was a minister in power. If Li Jianting was just as indecisive and weak-willed as Emperor Xiande and Emperor Tianchen had been, Xue Xiuzhuo could have opted to become a minister in power too. However, Li Jianting was not.

Perhaps, at certain points in time, Dazhou needed a gentle and mild emperor, but not in the here and now, where the pack of wolves were lying in wait for opportunities to strike. If Li Jianting could not be strong-willed and decisive, then all she could do was to be a puppet subjected to the manipulations of the court ministers. In that case, she would be utterly unworthy of sitting here on the throne.

"There are the imperial censors for admonishments and the court ministers for government administration. Only the Imperial College is not above the imperial court, yet it can help facilitate the discussion of political affairs worldwide. If the reputation of the imperial college is dependent on a single official, then he is the wolf that can influence the sovereign's policy-making decisions. That is why this humble subject has to stand isolated from the entire body of ministers." Xue Xiuzhuo's eyes were extremely calm. His calm, however, was not like that of ordinary people. It was more like he already knew of the path that lay ahead, and for that reason, he would not budge even if the others were to cast stones at him or spurn him.

A prestigious reputation might seem elusive, but in truth, it was also the key to forming a political faction. Hai Liangyi never formed cliques when he was alive. He did not even meet the court officials after returning to his residence every day. But was he really factionless? The gathering of those of humble origins, the political orientation of the imperial college, and the fact that Yao Wenyu could recruit all the virtuous talents in the world for Shen Zechuan, all bore the mark of Hai Liangyi's prestigious reputation at play.

Xue Xiuzhuo's appraisals when he served as the Chief Supervising Secretary of the Ministry of Revenue were all outstanding. He rendered meritorious service in straightening up Juexi and revitalizing its thirteen cities during the reign of Xiande, and then he made meritorious achievements by auditing the field taxes and returning the fields to the common folks during the reign of Shengyin. He used this "reputation", and he knew very well the power of inciting "social movements".

Li Jianting suddenly turned back and asked, "Does Teacher not fear death?"

To date, no one had ever asked Xue Xiuzhuo this question. He looked at Li Jianting and answered, "Court officials die for the state."<sup>104</sup>

To safeguard the state, one should not begrudge the sacrifices made.

Xue Xiuzhou did not begrudge this life of his and even this lifetime's worth of reputation—he could bear to give them all up.

Li Jianting was silent for a moment. "I respect Teacher, and I, too, do not begrudge it."



"Objects that do not hit its limit will not reverse its course; evil that has not reached its peak will not meet its demise."<sup>105</sup>

Yao Wenyu scribbled rapidly, his handwriting a scrawl. The ground of the inner chamber was all paved with paper. His brush-holding hand trembled ever so slightly. Finally, he abandoned the brush and covered his lips to cough violently.

Opportunity, opportunity.

Qi Shiyu wanted the Qi clan to keep inheriting Qi Zhuyin's "Prince of Donglie" title. He was far more cautious than Xiao Fangxu, and even at this point, he could still exercise patience to observe the situation. Shen Zechuan had just won over the hearts of the people from the six prefectures with the Duanzhou battle. To completely disassociate himself from the two words "Shen Wei", he had to be benevolent and righteous to the end. So even when Tantai Hu's Dunzhou's garrison troops arrived at the Beiyuan military drill grounds, he could not take the first move to mobilize troops. And besides, as long as Qi Zhuyin did not move, the 300,000-strong Qidong Garrison Troops would be a blade to the south of Zhongbo.

Opportunity, opportunity.



The Prefectural Lord wanted an opportunity to completely eradicate the latent threat.

The sound of Yao Wenyu's coughs was short and urgent. No longer holding the brush, he merely covered his mouth with a handkerchief.

Qiao Tianya had only just arrived tonight, and the moment he dismounted his horse and entered the courtyard, he heard the coughing inside the room.

"Did no one prepare the medicine for Mister?" Fei Sheng asked the maidservant in the courtyard.

"He only took half a bowl," the maidservant answered in a soft-spoken voice, "then he kept himself inside the room and said not to disturb him."

Qiao Tianya pushed the door open. The woolen rug was all covered with fallen paper pages. Fei Sheng, who was following behind, bent over to pick them up, only to see them crammed with words all over. He could not help but blurt out in astonishment, "Is Mister planning to author a book..."

Qiao Tianya was already in the inner chamber. Yao Wenyu's handkerchief was stained red. He shoved aside the wheelchair and picked Yuanzhuo up in his arms.

To Fei Sheng, he said, "Call Jiran!"

For some reason, when Yao Wenyu tilted his head back, his nose suddenly started bleeding. Qiao Tianya pulled away Yao Wenyu's hand, which had been covering his mouth and nose—it was damp and cold.

By this time, it was already late in the night. Jiran had long gone to bed.

Qiao Tianya did not dare to wait. With Yao Wenyu in his arms, he leaped down the steps and ran towards Jiran's courtyard.

With eyes half-closed, Yao Wenyu turned his head aside to burrow into his chest, murmuring, "... Fei Sheng... pass the message..."

Qiao Tianya ran until he was sweating all over. He reached out a hand to cup the other side of Yao Wenyu's face, as if he wanted to hold Yuanzhuo down in his bosom.

Fei Sheng went on ahead and ascended the steps. Pounding on the door, he shouted, "Open up! Wake the little monk up now!"

The young male servant watching the door did not dare to tarry and ran to shout for Jiran after moving the latch out of the way. Jiran was bundled up in his monk robe when he stepped out. With eyes bleary from sleep, he said, "This humble monk does not see patients at night—oh! What happened to Mister?!"

By the time Shen Zechuan hurried over, it was almost dawn. Dressed in a wide robe, he saw Yao Wenyu sleep soundly in the inner chamber and motioned for everyone to head over to the side hall.

“Expending yourself mentally can easily shorten your life,” Jiran said. “The poison Mister is inflicted with is called ‘late return’. As the name implies, it’s just the opposite of ‘swift pursuit’. This poison is late to come and slow to disperse. It has been over a year now, right?”

“It should be a year and a half now,” Fei Sheng still remembered, “... starting from the time in Dancheng.”

Jiran set down the brush, put his palms together, and bowed to Shen Zechuan, saying truthfully, “When this humble monk first saw Mister, his wrists were already showing shades of blue. Your Lordship, this humble monk can’t cure this poison and swift pursuit.”

The color drained from all the faces in the side hall.



In his trance, Yao Wenyu heard the sound of rain. He dreamed of Mount Bodhi. It was as if he closed his eyes, all that greeted his sight would be the endless rain. The cloudy fog among the mountains covered the green bamboo from view. Mud stained his sleeves as he stood in the face of the wind. He felt damp all over, but he could not tell if it was his sweat, or the rain.

“A spring and an autumn<sup>106</sup> have since passed with our last parting.” The sighing of the bamboo sang behind him. Hai Liangyi stood at a far distance. “And now Yuanzhuo is back.”

Yao Wenyu looked back. The refreshing breeze sent his wide sleeves billowing. He greeted, “Teacher.”

Hai Liangyi stood with his hands behind his back. His short beard had already gone white. He was not wearing his official robe, just like the year he led Yao Wenyu by the hand into the academy; there was even a *zhaowen* bag<sup>107</sup> hung around his waist. “I heard the wind rouse, and that was how I knew you were back.”

The sighing of the wind among the bamboo forest was too loud. Hai Liangyi’s figure lay concealed within, leaving only Yao Wenyu standing alone. The mountain fog was dense. Yao Wenyu looked into the far distance at the imperial palace in Qudu. He once climbed to a high spot to look far out, but he only saw the picturesque mountain scenery in the twilight. It was only now that he realized just how vast and expansive the world was.

“Wait for me, Teacher,” Yao Wenyu said. “Once the rain stops...”

The sound of the zither suddenly rang out. The scene before Yao Wenyu’s eyes vanished, and he landed back onto this bed of his. The partially covered window kept out the sunlight. He did not have the sensation of waking up when he opened his eyes; on the contrary, he felt as if he had fallen into a dream. Several times, he closed his eyes. Eventually, he said, “Songyue, it’s already the hour of si.”

Qiao Tianya pressed down on the zither strings and said, “You have gone all confused from a messed up sleep schedule. Don’t you usually call me Qiao Tianya?”

“The moon over the pines<sup>108</sup> lends to the chill of the night; the wind and the spring,<sup>109</sup> in a melodious chorus, sing.” Yao Wenyu said. “This name is too lonely.”<sup>110</sup>

“I once had a friend named Shao Fengquan.” Qiao Tianya strummed the zither strings, which elicited a series of random sounds but did not form a tune. “A pity he died.”

Yao Wenyu listened to that disarray of zither sounds and asked, “You play the zither. Does he play it too?”

“I don’t remember anymore,” Qiao Tianya said. “The only one who can play the zither for you, however, can only be me, Qiao Tianya.”

Yao Wenyu looked at him. “You have yet to teach me the tune you were going to teach me back then during our first encounter in spring.”

Qiao Tianya stopped and looked at Yao Wenyu as he answered, “It’s still not too late now.”



Xue Xiuyi did not give a clear account. The residences of those merchants were all empty. Qudu required proof of household registration for access in and out of the city. The Capital Command Troops kept guard for three days, but they never did find those people. These merchants who had wantonly squandered their money on Donglong Street seemed to have vanished into thin air.

Kong Qiu received Xue Xiuzhuo’s request in the office compound. He set the teacup down and considered it for a moment. “Let him go.”

When the official returning his reply left, Cen Yu said from opposite him, “I fear it’s inappropriate to let Xue Xiuzhuo have a hand in this case at present.”

“This matter concerns the inner court, and the amount of silver involved is large. After the Ministry of Justice formulates the charges, they will definitely want a joint trial by the Three Judicial Offices.” Kong Qiu picked up the teacup again. “Xue Xiuzhuo is the Court of Judicial Review Vice Minister. Since he has not been suspended from duty, he has the authority to supervise and investigate.”

“Xue Xiuyi is his eldest brother, after all. He ought to avoid drawing suspicion to himself.” Cen Yu held his knees. “Furthermore, the amount of memorials impeaching him are increasing of late.”

“Not that I’m insinuating anything, but Xunyi, the Chief Surveillance Bureau ought to be dealt with too.” Kong Qiu took several sips of tea. “It’s not wrong to impeach Xue Xiuyi for corruption and bribery that day on the imperial court, but dragging in Xue Xiuzhuo inevitably makes it look like there’s personal grudge at play too. Look at those words spouted; every single one is groundless.”

“Xue Xiuzhuo is a man of extraordinary merits, and he comes from a noble clan,” Cen Yu said. “Those who hate him are only all too anxious to trample on him. If Her Majesty had been willing to rebuke him a word or two when dealing with Xue Xiuyi, it wouldn’t have gone as far as to cause such a mass outrage.”

Unable to taste the tea in his mouth, Kong Qiu set down the teacup and said after a moment of silence, “To begin with, a direct remonstrance is not the way to go for this matter. Xue Xiuzhuo audited the field taxes and returned the fields to the commoners in the cities of Dancheng, Wucheng, and Chuancheng. Yongcheng suffered a drought this year, and Jiang Qingshan encountered difficulties in trying to borrow grains, begging from all quarters in Qudu. Even so, both of them did not touch the grains allocated to the common folks of the three cities. The people all remember him, and they are even willing to erect a longevity tablet<sup>111</sup> to honor him at home. Her Majesty has only just refuted his memorial to continue pursuing the field taxes, and to ease the situation, she rewarded Jiang Qingshan. If she were to censure Xue Xiuzhuo now because of that scoundrel Xue Xiuyi, the people of the three cities would object. Besides, it’s common knowledge that Xue Xiuzhuo and Xue Xiuyi are on bad terms with one another, and they have long divided up the family properties to live apart. You imperial censors want Her Majesty to dismiss Xue Xiuzhuo from office pending an investigation because of this matter, but if Her Majesty did as you asked,

wouldn't she be cold-hearted and ungrateful for casting him aside once he has served his purpose? Xue Xiuyi colluded with Fuman to commit embezzlement and bribery, and Her Majesty immediately ordered the Ministry of Justice to investigate. She has not shown any intent to shield Xue Xiuyi for Xue Xiuzhuo's sake either. Investigate what ought to be investigated and kill those who ought to be killed. You can't push others into too tight a corner."

Cen Yu could tell from Kong Qiu's words that he meant to protect Xue Xiuzhuo, so he said, "The imperial censor remonstrated only because he feared Her Majesty will show favoritism and side with Xue Xiuzhuo. If Her Majesty listens to Xue Xiuzhuo in every matter, it will mess up the order of hierarchy between the sovereign and her subjects. Besides, Her Majesty showed favor towards Fuman a few days ago, but didn't Fuman forget his place and do wrong still?"

Kong Qiu pointed at Cen Yu. "That's right. It's because Her Majesty favored and trusted Fuman that Fuman would commit one mistake after another, but this time, you're not seeing it clearly. Let me ask you, who is Fuman? He was on good terms with Xiao Chiye at the beginning, yet he could switch allegiances to Han Cheng and lured Xiao Chiye into the palace, and he could also turn around and kill Han Cheng for the sake of his own future prospects and life—the poisoning case was left inconclusive; Her Majesty might not have pursued it, but she is no fool. Fuman is highly reputable among the inner court *yamen*, and his godsons and god-grandsons are everywhere. Most importantly, he is a eunuch with power and influence who has served in two reigns, waiting in attendance by the Son of Heaven's side. He holds the endorsement rights<sup>112</sup> that will permit him to reject the Grand Secretariat's memorandums. Right now, Her Majesty is the prime of her life, but what about after? Any oversight while retaining such a vile character by the side will result in physical harm or worse, the ruin of state foundation! Even if Her Majesty doesn't kill him, I will kill him!"

As Kong Qiu spoke, he stood up and paced a couple of steps.

"Shen Zechuan mass deployed troops to the Beiyuan military drill grounds. How long can the 40,000 new soldiers in Qudu hold up for? We have to ask Commander-in-chief Qi to mobilize troops to come to Her Majesty's aid. When Commander-in-chief Qi sent troops to fight the Qingshu Tribe the last time, Xue Xiuzhuo was the one who forked out the military salaries and provisions, and now that we want to get past Tianfei

Watchtower to fight Zhongbo, we still have to ask Xue Xiuzhuo for the military salaries and provisions!”



The warden from the Ministry of Justice was familiar with Xue Xiuzhuo and opened the doors for him. “Is Your Excellency here to see Custodian Xue? As long as you have a memorandum, I’ll go open the doors now.”

Xue Xiuzhuo looked along the warden’s arm for just a fleeting moment before he withdrew his gaze and said, “I am here to see Yingxi.”

The warden did not ask too many questions. After looking through the memorandum, he led Xiu Xiuzhuo inside and unlocked the cell door for him. “As Yingxi-*gonggong* still has an ongoing case, he is not locked up with the others. Your Excellency, this way.”

Xue Xiuzhuo lowered his head and entered the cramped, narrow cell.

Yingxi’s prisoner attire was filthy, and he had been tortured. At present, he was lying inside with his arms and legs curled up. On hearing movements, he shuddered and jolted up into a sitting position, covering his head as he cowered out of the way and shouted, “I’m guilty, guilty! Don’t hit me!”

Xue Xiuzhuo looked around.

Yingxi saw Xue Xiuzhuo through the gap between his arms and immediately scrambled off the bed to kneel at his feet and pleaded, “Your Excellency, is Your Excellency here to investigate the case? I’m guilty! Guilty!” Shaking the chains, he pointed at his own face. “But this time I was wrongly accused!”

He clenched at Xue Xiuzhuo’s official robe until it was all creased.

Xue Xiuzhuo lowered his eyes to look at Yingxi. “A final judgment has not been reached for your crimes yet. I’m going to ask you a few questions. If you can answer me truthfully, I will put in a mitigation plea to the officials from the Ministry of Justice.”

Yingxi hurriedly nodded, his gaze following Xue Xiuzhuo as he answered, “I will tell you all I know! Everything I did was all at the *Lao-zuzong*’s behest!”

“Who was the one who sent you to Qidong to supervise the army?”

“The, the former emperor...” Yingxi answered. “The former emperor sent me to Qidong to supervise the army, and the *Lao-zuzong* was the one who recommended me for it. The *Lao-zuzong* said with us father and son on

the inside and the outside, we will no longer have to worry about our meals, nor put ourselves at other people's beck and call."

Xue Xiuzhuo continued to ask, "Were you the one who swapped out the military grains in the Bianjun Commandery?"

How would Yingxi have expected Xue Xiuzhuo to ask about this? He released his grip and started cowering back, his gaze evasive as he hedged, "I'm merely an army-supervising eunuch... how would I dare to swap the military grains..." He looked at Xue Xiuzhuo's displeased expression and unexpectedly blurted out to implicate other people, "I... I did not force that Lu Guangbai to defect!"

Xue Xiuzhuo bent over to grab Yingxi's arm. He probed again, "Were you the one who swapped out the military grains in the Bianjun Commandery?"

Yingxi's breathing was short and urgent. Unable to avoid it, he could only wipe his tears and snot and answered with deep remorse, "This matter really isn't up to me, Your Excellency, Your Excellency! I only knew that I had to swap the grain wagons, but who knew it was all moldy rice inside! If I had known it beforehand, I would not have dared to switch it even if you endowed me with ten guts!" When he spoke to this point, he recalled the constant fear and anxiety he had been under this year and could not help but shed tears as he sniveled, "The *Lao-zuzong* has really put me in hot water! Commander-in-chief Qi took me into custody. I, I'm just the scapegoat taking the blame for Fuman. He has a guilty conscience, so naturally, he wanted to save me."

Xue Xiuzhuo had been investigating the Bianjun Commandery's military grains case all this time. There were no problems with all the Ministry of War officials involved. It was only until Yingxi re-entered the palace that he remembered the army-supervising eunuch.

Scorpion!

Xue Xiuzhuo stared at Yingxi as he asked, "What are you planning to do by entering the palace?"

Yingxi shook his head vigorously, his face a wretched sight as he choked with sobs and answered, "It's not me, not me! It was really at Fuman's behest that I entered the palace this time. Your Excellency, he wrote a letter to me in the sixth month, wanting me to take care of the flowers and plants in his courtyard on his behalf. He was waiting to use

them in the ninth month to win his master's favor! I really came here this time to deliver the flowers!"

"You people have been hiding in Qudu." Xue Xiuzhuo raised his voice. "Who else do you still want to kill?"

Yingxi's arm was hurting from Xue Xiuzhuo's grip. He bawled, "I don't know! I don't know! I was wrongly accused!"

"How about Shen Zechuan?" The expression in Xue Xiuzhuo's eyes grew increasingly grim. "Is Shen Zechuan a Scorpion too?"

Yingxi shook his head haphazardly as he struggled. "I have nothing to do with the rebels! I swear to Heaven, I'm in no way associated with the rebels!"

"Was Xiao Chiye's nomination of Fuman into office also instigated by Shen Zechuan?"

In the instant Yingxi pushed and shoved at Xue Xiuzhuo, Xue Xiuzhuo felt a chill creep down his spine. Things that he could not figure out now all seemed to click together.

"And that relay report that told on Wei Huaigu." The expression in Xue Xiuzhuo's eyes was terrifying. "You eunuchs were the one who swapped the tags and had the Ministry of Justice switched to the Ministry of Revenue. The aim was to make Wei Huaigu turn himself in. You were cutting off the tail to keep the Scorpions safe. It was Fuman... It was the eunuchs!"

No wonder there were no traces to be found on the imperial court.



Fuman had his head lowered as he gasped for breath when a bucket of salt water suddenly splashed over his face. He was wounded all over, and the pain caused him to yell out, but as his limbs were all bound, he could only cuss at the top of his voice, "—You son of a bitch!"

Fengquan threw aside the bucket and scoffed, "You're no decent cur either."

"It's all because of you," Fuman's voice was shrill, "that I'm in such dire straits today!"

"You did it to yourself." Fengquan smacked Fuman's face condescendingly. "Just a mere few years old bastard, and you dare to call yourself the *Lao-zuzong*. Seems to me you're tired of living."

Fuman could not hold his face straight from Fengquan's smack. Such a smack like this that used moderate strength did not hurt like a slap would,



but it was much more humiliating. Blood saturated Fuman's mouth. Spewing a mouthful of blood, he said, "Just you wait. Her Majesty—"

"Wait for Her Majesty to raid your properties and execute your family." Fengquan leaned in and whispered, "Do you think no one knows you poisoned Her Majesty? You set me up and had me thrown into prison, so anxious were you for me to die. Do you think Her Majesty can't see through you?" He started laughing oddly, as if he loathed Fuman to the death. "Once your family is wiped, we can move on to all nine generations of your clan."

Fuman spat out a few mouthfuls of teeth that had come loose and said, "Bull-fucking-shit, you despicable thing! It wasn't me..." Gasping heavily for breath, he tilted his head back and shouted, "It wasn't me!"

"Who else can it be if not you?" Fengquan took several steps back. "You were the one who received Han Cheng's 'swift pursuit'. Han Cheng gave it to you, wanting you to add it to Her Majesty's meal. Once she was killed, the Capital Command Troops would immediately be able to kill the officials of the Grand Secretariat on grounds of rushing to the emperor's aid. So you poisoned Her Majesty's food and almost killed her."

"I know my own limits..." Fuman was so resentful his voice trembled. As he looked at Fengquan's expression, his eyes gradually widened. "It's you... You were the one who added the poison..."

Fuman was in two minds between Li Jianting and the noble clans. He did not dare to disobey Han Cheng, but he did not dare to poison Li Jianting for real either; thus, he had "swift pursuit" swapped over to a common poison, and he only added a little, so it was not all that deadly.

Fengquan, whose face lay concealed in the darkness, revealed his pearly white teeth. "You are the *Lao-zuzong*, the great forefather. I am the little *zuzong*."<sup>113</sup>

Fuman wished with a vehemence to tear Fengquan apart with his hands. Clanging the chains hard, he snapped, "Yingxi is your bitch!"

"Tsk." Fengquan made nothing of Fuman. "The one who brought him up single-handedly is the '*Lao-zuzong*'. He's so overwhelmed with gratitude for you he doesn't acknowledge me at all."

"I have been wronged..." Fuman could not hold back his cries as he wailed sorrowfully, "Your Majesty, I am innocent!"

Unaccustomed to the stench of blood, Fengquan covered his nose as he advised, "Since you have confessed to it all, I will present your statement as is to Her Majesty." He turned around and summoned the warden in. "The

*Lao-zuzong* is advanced in age. Don't apply any more heavy torture. The various excellencies have yet to declare him guilty, so we must follow procedures. He keeps threatening suicide, and I fear he will bite off his tongue to kill himself before he can even be beheaded."

That former subordinate from the Eastern Depot was advanced in age too. Bowing to Fengquan's wish, he snickered, "We are experts at this, so don't worry, *Feng-gonggong*. I guarantee he will live until his execution. As for biting off his tongue to kill himself, all we have to do is to just have to cut off his tongue to preempt it, isn't it?"

Fengquan looked back and replied, "Then I shall have to trouble you."

Fuman watched the eunuch approach and cried out in terror, "Without permission from the Ministry of Justice, how dare you, how dare all of you —"

The door slammed shut with a loud clank.



It was night.

Xue Xiuzhuo was waiting in the office compound for Kong Qiu's official reply in writing. He wanted to see Fuman tonight, so he had to have the memorandum from the Grand Secretary. This was long past working hours, but the Grand Secretariat had yet to break off for a rest due to the increase of troops at the Beiyuan military drill grounds.

"Fuman tried to bite off his tongue to commit suicide yesterday, and a merciless official<sup>114</sup> took matters into his own hand and cut off his tongue." Kong Qiu took time away from his hectic paperwork and said to Xue Xiuzhuo, "Even if you go now, you can't get anything out of him. Fortunately, they recorded his confession statement before they applied the torture. Should you wish to take a look at it, I'll get the Ministry of Justice to pass it to you."

Xue Xiuzhuo froze for a moment when he took the memorial, then frowned and asked, "How can he take matters into his own hands when it is a matter of this magnitude? Who was the official who applied the torture?"

"A young man in the prime of his youth." Kong Qiu frowned too. "That was really one ruthless move. The Ministry of Justice has already dismissed him from office."

Such a coincidence?

Xue Xiuzhuo turned his head to the side. "I'll go take a look—"

“Put everything else aside first!” Cen Yu ran through the door all drenched in sweat; even the sides of his temples were soaked through. He stuffed a paper he was clenching before Kong Qiu and said in an urgent tone, “Boran, look. Isn’t this a disaster?!”



“The reigning emperor comes from the common people. Who can truly prove without a doubt that her lineage is authentic? We only have Xue Xiuzhuo’s words for it!” Rumors in the streets spread fast. In the course of a night, almost everyone was holding that paper of unknown origin. “Xue Xiuzhuo can’t be trusted either. Just look at his eldest brother, Xue Xiuyi. What is he? The national rat that almost made the Grand Secretary pass out from anger.”

“Didn’t they all say that the current emperor looks like Emperor Yongyi?”<sup>115</sup> An old man with a walking stick craned his neck. “The various excellencies from the Grand Secretariat have given the nod too.”

This teahouse was in a mess. Ge Qingqing stroked his newly grown beard as he said, “Yeah, and the little girl from that butcher household in front looks like the former emperor too! It has been over ten years since Emperor Yongyi was alive. Don’t they all have two eyes and one mouth when it really comes down to it? Seems to me like everyone here resembles him too.”

The students gathered around and read that piece of paper through. Each of them had their own ideas on the topic, and after several disputes, they actually went so far as to come to blows.

“The Xue clan dominates the imperial court, and you people are conspirators who are his accomplices in evil! You’re all sinners of Dazhou, condemned through the ages!” A student’s spittle spewed all over. “The national rat has already shown his face, and Her Majesty still doesn’t bring the Xue clan to justice. If this is not fear of them, then what?!”

“Xue, Xue...” The other party, who was being yanked by the collar in a crowd so cramped he was tottering, crumpled the torn paper in his hands and lifted it up high. “His Honorable Excellency Xue audited the field taxes and returned the fields to the common people. Who among us here can do that? You are all just despicable people slandering him! You people are the real sinners of Dazhou! Her Majesty did not punish His Honorable Excellency Xue because...”

“Screw your motherfucking balls!”

“Why are you people so insufferably vulgar?!”

Tables and chairs were thrown into disarray as the students traded blows with one another. Brushes and inkstones were knocked all over the ground. One misstep was all it took to end up in ink from head to toe. Doors and windows clattered noisily as the students bumped into them. A headmaster hurried in to calm the situation, but he had not even shouted a word when the repeated bumps and shoves from the students jostled him out of the door.

“Call for the Capital Command Troops,” the headmaster lifted the hem of his robe and stomped his foot as he urged. He was in such a state of anxiety that his neck was flushed red and he was sweating profusely. “Hurry, call the Capital Command Troops over! People are going to get killed!”

“His Honorable Excellency Xue is the beacon of light whose glory shines throughout the annals of history; he is a loyal subject!” Shreds of paper fluttered all over the air. A student stepped onto the chair and table to stand at a high spot, where he pointed all around him. “You people persecute loyal subjects based on a piece of unfounded nonsense. The state and society will be ruined at the hands of you vile...” He had yet to finish his sentence when an inkstone hurtling at him smashed into his head.

“It is indeed true that Xue Xiuyi colluded with the eunuchs to steal and sell treasures from the palace granaries.” The fired-up students could no longer tell who around them was in whose camp. “Xue Xiuzhuo is a rat too!”

The table flipped over with a thud, and the student lost his footing and fell to the ground. Before he could scramble to his feet, he was trampled upon by the jostling crowd of students.

“Don’t hurt others.” A few teachers from the sides pulled at the students. “You must not hurt the others!”

“What’s happening here...” The schoolmaster slapped his thigh, his tears coursing down his aged face. “Stop it now!”



The tinkling sound of the zither lingered in a never-ending loop in the air. Yao Wenyu played very slowly. The red thread on his wrist swayed at the opening of his sleeves. He had strummed away at the strings until his fingers turned red.

Qiao Tianya pressed down on the zither strings and said, "You missed a part."

Without waiting for Yao Wenyu to ask, he plucked a few strings beside Yao Wenyu's hand. Yao Wenyu, however, could still not remember it, so Qiao Tianya took Yao Wenyu's hand and led him into maneuvering the strings.

Yao Wenyu raised his eyes to look at him. "Have you ever taught others like this before?" He asked.

Qiao Tianya's palm was scalding hot, although when he smiled, it was still as carefree and unfettered. He cast a glance at Yao Wenyu and answered, "I did. Many of them."

"And no one ever told you," Yao Wenyu said, "that you're holding too tight?"

"Perhaps someone did," Qiao Tianya said, "but I don't remember."

"You forget fast." The back of Yao Wenyu's hand gradually rose in temperature too. "It's a good habit to have."

Qiao Tianya looked back at Yao Wenyu. In this brief exchange of gaze, he suddenly reached over the small table and kissed Yao Wenyu on the lips. The leaves in the courtyard rustled as they fell and landed on Qiao Tianya's back. He raised a hand to secure Yao Wenyu's chin in place.

The taste of medicine was bitter, as was Yao Wenyu.

This bitterness sprang from between their lips and tongues and dissolved in his chest, becoming a piercing pain. Qiao Tianya found it painful, and he thought the same for Yao Wenyu. As they kissed, he caressed Yao Wenyu's cheeks, as if he had never touched Yao Wenyu in such a way before and wanted to make up for it now.

"Do you have something to say to me?" Qiao Tianya stopped and touched the bridge of his nose with Yao Wenyu's.

"You're lying." Yao Wenyu's pale face broke into a smile. "I'm your first student."

Qiao Tianya smiled too.

"Qiao Tianya." Yao Wenyu raised his fingers to touch Qiao Tianya's eyes. "Seek not great merit in life, but a safe and smooth-sailing life blessed with honor, prosperity, and happiness. I wish you a life of great success<sup>116</sup> and longevity."

Qiao Tianya's expression remained unchanged, but the rims of his eyes had gone red. "Why don't you wish me luck in finding a good match and be

blessed with a household full of children and grandchildren?”

Yao Wenyu did not wish to say.

“You’re lying too,” Qiao Tianya said. “You already knew how to play this tune.”

“Yuanzhuo has kept his spring date with you this life.” Yao Wenyu retracted his hand. “I have no more regrets.”

The wind brushed past them, sending both of their sleeves and robes fluttering.

They were clearly this close together, and yet, they were so very far apart.



Credit: Thanks to Katie82 and fukixie for spotting the typo! <3

## ◇ CHAPTER 269: METASTASIS ◇



Not even the ban imposed by the imperial court could stop the gossip from spreading like wildfire around Qudu. Everyone in the streets and alleys, pleasure quarters and teahouses were all discussing the female emperor's birth origins. The city gates were sealed off, but the rumor still made its way to the eight cities and was now spreading to Juexi.

"Have the Capital Command Troops seal the gates as soon as possible," Kong Qiu said during the discussion in Mingli Hall. "The news must not be indiscriminately spread! The Imperial College caused such a commotion the Capital Command Troops had to intervene. Chengbi is a long-time minister. He knows how to handle the situation."

Shao Chengbi knelt before the emperor's desk. The new official robe he was wearing fitted him, but his hair was all white, and he did not look at all like a military general. His voice was very hoarse as he said, "It's not the first time the students have stirred up trouble. It's hard to get a right handle on it. My fear is that it might just end up adding fuel to the fire when the soldiers arrive."

"Even so, you have to intervene." Cen Yu stood up. He was an imperial censor, so he naturally understood the stakes involved. "Public opinions can obscure the truth, and repeated slanders can bring about one's ruin!"

Li Jianting did not sleep last night. She sat behind her table and drank strong tea, finishing it in a few mouthfuls. "I have a clear conscience, but the way the rumors started this time is fishy. Who exactly wrote that paper? Does the Ministry of Justice still not have a clue?"

“It’s being copied all over now,” Kong Qiu said. “We don’t know whose handwriting it is.”

“It’s true that there is nowhere to trace the handwriting.” Xue Xiuzhuo looked at Cen Yu. “But Your Excellency Cen, please take a look at this article again carefully.”

Cen Yu was burning up with anxiety when he saw this piece of paper last night, so where would he have the time to look it over carefully? On hearing Xue Xiuzhuo say so, however, he took over the article and read it again. After looking at it for a while, he suddenly jolted to his feet and took a few steps while holding the article in hand. “The article that made paper expensive<sup>117</sup> in Qudu a few years ago was the ‘Lamentation of Chashi’. This article seemed to be from the same hand as the ‘Lamentation of Chashi’.”

Kong Qiu vaguely remembered such a person and said hesitantly, “Is it that...”

“The ‘Eloquent Brush’ Gao Shenwei.” Cen Yu turned back. “It’s Gao Zhongxiong!”

Gao Zhongxiong had grandiose ambitions but little skill. He served as Han Jin’s aide in Qudu and caused the Eight Great Training Divisions to end up getting trounced by Xiao Chiye. Han Cheng meant to deal with him at that time, and Gao Zhongxiong struggled to keep himself alive in Dancheng. Who could have expected him to eventually throw in his lot with Shen Zechuan?!

“What’s of top priority now is not only to stifle the rumors but also to convince Commander-in-chief Qi to mobilize troops as soon as possible,” Kong Qiu said. “Shen Zechuan has the 120,000 garrison troops of Zhongbo in his grasp. No matter what, we cannot fight them head-on when it comes to military strength.”

“I have already issued an edict to Qidong,” Li Jianting said, “telling the Prince of Donglie to send troops across Tianfei Watchtower to launch a direct assault on Dengzhou.”

Zhongbo had no reinforcements. Shen Zechuan dispatched the Dunzhou garrison troops over to Cizhou and left the Imperial Cavalry to guard Duanzhou, leaving Fanzhou and Dengzhou inevitably empty.

“There’s no need to panic just yet,” Chen Zhen said. “The Zhongbo garrison troops are newly established too. Shen Zechuan only has the Dunzhou and Cizhou garrison troops available for use. He doesn’t even dare to mobilize the Chazhou garrison troops rashly. Chengbi, the 40,000



Capital Command Troops are at your disposal. We are practically evenly matched with Shen Zechuan!”

“I’m worried Shen Zechuan still has something up his sleeve.” Li Jianting rose to help up Shao Chengbi. “All I can do now is entrust Qudu to Viceroy Shao.”

“This old subject shall sacrifice my life to repay Your Majesty’s kindness.” Shao Chengbi limped. “There is no time to lose. This old subject will head out of the city tonight on horseback and hurry over to Dancheng, but before I leave, I have a favor to ask.”

As Li Jianting looked at Shao Chengbi’s aged face, she suddenly felt a surge of emotions for some unknown reason. Supporting Shao Chengbi by the arm, she said in an emotional moment, “This battle is dangerous. Regardless of success or failure, as long as I am still here, I will definitely redress the injustice Viceroy Shao has suffered.”

“This old subject is already old. It’s all because of the favor Your Majesty showed me that I can still do my utmost for my country. As for the rest, I will leave it to fate.” Shao Chengbi’s expression was grave and solemn. “This old subject would like to request to open up the Chunquan Battalion armory.”

Li Jianting was slightly taken aback.

“Chunquan Battalion is equipped with firearms,” Shao Chengbi said. “This old subject would like to take this batch of firearms with me.”

“You have my approval.” Li Jianting promptly turned around and called for Fengquan to bring the wine over. She personally poured a cup for Shao Chengbi. “I shall wait in Qudu for Viceroy Shao to return in victory!”



Gao Zhongxiong set down his brush and said to Yao Wenyu, “In Yuanzhuo’s opinion, how will Qudu fight this battle?”

“First, quell the rumors, then persuade Commander-in-chief Qi to mobilize troops,” Yao Wenyu turned his wheelchair to the other end of the table and spread out the map, “and have Shao Chengbi guard Dancheng. Xue Xiuzhuo will certainly make an issue of His Lordship’s background. He wants a justifiable reason to dispatch troops too.”

“There are indeed 40,000 garrison troop soldiers still left in Fanzhou and Dengzhou, but they are all new recruits, so we can only wait for Huo Lingyun to rush over to provide reinforcement.” Zhou Gui was a little worried as he sighed with emotion. “Xue Xiuzhuo returned the fields to the

commoners. He has an excellent reputation in Dancheng. If the imperial court were to bring up Shen Wei, it'd be hard for us to counterattack."

Kong Ling then said, "They bestowed beneficence upon the three cities, but our benefactions extend to the six prefectures. His Lordship's contributions in the three territories are all tangible accomplishments. It's not something the new emperor can compare to. We were also the ones who joined forces with Libei and Qidong to win over the Chashi River's line of defense. Second Master has also made illustrious military achievements in bringing peace and stability to the Bianjun Commandery and advancing east into the desert. Zhongbo and Libei are unbeatable in terms of achievements."

Shen Zechuan sat alone in the principal seat, looking pensive.

"There is one more matter I can't figure out. The issue of commoners' fields in the three cities has just been settled," Zhou Gui pointed at Qudu. "However, the number of commoners forced to leave their homes for Zhongbo is still increasing instead of decreasing. What is the reason for this?"

"The noble clans have had jurisdiction over the eight cities for a long time. The so-called encroachment on the commoners' fields doesn't just refer to the eight great clans. The reason why the Grand Mentor implemented the census register system<sup>118</sup> back then was exactly to curb any attempts at field encroachment. The three cities of Dancheng, Wucheng, and Chuancheng had indeed straightened out their field taxes, but this sum of field tax was also forcibly imposed and collected by the Pan, Han, and Fei clans. In other words, there are still many 'bandits', who are affiliated with the noble clans but are not of noble birth themselves, stealing the commoners' fields, and they continue to make the common folks pay for this shortfall." Yao Wenyu looked at Shen Zechuan. "Since the noble clans have the name of 'chronic ailment' and 'deeply-rooted malady', they cannot be easily eradicated."

"Yuanzhuo has hit the nail on the head." Shen Zechuan lifted the lid to open up the teacup and covered it again. "It's not hard to implement the census register. The real difficulty lies in accounting for the yearly cumulative total, which requires internal regulations of government affairs and supervision in the data entry and submission of the reports. The selection of local officials in the various areas is also a top priority. Qudu has been caught up in the tussles between political factions in recent years,

and those from the noble clans and those of humble origins have each suffered losses. By the time the new emperor ascended to the throne, the imperial court was empty and the key positions, vacant. Even if Xue Xiuzhuo does his utmost to turn the tide and save the desperate situation, he cannot do it alone.”

“Qudu can’t even pay the monthly salaries now,” Kong Ling said, “and they still have to bear the military expenses of the 40,000-strong Capital Command Troops. The longer it stretches on, the more strapped they will be. The commoners can’t prosper, and the silver treasury in Xue Xiuzhuo’s hands will not make it past winter this year.”

“At this stage,” Shen Zechuan said, “we are fighting a war of words. Let’s see how Qudu responds.”

The bamboo blinds rose gently, and Fei Sheng entered with a letter in hand. “Master, a letter from Second Master has arrived.”

Seeing as it was already late, Kong Ling rose with Zhou Gui and Gao Zhongxiong in tow and said to Shen Zechuan, “It’s too late today, and Your Lordship ought to retire for the night too, so we shall take our leave first.”

Shen Zechuan waited for them to leave one after another before opening Xiao Chiye’s letter. The moment the paper was spread open, a few tiny paper-folded wolves dropped out.

My wife, treat this letter as you would my person.

Shen Zechuan brushed his fingers over this line.

This expedition is dangerless. The Armored Cavalry has already arrived at Mosanchuan. We can reach Amu’er native place in the eleventh month. With the Huiyan Tribe as an example of the benefits of the mutual frontier trade, I have drawn over three desert tribes to our side, hoping to exhaust the combined strength of the three tribes to attack the bald vultures together. The provisions are ample, and the sweet potatoes are filling. The only thing, though, is that Lu Guangbai is way too noisy. If I can emerge victorious in one battle, I will be able to rush back home to spend the new year with you. Miss you.

Shen Zechuan looked at the bottom, where Xiao Chiye had used charcoal to scrawl a dark, starry night sky. Shen Zechuan read the few short lines repeatedly for a very long time. The candlelight shone upon the paper-cut window decoration. The night in Cizhou could still be considered refreshingly cool, but autumn was already setting in to the east of the Chashi River. Mosanchuan – or the Three Rivers of the Desert – were all

barren shores with harsh sandstorms. He wondered if Xiao Chiye would be thin when he returned.

All the thousands upon thousands of words Shen Zechuan had to say dissolved into that phrase, “*miss you*”.

There was another official letter sealed with the commander’s seal behind Xiao Chiye’s letter from home. Shen Zechuan opened it to find that it was a letter from Lu Guangbai.



Several days later, the sound of horses’ hooves broke the silence. The cold night had not yet awoken. The man who reined in the horse produced his own authority token and shouted at the soldiers guarding the camp. “Tally of urgency<sup>119</sup> from the express dispatch station!<sup>120</sup> Hurry up and open the gates. I want to see the Prince of Donglie!”

Qi Zhuyin already had a premonition when she draped her clothes around herself. She lifted the curtains and stepped out, where she saw the authentication token from the express dispatch station against the cobalt blue sky.

“Military report?” She asked.

“Military report!” The official from the express dispatch station dismounted his horse and kneeled to pay his obeisance. In a loud voice, he said, “The Ministry of War has specially authorized the Prince of Donglie, Qi Zhuyin, to dispatch troops to Dengzhou to crush the Zhongbo rebels immediately!”

Qi Zhuyin pursed her lips lightly. She did not immediately answer.

The official from the express dispatch station then stood up and lifted the tally high. “As per the imperial decree, Her Majesty has appointed the Prince of Donglie to dispatch troops! “

“There are 40,000 Capital Command Troops right in Dancheng,” Qi Zhuyin said. “Why is Shao Chengbi not making a move? Tianfei Watchtower is a key natural barrier of Dazhou. Each time my troops pass through, it will deplete several tens of thousands in military salaries.”

“The Grand Secretariat has already given an official reply in writing to the Ministry of War; Qidong’s military salaries will arrive in a few days.” The official had an oblong face shape. Formerly Shao Chengbi’s old subordinate, he had come to ask Qi Zhuyin to deploy troops. He continued, neither obsequious nor supercilious, “The ambitions of the band of traitorous rebels are all too clear. Viceroy Shao’s stationing of his troops in

Dancheng is, in fact, to guard Qudu. The traitor from the Shen clan is presently diverting his troops to Cizhou. His back is empty. As long as the Prince of Donglie sends troops, you can attack them from the front and the rear simultaneously with Viceroy Shao to besiege and annihilate the rebels.”

Qi Zhuyin did not answer.

The official pressed in a step closer. He wore a yellow belt bestowed by the emperor around his waist, along with a renowned blade bestowed by the emperor. Qi Wei promptly strode forth to stand before Qi Zhuyin and berated, “Remove your blade on seeing the prince!”

“My blade was bestowed by the Son of Heaven.” The official was not in the slightest afraid as he said coldly, “The rebels are threatening Qudu, and they have already forced their way before the emperor, so why is the Prince of Donglie unwilling to deploy troops to come to Her Majesty’s aid?” He abruptly yanked off the yellow belt. “The Qi clan takes orders from the Son of Heaven; you are a subject of Dazhou, so Qi Zhuyin, why are you not heeding the order?”

Qi Wei, having already lost his temper, snapped, “My lord’s honorable name is not something for you to call!”

The official stood tall and dauntless. “The state is in imminent danger! If the Prince of Donglie doesn’t dispatch troops, Dazhou will perish. When that time comes, the emperor is not the emperor, and the subject ceases to be the subject. You and I will merely be the slaves of a fallen empire. There will be no status and rank to speak of!”

Qi Wei was enraged. “Take him down—”

“Stand down!” Qi Zhuyin suddenly raised her hand, and the overcoat on her shoulders slid to the ground, revealing her regular wear and Zhujiu at the side of her waist. “Leave the tally behind,” she said. “I’ve got the message.”

Under the tense atmosphere, the official took the tally and presented it to Qi Zhuyin with both hands. He bowed again and said in a quiet voice, “This humble official shall wait in Dancheng for the Prince of Donglie to return in triumph.”

Having said that, he turned around and got on his horse. Without even drinking a drop of water, he spurred his horse on and set off on his return journey.

“This man is truly rude!” Qi Wei took two steps after him and looked back at Qi Zhuyin. “Commander-in-chief, why do you have to put up with

it? Qudu is the one begging us to send troops right now!”

“He’s a decent official, composed in the face of danger and calm in the face of crisis. You should learn from him.” Qi Zhuyin flipped over the tally for a look. “We have been raising our horses and training our troops to this day, and all the food consumed has to be repaid.”

“So we are really going?” Qi Wei followed Qi Zhuyin closely. “Second Master is away on an expedition. Attacking Zhongbo now is to exploit another’s plight.”

“Exploitation is still a thing when you’re fighting a war?” Qi Zhuyin turned around to enter the military tent. She set the token on the table and looked at the map hanging on the wall. “Shen Zechuan lacks generals now. There’s only a Huo Lingyun who can temporarily stand in as Dengzhou’s commander, but the soldiers under his commands are not the best quality. Twenty thousand soldiers will be enough for us to fight Dengzhou.”

“I just fear...” Qi Wei started.

“Tantai Hu can’t be in two places at once,” Qi Zhuyin continued, “and Shen Zechuan has still yet to recover from his injuries. Once I make my move, Jiming will come.”

With the interruption from Qi Zhuyin, Qi Wei forgot what he was going to say and instead exclaimed in surprise, “The Hereditary Prince—I mean, the Prince is going to return to the battlefield?”

“Xiao Chiye left his beloved there.” Qi Zhuyin cast a glance at Qi Wei. “You think he’d dare to leave without a contingency plan?”

“Libei only has 30,000 Armored Cavalry left.” Qi Wei started to worry for Xiao Jiming. “The Prince of Libei is still in recuperation. If something were to happen to him, won’t the Princess Consort drown Qidong in her tears?”

Qi Wei could already imagine what Lu Yizhi would look like as she pounded Qi Zhuyin with her fists and bawled herself a river with her eyes shut.

“River of Ice Armored Cavalry, Xiao Jiming,” Qi Zhuyin said. “He’s *the* Xiao Jiming who sped through the snowy night and crossed the river to head down south to launch a sudden assault on the Biansha Cavalry. Even if Libei had only 5,000 Armored Cavalrymen left, he would still dare to come, let alone with 30,000 of them.”

Qi Wei was already at a loss what to do. He was not at all wishy-washy when fighting battles with the Biansha Cavalry, but with Libei...

“Commander-in-chief,” he said. “If we really come to blows, we will both suffer casualties. Leaving aside the troops who will sustain injuries and deaths, the common folk in both territories will also be in a state of panic and unease. Dengzhou did a good job straightening out the grain fields this year. We cross over, and people will still have to starve to death next year. Aren’t the officials from the capital all capable? Let them convince Shen Zechuan with their eloquence. The way it seems to me, Shen Zechuan will not move as long as the Capital Command Troops remain in place.”

“Then you have to understand one thing.” Qi Zhuyin turned around and said in all seriousness, “If we don’t fight this battle, you and I will be the slaves of a fallen empire. In the future, you and I will be subjects of a former reign, and the empire will see a change of surname thereafter. If we do not bow down to Shen Zechuan, we will have to kneel to Xiao Chiye.”

Qi Wei was struck dumb.

“Since time immemorial, loyalty and righteousness have struggled to co-exist.” Qi Zhuyin looked at the map again. “And this is a perfect example.”

The sounds of footsteps suddenly rang out at the door. Qi Wei turned his head back for a look.

“I heard an official from the express dispatch station has arrived.” Hua Xiangyi was in the midst of lifting the flap to enter. She was plainly dressed in white, mourning clothes, the contrast of which accentuated her delicate, dainty features.

“A-Yin, that’s a military report?”



Before Shao Chengbi left Qudu, Li Jianting had Fengquan pack his bags for him. In truth, however, Shao Chengbi had nothing to pack. All he brought along was a broadsword.

Fengquan washed Shao Chengbi’s hair for him, then tied his hair into a topknot before the bronze mirror. Shao Chengbi’s white hair was very rough.

He said, “I can’t grow it out when going onto the battlefield to kill the enemies. Might as well cut off some.”

So Fengquan had a junior eunuch bring a razor, which he used to cut Shao Chengbi’s hair short.

“Her Majesty asked you to see me off.” Shao Chengbi’s voice had gone all hoarse from the poison he took. It was not damaged to the point he could

not speak, but his voice box was thoroughly ruined. "It is, in itself, a great kindness."

Soft shaving sounds came from the razor. Fengquan answered expressionlessly, "It is as Father says."

"This one parting stretches eternal." Shao Chengbi looked at Fengquan in the mirror. "Us father and son won't see each other again."

"Father is composed and steady in directing military operations. You will not lose." Fengquan carefully shaved Shao Chengbi's hair.

"Furthermore, the firearms of the Chunquan Battalion are all in Father's hands. They are enough to give Shen Zechuan a headache."

"He succeeds the Grand Mentor," Shao Chengbi said. "He is a formidable and ambitious man."

"The Grand Mentor might have been able to devise strategies from a command tent and score victories without a trace." White hair rustled as they fell to the ground. Fengquan wiped the blade with his thumb. The side of Shao Chengbi's neck was right within reach. "But he is afflicted with a disease that all intelligent people possess, and that is, conceit."

Shao Chengbi's blinded eye moved with great effort.

Fengquan kept away the razor and swiftly rolled Shao Chengbi's hair up to secure it in place.

Shao Chengbi sat quietly. The rays of the setting sun penetrated the window and drew a boundary line between Fengquan and him. Dust motes floated in the air.

"In the next life," Shao Chengbi said, "I will be your son."<sup>121</sup>

After a moment of silence, Fengquan answered, "Spare me."



Qudu took half a month to draft up the official proclamation and public denunciation, and the various *yamens* put it up in public. Other than the defeat of Shen Wei's troops, there were also mentions of Shen Zechuan's crimes, such as possessing his own troops under his own banner and forming a faction to plot a rebellion.

"The imperial court has shown kindness to the Shen clan, but the remaining survivor of the Shen clan proclaimed himself king in lands he seized with the intention of plotting a rebellion!" The junior *yamen* official struck the gong and shouted to those illiterate commoners. "He is now gathering bandits and pressing in towards Dancheng. He's a rebel and a traitor! From today onward, the Capital Command Troops will patrol the



city and impose a curfew. No one is allowed to go out after the hour of you!”

The Capital Command Troops, equipped with superior arms of the finest quality, ran around the streets and markets regardless of day or night. All the teahouses and wine taverns where rumors were the most prevalent were closed down. Anyone who gathered in groups was arrested and imprisoned for slander and libel. In no time, everyone was thrown into a state of alarm. The sound of stringed and woodwind instruments, as well as reed pipes, no longer permeated the most prosperous Donglong Street.

“The ascension of the emperor is neither backed by the imperial genealogy records<sup>122</sup> nor authenticated in writing in cinnabar.”<sup>123</sup> Gao Zhongxiong stepped on a rock and lifted the article high. The sun was blistering hot, and his face was all drenched in sweat. “It’s hard to believe based on Xue Xiuzhuo’s words alone! If she is truly Prince Qin’s legitimate descendent of lawful birth, then may I ask, where is the cinnabar seal? Prince Qin is without an heir; if he has a daughter of lawful birth, how could he have allowed her to end up wandering among the common people?”

“Ever since the Great Imperial Ancestor<sup>124</sup> ascended to the throne, Dazhou has had twenty-one sovereigns, and there has never been an emperor with such dubious origins in hundreds of years! Is the one everyone kneels to today a sovereign of the Li clan, or a powerful minister of the Xue clan?!” Gao Zhongxiong wiped his sweat, his tone somber, “Court politics were undermined during the reign of Yongyi, its army was defeated during the reign of Xiande. The Li clan is held captive by the noble clans. They no longer have any grace to extend. They can’t even fend for themselves!”



An urgent flurry of footsteps sounded in the office compound, while the candlelight in Mingli Hall burned through the night without end.

“The express dispatch station reported back that the Prince of Donglie meant to send troops.” The mobilization of soldiers and horses was no small matter. Chen Zhen had already been here for four days; he even had his meals and slept here. “But there is no military report as to the exact timing for departure and arrival. We have no idea too.”

“The grains were all put together in haste. We can’t wait, and we can’t let it drag on. Issue a tally of urgency. If Qi Zhuyin doesn’t get into motion,

then issue it to Qi Shiyu!” Kong Qiu sat in seat, so anxious was he that he was fuming. “If we can make it a quick battle in Dengzhou, the Beiyuan military drill grounds will definitely withdraw troops and turn back to provide reinforcements. Shao Chengbi will then be able to go into battle and follow up with an attack. But the imperial court has over ten writers, and yet Gao Zhongxiong still managed to get the upper hand. Is there no one in the Hanlin Academy and Imperial College?!”

The Grand Secretary was in a rage, and the hall fell silent for a moment. All the officials standing under the eaves with their hands by their sides kept their mouths shut.

Li Jianting’s birth origin was dubious to begin with. At first, it was said that she was Prince Qin’s legitimate daughter, but even so, she ought to have a genealogy record, or if not, at least Prince Qin’s last words in writing or cinnabar seal. When Xue Xiuzhuo verified the identity of the Heir Apparent, the proof he had produced was in the handwriting of Emperor Tianchen, Li Jianheng. The bright yellow<sup>125</sup> satin-covered folded book was indeed affixed with the imperial seal, but at that time, Li Jianheng was already dead, and the long-time officials from the Grand Secretariat all knew nothing of the matter.

And now, Zhongbo was insisting that Li Jianting was definitely not of the Li clan’s bloodline. Although the various regions strictly prohibited private discussions of state affairs, the rumors persisted. Even worse, there were also speculations about the female emperor and Xue Xiuzhuo.

“This battle is a tough one to fight,” Cen Yu said. “It’d be far better to go give the Prince of Donglie another nudge.”



Shao Chengbi bumpily hobbled his way up the city wall. He could not see Cizhou from here, only the continuous stretch of the Dunzhou garrison troops’ military tents. Tantai Hu had complied with Shen Zechuan’s order and was approaching Dancheng amidst both parties’ increasingly heated cussing.

“Tantai Hu was originally Xiao Chiye’s general, but was later transferred by Xiao Chiye to Zhongbo, where he began to guard Dunzhou. That Shen Zechuan could successfully defend Duanzhou was, in part, thanks to Tantai Hu.” The official following beside Shao Chengbi’s side was the same official who went to Qidong to deliver the tally of urgency. He was the son of a former subordinate of Shao Chengbi. His name was Xu

Yu. After the Shao clan had their properties sealed off and family members executed, he was dismissed from his military rank. He stayed in the relay station where he eked a living in a sinecure. He knew the generals from the various regions like the back of his hand.

Shao Chengbi shifted his crippled leg and moved closer to the battlements. "What is this person's relationship to Tantai Long?"

"He's Tantai Long's younger brother."

"Tantai Long is steady and reliable. If he takes after his elder brother's nature," Shao Chengbi looked at the boundless horizon where dusk was creeping up on, "then he probably won't make a rash move."

"Shen Zechuan won over the six prefectures by playing the benevolence and righteousness card," Xu Yu said, "and now he is taking the stand that 'the Li clan is malevolent', and 'the Prefectural Lord has just cause', so naturally, he would not dare to let Tantai Hu attack the city, lest he gives the others grounds for gossip. However, the way this humble official sees it, the Dunzhou garrison troops intend to encircle and block off the city gates to deplete Dancheng's granary in an attempt to force Viceroy Shao to open the gates."

"The treasury is empty, and the army is short on military grains. Besieging the city to force a surrender is indeed an excellent strategy." Shao Chengbi walked along the battlements. "How is Tantai Hu's management of his troops?"

Xu Yu looked out of the city and thought for a moment. "Relaxed and free handed," He answered.



Tantai Hu ate his meal in the camp. Ever since he had arrived at the Beiyuan military drill grounds, Yu Xiaozai had been eating and staying with him.

It was already dark now.

"Anything unusual during the night patrol?" Tantai Hu asked.

Liu Kong, who was standing at the entrance of the tent, answered, "All is well. General, that Shao Chengbi was so scared on hearing of your mighty name that he doesn't even dare to step out of the city gates."

"I heard Shao Chengbi is a cripple." Tantai Hu cleaned out his meal in several mouthfuls. "I wonder if he dares to fight on horseback with us."

"They want to defend the city." With Yu Xiaozai present, Liu Kong watched his words and merely said, "If there are any orders from His

Lordship, I'll immediately report it to you, so please take a rest, General."

The camp was buzzing with mosquitoes, so the tent flap was lowered. Yu Xiaozai soaked his feet in hot water and asked Tantai Hu in a quiet voice, "I can see that this person is quick-witted and bright. How come I didn't see him on my last tour on inspection?"

"I hadn't promoted him yet at that time," Tantai Hu said. "He has had a hard life. He comes from a farming household in Dengzhou. During the fourth year of Xiande, his family was slaughtered by the Biansha Cavalry, and he mixed in with the Fanzhou bandits for a period of time. Later, he joined my troops. I guess he can be said to have turned over a new leaf."

Meticulous as always, Yu Xiaozai thought about matters as he wiped his feet.

At night, they slept on separate beds. Tantai Hu's snores were deafening, but unexpectedly, when the hour of chou came around, his stomach started acting up. Tantai Hu initially thought that the food was unclean. He was in such pain that his face had turned white. It was only until the latter half of the night that he felt something amiss.

Outside the tent, Liu Kong reported with urgency, "General! The brothers are all having the runs!"

Clutching his stomach, Tantai Hu slipped on his shoes and lifted the tent flap to hear moans everywhere around the camp. The latrines were all crowded full of people. His expression grew slightly grim as he said, "Summon the military medics first, then send someone to convey the news immediately to Cizhou!"

Yu Xiaozai was half-dead sleeping, but he crawled up from bed on hearing the commotion. As he draped his clothes over him, he walked out and exclaimed in shock, "What's happening?!"

"Someone poisoned—"

Before Liu Kong could finish his words, the sound of vomiting rang out from the sides as all the soldiers began to throw up. With such similar symptoms, what else could it be if not a case of poisoning? Tantai Hu's heart skipped in alarm as he realized that there was a spy among the soldiers.

"Summon the military medics, quick!" Tantai Hu commanded with urgency.



Xu Yu was already asleep when he heard the scout reporting back. He did not even have the time to wash up when he went to summon Shao Chengbi. As he led Shao Chengbi up the city gate, he said, “Viceroy Shao, the garrison troops are in chaos!”

Shao Chengbi looked at the bright lights in the far distance and heard human voices.

Xu Yu was delighted. “The scout reported back that everyone from top to bottom in the garrison troops ate something bad and are now suffering from stomach upsets, with bouts of vomiting and diarrhea. That Tantai Hu is now burning with anxiety, like an ant on a hot pan.”

Being prudent, Shao Chengbi said, “Is it true? If it’s a trap to lure the enemies, there may still be an ambush.”

“Tantai Hu has the runs too. Everyone in the campground is down for the count. It doesn’t seem to be fake. Besides, Zhongbo has no reinforcements. He would never use 20,000 garrison troops to put on a show.” Xu Yu held his blade in his hand, feeling a surge of emotions in a rare moment. “Viceroy Shao, once we emerge victorious in this battle and return home in triumph, the injustices we suffered will be redressed!”

Shao Chengbi’s breathing was slightly heavy. He braced himself against the battlements, still hesitating. The junior soldier at the bottom hurried up the steps and cupped his fists at Shao Chengbi. “Viceroy Shao, the express dispatch station’s tally of urgency—the Prince of Donglie has mobilized troops!”

Shao Chengbi narrowed one of his eyes and tilted his head back to roar with laughter under the firelight. He suddenly turned back and said, “Heaven is helping me! Lead the horse over!”



Tantai Hu was down with a bad case of vomiting and diarrhea too. His stomach was churning, and his legs were trembling. There were not enough military medics to go around. The erected shack was packed full of soldiers lying down. Even Liu Kong had puked a few times.

“Is the message sent?” Tantai Hu asked with a ghastly pale face.

Yu Xiaozai smacked his thigh. “How’d I know?!”

At this moment, it was tough to even form a squad that could still stand on their feet, let alone lined up in formation. Tantai Hu extinguished half of the torches in the camp to put on a show of normalcy, but his eyelids

suddenly twitched, and he kept having the nagging feeling that something was going to happen tonight.

Liu Kong said to Tantai Hu, "The ones transporting military grains are all our own men, so nothing will go awry on the way. We have been eating rice and noodles for a month without incident, but something just had to go wrong tonight of all times..."

Tantai Hu said through gritted teeth, "There has to be a spy from Qudu among the troops."

Although Yu Xiaozai tried his best to divert the topic, he was the only one in the entire camp who was still fine. Cold sweat broke out on his back. It had already occurred to him what the other party's intent was. The gears whirled in his mind. His expression unchanging, he said, "Let's not lose our heads now. If by any chance—"

He had yet to finish speaking when he heard the sound of hooves from the western side of the camp galloping their way over. The soldiers on the watchtower struck the drum to sound the alarm. In an instant, the words "enemy attack!" reverberated through the entire camp.

Liu Kong let loose an exclamation and cried out in a fluster, "General!"

Tantai Hu abruptly jerked to his feet, his chest heaving. Then he yanked up the soldiers who were in slightly better condition and shouted, "Get into formation!"

The Capital Command Troops had light cavalry as their vanguards, so they could launch a surprise attack and gather intelligence on the facts of the matter. If the Dunzhou Garrison troops were indeed laying a trap to lure the enemies in, they would be able to retreat immediately.

The light cavalry of the Capital Command Troops charged their way to the western side. The drum on the watchtower was pounded with such intensity it was about to break. Tantai Hu raised his arm and hollered, "Archers!"

The Dunzhou garrison troops often had to face off the Biansha Cavalry, and in order to deal with the Biansha Cavalry, Tantai Hu had the bows the troops used swapped from longbows to the strong bows used by the Libei Armored Cavalry. The results had been remarkable the few times they were used in battles, but right now, soldiers who could still draw a bow were few and far between.

The bows and arrows failed to wear down the light cavalry. The other party already knew of the fatigue and frailness of the Dunzhou garrison troops. The infantrymen behind charged swiftly with shields in hands, their armors glinting in the moonlight. These were the finest gears of the Eight Great Training Divisions.

The campground's wooden fences were knocked down. Even if the garrison troops were to run now, it was too late. Tantai Hu drew his blade to face the enemies head-on, but before he could get to the infantry of the Capital Command Troops, the light cavalry rushed right into his sight. He caught a whiff of gunpowder, and his heart went cold as he rolled to the ground.

The bronze firearms instantly blasted into action, sending sparks flying in all directions.

Tantai Hu covered his head and dodged, but both his arms were stinging in searing pain. He turned his arms over and gasped in alarm.

“By grace of imperial magnanimity, the imperial court will not pursue the heinous crimes of all those willing to surrender tonight.” Shao Chengbi spurred his horse into the camp. “The 300,000-strong Qidong garrison troops have already made it past Tianfei Watchtower. The Shen clan’s rebellion has failed to come to fruition and is now at a dead end. This old man advises all in attendance to wise up and surrender before it’s too late!”



Credits: Thank you Gale for spotting the typo! <3

## ◇ CHAPTER 270: DOORSTEP ◇



Tantai Hu understood that victory would prove hard for this battle. He spat a mouthful of saliva and cursed, “Son of a bitch, wily old fox. To think you would use such an underhanded trick!”

Unmoved by the cussing, Shao Chengbi looked at Tantai Hu and continued, “By following you into battle, the soldiers are entrusting their lives to you. You have no chance of victory now. In resisting stubbornly, you are disregarding the safety of the soldiers. Tantai Hu, this old one is a former acquaintance of your eldest brother, so let me advise you again to surrender and pledge allegiances to the side of the righteous.”

“Bullocks.” Tantai Hu said coldly as he rose with his blade. “I followed His Lordship on a campaign to fight against the Biansha Cavalry, and yet you want me to surrender to you at the end of the day. Bah! I, Tantai Hu, will not bow!”

The words had yet to be fully out of his mouth when Xu Yu heard the “*whoosh*” of an arrow being released from the top of the watchtower. The whistling sound pierced through the darkness of the night, sounding particularly jarring on the ears. Xu Yu, having long heard about the smooth passage of the Zhongbo bridleway and great numbers of relay stations, guessed that Tantai Hu was passing on the news with this one move.

Xu Yu immediately advised, “Viceroy Shao, there is no time to lose. Let’s make this a quick battle and get it over and done with!”

“We treat you with compassion even though you insist on resorting to arms.” Shao Chengbi gripped the hilt of his broadsword. “To catch the



bandits, first capture their chief. Kill Tantai Hu, and we will be able to score a victory without fighting tonight.”

The Capital Command Troops had already swarmed in at the drop of his voice. The garrison troops were too powerless to resist and could only cut a wretched sight as they fled. Yu Xiaozai saw that Tantai Hu was in no position to do a thing without support. Just as he was about to be surrounded, a few partridge cries suddenly rang out from outside the camp.

Partridges?

Where on earth were there partridges in Zhongbo?

Right at that time, in the very instant Shao Chengbi drew out his new broadsword, Yu Xiaozai covered his head and shouted, “Laohu, roll!”

Tantai Hu originally did not want to roll, but at the very moment he was about to lunge forward, he felt a pain in the back of his knee and his entire body went down with a “*thud*”, his face to the ground. Before he could steady himself, he heard the military tent at the side collapse with a thunderous boom, smashing right into the Capital Command Troops in front.

The catapult!

Tantai Hu subconsciously thought it was the Biansha Cavalry, but then he thought the better of it and exclaimed with an overjoyed expression, “The Imperial Army!”

With the light from the flames, Xu Yu saw soldiers surging out from the eastern side of the camp and could not help but curse “*shit*” to himself. The firelight outside the camp suddenly intensified. The Imperial Army had even brought along the catapult from the Cizhou armory. They had been waiting for a long time just to seize the opportunity to fight the Capital Command Troops tonight.

In the twinkling of an eye, the tables had turned. Shao Chengbi wanted to withdraw his troops, but the retreat route in the back had already been intercepted and severed.

“Viceroy Shao,” Xu Yu said to Shao Chengbi, “We have played into their hands!”

The collapsed military tent knocked over the torches, and sparks abruptly shot up. The Capital Command Troops’ light cavalry were only a few hundred in number. As they hastily retreated, they bumped into the Imperial Army that had come circling around to their backs.

Tantai Hu looked as if he had seen his dear mother the instant he saw the Imperial Army. He propped himself up and rose to his feet, crying out with joy, "Bloody hell, Qiao Tianya!"

On hearing this name, Shao Chengbi looked back in the firelight. A few strands of white hair from his slightly loosened bun fell, blocking the sight of his blinded eye. His vaguely hunched back was not at all strapping tall, but it looked like a steep, protruding hill in the color of the night.

"Uncle Shao." Qiao Tianya's blade-gripping hand slid down, where it rested on the hilt of a sword that was not easily drawn. After a moment's pause, he continued, "—*Shifu*."

The past materialized in that very instant, but in just a split second, it dissolved away into the long, endless night. Qiao Tianya was at the age of four when he acknowledged Shao Chengbi as his master. This sword that he had brought along when he left Qudu had also been a gift from Shao Chengbi.

Shao Chengbi did not have a sword. He slowly drew out that brand new broadsword of his and looked at Qiao Tianya as he proclaimed in a hoarse voice, "Traitors ought to be executed."



Huo Lingyun galloped through the starry wilderness, speeding through the lush expanse of grass as he rushed in the direction of Dengzhou. At the foot of the city wall, he raised his authority token high and bellowed, "Open the gates!"

The Dengzhou overhanging gate slammed down with a thunderous bang, and Huo Lingyun galloped across the passageway, dismounted his horse, and sprinted up the city wall. He grabbed over the torch at the side and thrust it before him to illuminate the way ahead, gasping heavily for breath as he drove away the darkness. The Tianfei Watchtower mountain chain was still and silent in the pitch-dark night; the Qidong Garrison Troops mentioned in the urgent report were nowhere to be seen.

Huo Lingyun asked the general guarding the city, "Any activity from the smoke signal towers?"<sup>126</sup>

"All as usual," The general guarding the city answered.

Huo Lingyun's back was all soaked from speeding the way over. He wiped the sweat off his face with a palm and returned the torch to the general guarding the city.

"Be on your guard," he commanded.



Dark clouds hid the moon from view, and the stars faded away. All good things were gone in a flash, fleeting and ephemeral. Sparks flew all over as broadsword and sword collided. The victor was decided at the moment when Shao Chengbi fell off his horse.

His broadsword was broken, as were his master-disciple ties with Qiao Tianya.

The camp was illuminated by the collapsed and pinned-down torches. The footsteps of the Capital Command Troops were in disarray. They were no match for the Imperial Army, who were masters at combat on foot.

Shao Chengbi, too, was no match for Qiao Tianya.

Qiao Tianya was only a few steps away from Shao Chengbi. His sword returned to its sheath under the firelight, and a disarray of overlapping shadows shrouded the side of his body. In his trance, he actually bore some resemblance to the Shao Chengbi who drew his broadsword earlier.

“Defeat is certain this battle,” Qiao Tianya said softly under the crackling sound of the fire. “*Shifu* is not here to crush me.”

With his hand covering his chest, Shao Chengbi struggled to gasp for his dying breath. His pale lips opened and closed. “I’m already at this age... I’m no longer as valiant as I was in those days... I came to see you... Your father erred...” Shao Chengbi tried his best to open his eyes wide as he gazed at the blurry canopy of heaven. “... And so have I... With this battle... I’ve repaid the debt... on your father’s behalf... Shen... truly lives up to the Grand Mentor’s... words...”

Qiao Tianya looked at Shao Chengbi.

But Shao Chengbi would not look at Qiao Tianya. His hoarse voice was just like a drum that had been broken. In the last lingering moments of his life, he murmured, “Qiao Songyue. A fine lad.”

Qiao Tianya tightened his grip on the hilt of the sword. He stood unmoving and still in the entire sky of flying ashes and let the dust settle upon him, his shoulders cutting a sorry sight. The day he went to the Shao’s residence to acknowledge Shao Chengbi as his master, Shao Chengbi had patted the top of his head and said the exact words, “Qiao Songyue. A fine lad.”

Tantai Hu, who was on the other end dragging the bodies, whistled at Qiao Tianya and tossed over the firearms they had just seized.

“Other than the dozen or so equipped by the light cavalry,” Tantai Hu’s expression was odd, “the others are all malfunctioning.”



Qi Zhuyin stood before the Tianfei Watchtower’s beacon tower and overlooked the winding mountain range. This night was just like a rising tide, trapping not only her but also Qidong. She had stood here alone countless of times before, watching over the Five Commanderies.

Seeing her lonely back, Qi Wei could not stop himself from calling out, “Commander-in-chief...”

At this call, Qi Zhuyin thought of her conversation with Hua Xiangyi before she set off.

Hua Xiangyi sat upright opposite her, the white flower at her temple hidden among hair the color of raven black, as if floating open on the crystal clear water surface. It was not as conspicuous as the lady herself, but it gave her a boost of charm. As she brewed the tea, she said, “Looks like success or failure hinges on this one move, given how Qudu is pressing you so urgently.”

Qi Zhuyin watched her steep tea, her womanly, dainty hands holding up the clay teapot. Strangely enough, as long as Hua Xiangyi was there, all the strife outside seemed to have vanished. Hua Xiangyi could always quite manage to make Qi Zhuyin think of the pleasure of rouge.

“I saw that your entire army is ready to depart, so I thought of having another cup of tea with you.”

“Tea to send me off?” Qi Zhuyin asked.

As boiling water poured over the tea leaves, wisps of steam spiraled into the air.

“Tea to make you stay,” Hua Xiangyi said.

The tension in the atmosphere turned up a notch. Qi Zhuyin braced herself by the side of her knees, looking as if she was going to get up.

“By mobilizing troops, Commander-in-chief Qi means to obstruct Shen Zechuan from advancing west so that he will stay put in Zhongbo and not enter conflict with the Li clan. But if you ask me, Commander-in-chief Qi is merely deceiving yourself with this one move, much like the thief who plugs his ears when stealing a bell. Not only is it of no benefit to the common people,” Hua Xiangyi nudged the tea gently over to the other end of the small table and looked at Qi Zhuyin, “it also deviates from Commander-in-chief Qi’s original intent.”

Qi Zhuyin stopped mid-action.

The emerald window gauze reflecting the banana leaves blocked out some of the sunlight, making Hua Xiangyi look like she was sitting in a painting.

She said to Qi Zhuyin, "Food is scarce in Qudu, and the eight cities' granaries are empty. You were unwilling to follow Xiao Chiye eastward because deploying troops into war would make it hard for the common people, but how is your aid towards the Li clan now any different from sending troops?"

"The cage of the noble clans is already broken. Qudu is now at the time when they are filtering out all that is inferior and worthless." Qi Zhuyin decided to speak frankly. "Dazhou still has the opportunity to turn things around. But once Shen Zechuan's troops enter Qudu, this opportunity will be forfeited."

"I know best the eight cities' accounts," Hua Xiangyi said. "The opportunity Commander-in-chief Qi speaks of is not an opportunity for Dazhou or the common people in the world, but merely for the emperor."

Qi Zhuyin was slightly taken aback.

"The legitimate lineage of the Li clan's bloodline has long since been severed with Li Jianheng. I do not recognize who the one sitting on the imperial court right now is. When my aunt was still alive, she often said Li Jianting bears a striking resemblance to Emperor Guangcheng, but Xue Xiuzhuo insisted that she is Prince Qin's daughter.<sup>127</sup> There is one thing mentioned in Zhongbo's diatribe that is true. If this woman is really a legitimate descendant of Prince Qin, then why doesn't Xue Xiuzhuo produce the precious proof from Prince Qin? Since he is so certain, why not show the proof to convince the entire world too?"

When Emperor Xiande was still on the throne, he addressed Hua Xiangyi as "*san-meimei*", or "Third Younger Sister". Everything she used was purchased in accordance with protocols meant for a princess. Even Li Jianheng had to respectfully address her as "*jiejie*", or "Elder Sister". Li Jianting ought to have called her "*gugu*", the address for a paternal aunt. If there was anyone else in the world who could verify Li Jianting's identity now that the empress dowager was dead, it was Hua Xiangyi.

Hua Xiangyi continued in a soft voice, "If the female emperor lacks legitimacy, then how can Commander-in-chief deem herself loyal?"

Qi Zhuyin clenched the teacup. Ripples began to form on the surface of the tea. “If she can achieve peace and stability for the common people, then my helping her is loyalty.”

“If that’s the case, Commander-in-chief Qi might as well assist Shen Zechuan rather than Li Jianting.” Hua Xiangyi finally showed her mettle amid her gentle words. However, she swapped back her address of Qi Zhuyin. “A-Yin, you and Xiao Jiming are friends who have been through adversity together, and you and Lu Guangbai are former superior and subordinate. If you assist Li Jianting, these two men will have to draw their blades against you, and you, them. This is the first reason.

“Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye jointly administer military and political affairs in the northeast. Shen Zechuan’s withdrawal of troops when you attack Dengzhou is a minor matter, but Xiao Chiye’s military defeat is a major issue. A military expedition afar is arduous. Without Shen Zechuan, the 90,000-strong Armored Cavalry will undoubtedly be defeated. Should the Biansha Cavalry stage a comeback at the time, the common people in the three regions to the east would still have to face this menace. Your loyalty today is to make the expectant common people in the three regions suffer again. This is the second reason.

“Li Jianting conferred the noble title of ‘Prince of Donglie’ on you not out of gratitude, but because she was forced by the situation. It is often said that *water brims only to overflow, the moon waxes only to wane*.<sup>128</sup> Let’s say you really quell the rebellion in Zhongbo. Once Qudu settles down, Qidong will be crowned with illustrious military service, but there will be no Libei to mutually hold Qidong in check. Since she can make you a prince today owing to the situation, then she can also be forced by circumstances someday to strip you of your conferred title.<sup>129</sup> This is the third reason.

“Yao Wenyu serves under Shen Zechuan’s command, and with his eloquence, spurred all the talents in the world into swarming over to Zhongbo. Shen Zechuan not only entrusted heavy responsibilities to the former Qudu minister, Yu Xiaozai, but also promoted the former advisor of the enemy’s forces, Gao Zhongxiong. He does not let family status and past history prejudice him as he leads the advisors under this command to push ahead with the census registry. In just one year, he has already rooted out the bandits in Zhongbo and created the world’s grains hub. Given how he has acted with magnanimity in Zhongbo thus far, he will similarly be able

to accommodate the competent ministers on the imperial court when his troops enter Qudu. This is the fourth reason.”

Hua Xiangyi gently held up the white flower at her temple and said slowly, “Everything of the above that Li Jianting can do, so can Shen Zechuan, but all that Shen Zechuan can do, Li Jianting might not necessarily be able to.”

These four admonitions made complete sense, whether for personal or public reasons. Like a slap to the head,<sup>130</sup> it shattered Qi Zhuyin’s loyalty to pieces.

However, this was still not enough.

Hua Xiangyi’s slender fingers that were holding the flower formed a contrast with the eastern pearl on her ear. She still looked wan and sallow, her expression several shades downcast. She spoke slowly and unhurriedly, “A-Yin, the Secretariat Elder once said that *‘men who wield brushes die in remonstrations, while men who wield swords die in battles’*, but look, in these twenty years of political storms, how many of them are able to die worthy deaths?

“Han Cheng wanted to support a boy of his own clan into becoming the emperor, but the world wouldn’t let him, not out of loyalty to the Li clan, but because the Han clan was immoral and was thus unworthy of the throne. Dazhou’s internal and external strifes are endless, and the one who can truly end this all has long since ceased to be Li Jianting. Shen Zechuan improves the lives of the people so that they thrive. He has just cause, and he has the respect and support of the people—he is the hope of all in the world.” She slowly raised her eyes to gaze at Qi Zhuyin, as if she was gazing at the stabilizing force<sup>131</sup> that would determine the rise and fall of the empire. Her gaze held both admiration and heartache. “And now, the lives and deaths of the people all lie in this one decision of yours.”

The thick mist from the tea dispersed among the window lattice.

After contemplating it for a long time, Qi Zhuyin asked Qi Wei, “A hundred years later, will anyone still remember Qi Zhuyin?”

“They will.” Qi Wei suddenly choked up with emotions. “With this move, the Commander-in-chief will fulfill the wishes of all in the world. From now on, the people will live in peace, and the great cause will be accomplished... Who wouldn’t remember Qi Zhuyin?”

“My name cannot be recorded into history, and my memorial tablet cannot be served with offerings. This is also a violation of the Qi clan’s

ancestral teachings. I am, in truth, a traitor of Dazhou.” Qi Zhuyin gazed at the landscape. “After my passing, I will be a pile of yellow earth, a handful of sodden mud.”

With his hand on his blade, Qi Wei kneeled and said, “If Commander-in-chief Qi passes and I am still alive, I will lay offerings before the Commander-in-chief’s memorial tablet. If I’m not, then my sons, grandsons, and generations after generations of my family shall light that everlasting altar lamp<sup>132</sup> for the Commander-in-chief.”

Qi Zhuyin looked back and smiled, “In that case, it’s all worth it.”



The city of Dancheng was close to Qudu. All the imperial court officials in the capital city were on tenterhooks. Mingli Hall was brightly illuminated, and the side hall was full of people. The moment the military report came in, everyone listened carefully with rapt attention.

“What is the update on the battle?” Li Jianting asked.

“To reply Your Majesty,” the back of the military officer kneeling before the door was all drenched in sweat as he gasped heavily for breath, “the 20,000 Capital Command Troops fell for the rebel troops’ trap, and Viceroy Shao was caught in a heavy siege—”

“How about the Prince of Donglie?” Kong Qiu stood up.

The military officer wiped his sweat and answered, “The news of the Prince of Donglie’s mobilization of troops is actually faked. Qidong’s 300,000-strong Garrison Troops have not moved at all!”

The teacup in Cen Yu’s hand clattered to the ground. A sudden uproar broke out in the side hall. All the eunuchs and palace maids present were thrown into a panic.

“What about the remaining Capital Command Troops?” Xue Xiuzhuo asked.

“Transfer them back immediately!” Chen Zhen reacted swiftly and strode a step out to say in an urgent tone, “Transfer the remaining Capital Command Troops back to Qudu immediately!”

“Hold on,” Xue Xiuzhuo suddenly spoke up. He looked at the military officer and said in a low voice, “When the Capital Command Troops are being transferred back, issue the tally of urgency to Juexi, Hezhou, and Huaizhou. Say that the rise and fall of the nation all hinges on this moment. Whoever can deploy troops to aid Qudu, the imperial court will reward them with a million taels!”



One million taels—with such a heavy reward, there were bound to be brave men stepping forward.

Xue Xiuzhuo was already forced to a dead end. The riot in Huaizhou had yet to stop, and there were still leftover bandits in Hezhou. With this move, he was dangling the key to the Xi clan's money vault at the city gates of Qudu—Shen Zechuan was not invincible without the assistance of the Libei Armored Cavalry. Whoever could tilt the scale in their favor at this moment would become the next power of Dazhou!



Credit: Thank you to Katie82 for the clarification! <3

## ◇ CHAPTER 271: HUILIAN ◇



“Qi Zhuyin has really turned traitor?” Cen Yu was in disbelief. “The Qi clan has guarded Qidong for a century. With this move, she’s destroying Qidong’s hundred years of prestigious reputation overnight...”

Dazhou was surnamed Li. They could remonstrate with their sovereign and die for their sovereign, but they could acknowledge no one else other than the Li clan as their sovereign. Hua Xiangyi said that the people did not want the descendant from the Han clan because of the Han clan’s immorality. That was a pretext. The ministers who really stood in the imperial court were all ministers of the Li clan. Without the Li clan, they would all be officials of a former dynasty.

If the emperor was bad, he could be changed, but he had to be surnamed Li—This was legitimacy. Otherwise, why would Hai Liangyi remonstrate with his death? Why would Xue Xiuzhuo do his utmost to such an extent? Wouldn’t it be better for them to switch allegiances to another master and declare Libei king? Centuries of the so-called “loyalty” all rested on this one surname. Overstep that boundary, and they would be treacherous traitors and despicable scums who violated the ethics of social order.<sup>133</sup> So they ran around shouting with arms raised, doing all they could. What they wanted was a resurgence of the Li clan’s Dazhou, not to kneel to another master.

Gao Zhongxiong rose to fame, but even when Qudu read his articles, they still spat on him and cursed him. This was because he was a turncoat.<sup>134</sup> To betray his original master was to be disloyal. A minister

stood by loyalty. If he could not even stay loyal to his master, what kind of an official was he? He was merely a beast in human clothing!

Yao Wenyu was renowned all over the world for his talents, and yet the virtuous talents he sought for Shen Zechuan were mostly recluses from the countryside; those that came from Qudu were few and far between. When the Imperial College discussed him, they lamented him for being a talent led astray and cursed him for turning his back on his former teacher's legacy. Hai Liangyi remonstrated to his death to protect the legitimacy of the throne, and yet he went to serve Shen Zechuan whose origins lack integrity. He threw in his lot with a traitor, and for that, he had long been disdained by these Confucian scholars at the core of the Dazhou empire. He was no longer that unimpeachable "unpolished jade" of yesteryear.

Tears coursed down Kong Qiu's face at the way things were now. He sighed, "It is I who have misjudged Qi Zhuyin!"

"Why was Shao Chengbi so easily defeated?" Chen Zhen collapsed into his chair. "He even took away the firearms from the Chunquan Battalion..."



Shen Zechuan ascended the stairs. Dawn had yet to break, and mist was rolling at the campground they were originally stationed. He could already get a clear look at Dancheng.

"It's getting cold." Fei Sheng followed behind him, holding the overcoat for Shen Zechuan. "Master, watch out for the chills."

Thin frost condensed among the mud. Qiao Tianya, Tantai Hu, and the few of them crossed over with their blades in tow as they followed the Prefectural Lord up. Tantai Hu had just made another trip to the lavatory, and his face was ghastly pale as he kneeled to pay his obeisances to Shen Zechuan. After greeting "*Your Lordship*", he consciously felt ashamed.

"You did well beating them at their own game," Shen Zechuan looked askance at him. "Once Second Master is back, you'll be rewarded."

Tantai Hu's face flushed red. "This... This is because of Your Lordship's thorough planning... I fucking... didn't expect a spy among the troops." He did not want credit that was not his to begin with. Pointing at Yu Xiaozai at the side, he continued, "It's all thanks to Youjing for being quick-witted!"

"Then you might as well thank Ding Tao," Yu Xiaozai teased. "He was the one who struck the back of your knees and sent you sprawling for

cover.”

At other times, Qiao Tianya would have said something to poke fun at him, but today, he looked depressed as he stood by the side and said nothing.

“How did Your Lordship guess that there was a spy among the troops?” Tantai Hu inquired.

“Weren’t you the one who told me that?” Shen Zechuan asked him in reply. He was in a good mood today. “You set off for Duanzhou when you heard that Wang Xian had arrived at Duanzhou. How would you have the guts to do so in the past? Not unless there was someone else instigating you.”

Tantai Hu admired Xiao Chiye the most, and he feared Xiao Chiye the most too. Although he was headstrong and obstinate, he wholeheartedly yielded to Second Master. If there was no one dropping hints in his ears, then given his frank and blunt nature alone, the thought that Wang Xian would lodge a complaint against him would never have occurred to him.

“The only question is whether this spy,” Yu Xiaozai said, “is a spy from Qudu or Biansha.”

“I wasn’t sure at first,” Fei Sheng said. “But from what he did last night, he is clearly a spy from Qudu.”

“No,” Qiao Tianya suddenly piped up. “The spy hiding among the troops is definitely not sent by Qudu.” The rest turned back to look at Qiao Tianya, who continued, “If he was sent by Qudu, the Capital Command Troops would not have been completely in the dark... Even Uncle Shao was unaware. Your Lordship, there’s something fishy about this matter. Second Master is in the midst of pressing in towards Amu’er. If Amu’er had arranged to plant a Scorpion here, he would definitely not use laxative, but lethal poison. That way, the garrison troops will be no match for the Capital Command Troops. Once Cizhou is in danger, Second Master will withdraw his troops and return to provide reinforcement. Only then will Amu’er’s crisis be averted.”

Xiao Chiye had already arrived at Mosanchuan, where he was relying on the Huiyan Tribe to win over the three tribes to form a mutual frontier trade market alliance and prepare to attack Amu’er together. Amu’er’s vanguard, Huhelu, and chief general, Hasen, had all died in battle. At present, he was a trapped beast. If he wanted to break out of the

encirclement, killing off the Dunzhou garrison troops would be the most convenient option.

Tantai Hu, being the artless person he was, said off-handedly, “Then who else can it be? It can’t be our own people in Zhongbo, can it?”

An innocuous remark on the speaker’s part, but not so on the listener’s end.

The gears turned in Yu Xiaozai’s mind, but he did not dare to continue from where Tantai Hu left off. Were someone to say that there were no factions in Zhongbo, they would be speaking of an impossibility. When Shen Zechuan was in Cizhou in the early days, the advisors under Zhou Gui’s command clashed for this exact reason. To date, officials who held key positions in Zhongbo belonged to one of two categories. The first was local officials in Zhongbo Shen Zechuan promoted, and the second was former ministers of Dazhou who came to throw in their lots with Shen Zechuan. Although they sat on equal footing with the officials from the six prefectures, everyone’s interpersonal relationships in private differed, as were their purposes for serving the Prefectural Lord. Between them, a boundary line existed.

Yu Xiaozai studied under Cen Yu, who was a major official of the Grand Secretariat. He came to Zhongbo to meditate for peace, but in the end, he did not leave owing to his own selfish desire to follow and serve the Prefectural Lord. Shen Zechuan treated him well and entrusted him with the heavy responsibility of conducting inspection tours. He traveled around the six prefectures to supervise and inspect the government administration, and it was inevitable for him to have friction with others. However, this had not deteriorated to the point where they mutually fought each other, because he did not manage the government affairs of a prefecture, had no soldiers in his command, and reported directly to Shen Zechuan. Shen Zechuan could dismiss him at any time he so wished. The one who really upset the balance was Wang Xian. Wang Xian was a criminal official who was relegated out of the capital, yet he still had direct jurisdiction over the key economic affairs of the six prefectures—he really gave Luo Mu hell when he was in Chazhou.

“Speaking of the spy,” Shen Zechuan asked Tantai Hu, “has he been caught yet?”

“The troops were in disarray last night.” Tantai Hu looked back at the squad in the distance. “We still aren’t done with the count yet... Your

Lordship, the firearms we seized this time are all malfunctioning.”

Shen Zechuan had only just learned of this matter. With a slight frown on his face, he asked, “Malfunctioning?”

Qiao Tianya eased over to Shen Zechuan and reminded him under his breath, “That batch of firearms from King Yi of Fanzhou. There are a total of one hundred and thirty-five.”

Of Dazhou’s Eight Great Training Divisions, only the Chunquan Battalion was equipped with firearms. Back then, when Xiao Chiye wanted it, it was only by virtue of his relationship with Li Jianheng that he could get his hands on them to fiddle with. Firearms were restricted by the Ministry of War, and even the Ministry of Works did not have its blueprint, so it was very difficult for one to get leaked out. Shen Zechuan did not manage to get his hands on one either when he was in the Imperial Bodyguards. The number of firearms was scarce; excluding the damaged ones in the armory, there were less than two hundred in total.

Shen Zechuan said in a quiet voice, “Have you checked the serial numbers?”

Qiao Tianya nodded. “Uncle Shao brought along a hundred and fifty firearms. They have the same numbers as the ones Huo Lingyun handed in.”

No wonder they were malfunctioning. The real firearms had made their way into Shen Zechuan’s hands a long time ago.

Shen Zechuan was slightly stunned. Reacting swiftly, he said, “The Ministry of War had the firearms blueprint and the key to Chunquan Battalion’s armory stored away. If Chen Zhen was the one who swapped them out, he would not have handed them to Shao Chengbi, and Shao Chengbi would not have been able to deploy troops.” He looked at Qiao Tianya. In the blink of an eye, many thoughts occurred to him. “Shao Chengbi knew that this batch of firearms had been swapped, yet he insisted on sending his troops and coming over to send himself to his death, because —”

Opportunity!

If Shen Zechuan wanted to send his troops into Qudu, he needed to have an opportunity.

“The Grand Mentor wanted me to conceal myself among the Imperial Bodyguards to wait for Your Lordship.” Qiao Tianya’s eyes were pitch

black. “In the indenture<sup>135</sup> he gave to Your Lordship, there was no mention of my surname or birthplace.”

Qi Huilian only wrote the word “Songyue”.

“In that case, other than me,” Qiao Tianya said calmly and steadily, “is there another ‘Fengquan’?”

Raindrops pitter-pattered down between Shen Zechuan’s brows, and the strong wind suddenly came sweeping over, wiping out the smoke in the camp. In the twinkling of an eye, a rainstorm came pouring down in torrents. Fei Sheng shook the overcoat open to shield Shen Zechuan from the rain.

“Should there come a day you and I both lose our lives in the midst of this, the arrangement today will be the killer move that will preserve his life.”

Qi Huilian hugged his legs as he sat under the eaves and watched the torrential rain pour. He set down the empty wine gourd and grinned at an oblivious Ji Gang beside him.

“You gifted him Yang Shan Xue. I’ll give him *Shi Jun Dao*—the Blade of Regicide.”



## ◇ CHAPTER 272: TWIST ◇



Raindrops pelted the military tent. Tea was boiling on the stove. Having already changed his clothes, Shen Zechuan sat in the chair and asked Ji Gang, “Does *shifu* know ‘Fengquan’?”

“Yes.” Ji Gang held the teacup in hand and glanced at Qiao Tianya at the side. “But I had no idea he’s Shao Chengbi’s son, much less knew that Shao Chengbi was selling steamed buns at the entrance of Zhaozui Temple... When the Grand Mentor said back then that he was going to do this, he only said that Fengquan was an informer.”

“Since he is Shao Chengbi’s son,” Shen Zechuan wondered, “how did he become Mu Ru’s younger brother?”

Ji Gang held the tea in his mouth before swallowing it a while later. “Do you still remember that night when we entered Zhaozui Temple, the Grand Mentor said that Eastern Palace suffered countless casualties, injured and dead, among its subordinates? It occurred to me at that time that since the Grand Mentor could feign insanity to survive, there must be several others from the Crown Prince’s faction who could have also slipped through the net to survive too. I asked the Grand Mentor later, but he wasn’t willing to speak of it, until one day, I chatted with the palace eunuch who came every month to deliver food and heard that Prince Chu, Li Jianheng, was fond of beauties and was racking his brains to scout for them in the local regions.”

Ji Gang told Qi Huilian about it as a joke, and several months later, Li Jianheng sent Mu Ru from the manor in the City of Jincheng to Qudu.



“I inquired with the Imperial Bodyguards. They said that Mu Ru was raised and trained in the manor since she was a child, and she barely even saw her younger brother once every five or six years. Fengquan was able to follow her into Qudu because their former family house was burned down, and he had nowhere to go except to seek refuge with his older sister.” Ji Gang set down the tea bowl and said with a serious expression. “I believed it to be true. You saw it too in Qudu. That Mu Ru really treated him as her younger brother. Who could tell that this was a sham?”

Before Li Jianheng could take Mu Ru into his residence upon her arrival in Qudu, Xiaofuzi seized the opportunity to offer her to Pan Rugui. Mu Ru was very much favored and pampered by Pan Rugui, and subsequently, Fengquan got into Pan Rugui’s good graces. However, he was still not Pan Rugui’s “grandson” at that time, because Pan Rugui still had a Xiaofuzi by his side.

“On the eve of the Dragon Boat Festival in the eighth year of the reign of Xiande, the Grand Mentor devised a plan to kill Xiaofuzi. You know of this incident too. I thought the Grand Mentor just wanted to get you out of the temple,” Ji Gang said, “but who would expect a Xiao Chiye to pop out midway through?”

When Shen Zechuan thought to this point, he suddenly remembered that not long after being released from Zhaozui Temple, when he was in the Imperial Bodyguards raising elephants, Xiao Chiye intercepted him to demand his thumb ring back, suspecting that he had planted a spy around Li Jianheng.

A natural-born talent.

That was how Qi Huilian praised Xiao Chiye. Because his sense of smell was too keen. With just his understanding of Li Jianheng alone, he sensed that someone was instigating Li Jianheng to fight for Mu Ru. However, Xiao Chiye also did not expect that Shen Zechuan was not at all the person who planted the person by Li Jianheng’s side. He pitted himself against Shen Zechuan, only to turn up for it empty-handed. Qi Huilian, however, had not exposed a single trace at all. This acuity of Xiao Chiye was simply astounding.

“After Fengquan was sent in,” Ji Gang said, “the Grand Mentor never mentioned him again.”

The sound of drumming rain on the roof of the tent slightly underscored the quietness in the interior of the tent.

Hunu was lying in Yao Wenyu's lap, so Yao Wenyu did not feel cold. He broke the silence, "If it's him..."

"If it's Shao Fengquan, why did Shao Chengbi bring along the firearms?" Shen Zechuan propped up his head with his left hand, his train of thoughts running along smoothly in the warm tent. "Shao Chengbi knew the firearms were replaced to give to the Fanzhou bandits. He understood that this batch of firearms is not usable, but he still brought them along."

Shao Chengbi came to meet death in the face all to give Shen Zechuan a reason to attack the City of Dancheng. He had hundreds of ways at his disposal; he did not need the firearms to further compound the issue—unless this batch of firearms was not meant to be used at all.

Qiao Tianya, who had been leaning back in his chair, abruptly sat upright. After a moment of silence, he said, "Uncle Shao is trying to tell Your Lordship who the Scorpion is."

The firearms were given to King Yi by the Scorpion in Zhongbo, and this Scorpion in Zhongbo got them from the Scorpion in Qudu. Chen Zhen could transfer the firearms around, and he held the blueprint in hand, but strangely enough, he had totally no knowledge of the loss of firearms from the Chunquan Battalion.

"The one who has eyes and ears everywhere is none other than a eunuch." A strange feeling overcame Shen Zechuan. Some of the matters he had been clear on began to blur, while those that had been obscured started to clear up. "Lu Guangbai told me that the one who swapped out the Bianjun Commandery's military grains is the army-supervising eunuch, Yingxi."

"If that is the case, then Fuman is a scapegoat," Yao Wenyu said, "and Xue Yanqing is a shield."

"This blade," Shen Zechuan's brows creased in a slight frown, "is a little inscrutable."



"Where exactly are you from?"

Xue Xiuzhuo squatted before Fuman and examined Fuman's expression.

After all the brutal tortures, Fuman was only left with a layer of skin. He had no tongue, and could only glare at Xue Xiuzhuo with bulging eyes as he opened and closed his lips. Behind Xue Xiuzhuo, Ya-er attempted to stuff the paper and brush he was holding into Fuman's hands, but all ten of

Fuman's fingers were broken. He was already a disabled person on the last legs of his life.

Xue Xiuzhuo did not expect the Scorpions to move this fast. This was simply the same as the time they forsook Wei Huaigu back then. He stood up and said, "You are a eunuch who entered the palace during the reign of Yongyi, who has served Emperor Guangcheng. Later, Pan Rugui died, and Xiao Chiye recommended you during the public ditches case. Only then did you start to make your mark. Subsequently, you sent your godson, Yingxi, to Qidong to supervise their army and indicated to him to switch the Bianjun Commandery's military grains. You meant to make the Bianjun Commandery suffer a defeat and open up the Qidong's line of defense for Amu'er."

Gurgling sounds rang out from Fuman's throat. He touched the chains with whatever was left of his fingers and lay on the ground with his eyes staring unblinkingly at Xue Xiuzhuo.

Military and political changes were bound to be inextricably linked. Back then, after the military defeat case, Hai Liangyi and the other court ministers noticed the aberration in Dazhou. Since the beginning of the Yongyi reign, they were fighting tooth and nail with the noble clans, stuck in a stalemate between the collision of two powers. But after the military defeat case, the situation no longer developed in the way either party envisaged. The one who unmasked his true nature and gave himself away was Hua Siqian. He was too overly flustered when Hai Liangyi was chasing down the accounts, and colluded with the Biansha Cavalry to ink a debt of blood in the six prefectures. Xue Xiuzhuo, who was then Chief Supervising Secretary for the Ministry of Revenue, clearly saw the transfer of grains and silvers.

Xue Xiuzhuo turned back and muttered to himself, "But Lu Guangbai did not die. Instead, he took the Bianjun Commandery Garrison Troops with him and deserted. Qi Zhuyin swiftly returned to defense mode, and Qidong remained impregnable. Your plan failed, so Amu'er transferred Hasen away and started to launch a major offensive against Libei."

This was the entire gist of the Bianjun Commandery's military grains case.

Fuman exhaled through his nostrils and swiveled his eyes around listlessly as he started to get all worked up.

The leading factor in the Libei's military grains case was Wei Huaigu, who colluded with the Juexi officials to resell the grains to Zhongbo for huge profits. In the process, they replaced Libei military grains with moldy grains, and this matter was exposed by the relay report from Yang Cheng. The report was originally meant to be submitted directly to the Ministry of Justice, but instead, it was sent to the Ministry of Revenue on its arrival at Qudu. Both Xue Xiuzhuo and Shen Zechuan thought this to be a move to threaten Wei Huaigu, because, at that time, Xiao Chiye kept his grip on the case and refused to let go, and they had to make a quick decision to cut their losses and kick Wei Huaigu out. Only then could they ensure that the other Scorpions hiding in Qudu would not be implicated.

In that case, who else was a part of these "others" apart from Fuman?

Fuman's bloody palm scraped across the ground as he strained himself to scrawl in an attempt to tell Xue Xiuzhuo something. Streaks of blood intersected on the ground, and his breathing gradually grew heavier. All of a sudden, he heard the door to the cell open.

"Your Excellency," Fengquan stood outside the door as per the regulations. "The relay report said the defectors have arrived. The Grand Secretary and Her Majesty are both waiting in Mingli Hall for Your Excellency to head over for a discussion."

As the cell was dimly lit and the hall was brighter, Fengquan's bowing shadow crept into the cell and shrouded Fuman. Fuman looked as if he had been bitten by a snake, his tears and sweating flowing as he stared at Xue Xiuzhuo's back. He parted his lips, but could make no sound.

Fengquan made way for Xue Xiuzhuo. After the latter left, his gaze shifted back to Fuman. Fuman panted for breath heavily, his chest heaving. The corner of his lips was still drooling with clear fluid that could not be concealed. Fengquan circled around him to size him up. When the cell door was shut tight, he kicked Fuman with his foot.

"What were you going to tell Xue Yanqing?" Fengquan looked at the criss-cross of bloodstains on the ground, and understanding dawned on him. "You wanted to write my name."

Fuman attempted to escape from Fengquan's shadow, but he could not move.

"Don't rush it." Fengquan gripped Fuman's wrist and led him to write on the ground, stroke by stroke. "Hush. Listen to me. Even if you tell him,

he won't believe you. When the time is right, I will tell him myself. All clever people need such a lesson like this."

Fuman's entire arm was trembling.

The bloodstains on the ground increased as Fengquan stubbornly persisted in writing. Leading Fuman, he turned a stroke in the "feng" that Fuman had written into a crooked "kill".<sup>136</sup>

"Hang in there," Fengquan said in a feminine manner. "I will not treat you unjustly."



Tantai Hu finished the headcount of the garrison troops but did not see Liu Kong, so he asked around, only to realize that Liu Kong had really gone missing.

"That son of a bitch had better not flee before the battle." Tantai Hu gripped the name roster. "I must have been blind, putting in all my effort to nurture him!"

"He waited for both sides to suffer casualties, but he didn't expect His Lordship to have such incredible foresight. If he stays on any longer, he won't be able to make his escape." Seeing no one else around, Yu Xiaozai whispered quietly to Tantai Hu, "When you report it to His Lordship later, just say it as it is. Don't say a word more than necessary."

It was only then it hit Tantai Hu. He blurted in shock, "You're saying that Liu Kong is the spy?! He fought battles too when he followed me to Duanzhou! Besides, as Qiao Tianya said, what's the point of him giving us the runs?!"

Unable to explain it, Yu Xiaozai simply said, "Just report to His Lordship as is, and His Lordship will understand. What I'm worried about now is that the traitor behind him will run too now that he has fled!"

Tantai Hu felt a chill run down his back. He took a few steps out, then backtracked and said quietly, "Tell me on the sly, so I know how things stand and prepare myself for it. The advisors all love to speak incisively in profound terms. If they don't say the name, I won't be able to guess it. I may have a bad temper and erred back in Dunzhou, but I don't think I have ever offended anyone. This crook has to have a reason for doing this to me!"

So Yu Xiaozai stretched out a finger to point to the south, looking to be in a spot. "This... *sigh*, you just got caught in the crossfire."

Officialdom was like a spiderweb where every thread and node was intricately connected. Any single promotion or dismissal could cause repercussions within its range. Yu Xiaozai could not say it, for he had no evidence. If he spoke up rashly, he would be suspected of ostracizing fellow officials.

Chazhou, which was under Luo Mu's charge, was the main gate to the trade route between Huaizhou, Cizhou, and Chazhou. In the earliest days, Shen Zechuan had no one under his command. As Chazhou's prefecture perfect, Luo Mu held the three powers – legislative, executive, and judicial – in hand, and no one other than the Imperial Cavalry censors could restrain him. In any work he did, he only had to send in a request document to ask Shen Zechuan; he had no need to seek another's opinion. Over time, Shen Zechuan would lose the "eyes" he left in Chazhou. As such, when Wang Xian, who came from the Ministry of Revenue, made his appearance, Shen Zechuan immediately had him assigned to Chazhou.

Wang Xian had the power and authority to administer the economy of Chazhou, and he took over the management of Chazhou's Tax Circuit Intendants and taxation of the commoners' fields. This, in truth, had already split away Luo Mu's powers. Luo Mu wanted to take Wang Xian out of the game, but he could not impeach the latter or stir up trouble. The safest way was to strike at him by leveraging someone else's might. The Dunzhou *yamen* bore ill will towards Tantai Hu. Tantai Hu was impulsive and prone to causing trouble, and he had no personal relationship with Luo Mu. Luo Mu arranged for Liu Kong to go over and planted him by Tantai Hu's side. It just so happened that Wang Xian had to make arrangements for the military grains. When both encountered each other, no doubt a dispute would arise. Tantai Hu was also Xiao Chiye's trusted aide, and Wang Xian could not afford to offend him, so he could only take the matter to Shen Zechuan. Were Shen Zechuan to probe into the matter, he would be probing the Dunzhou *yamen* and Tantai Hu, which had nothing at all to do with Luo Mu.

With this move, Luo Mu could plant his own man in the Dunzhou garrison troops and, at the same time, make Wang Xian lose Shen Zechuan's favor. What was the relationship between Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan? If Wang Xian insisted on stirring up trouble with Tantai Hu, he would be putting both the Prefectural Lord and Second Master in a spot.

Shen Zechuan assigned Yu Xiaozai to supervise the army, and Yu Xiaozai was an official from Qudu. If Yu Xiaozai were to screw things up in the Dunzhou garrison troops, he would become a spy in collusion with Qudu. Then Wang Xian, who was similarly an official from the capital, would surely be implicated.

This was called “striking a cow from the other side of the mountain”.<sup>137</sup>

This matter was initially a done deal, but Shao Chengbi proved to be a stroke of bad luck. Luo Mu himself probably did not expect that the viceroy Qudu had carefully selected was here to throw his life away. Long before the Capital Command Troops came attacking, Liu Kong sensed Yu Xiaozai watching him, so of course, he would seize his opportunity during the chaos to run once the battle started.

“Quick, go and inform His Lordship.” Yu Xiaozai lifted the hem of his robe and walked toward the other end. “I have to ask Fei Sheng if the Imperial Bodyguards set up in Chazhou have been withdrawn!”

Fei Sheng was in the midst of having his meal. After hearing Yu Xiaozai’s question, he replied in puzzlement as he held his bowl in his hands, “Of course, they had been withdrawn. At that time, when His Lordship went over to Duanzhou, he wanted to establish the Imperial Cavalry. We don’t have enough manpower, and there’s you to supervise the various regions’ *yamen*. So my men were all withdrawn.”

Yu Xiaozai promptly exclaimed in shock, his face turning pale as he said, “Oh no, Old Fei, this is bad!”



Xue Xiuzhuo braved the rain to make his way over to Mingli Hall. When he entered, he saw everyone wearing a myriad of expressions.

“News came in earlier.” Cen Yu gestured for Xue Xiuzhuo to look at the letter. “Luo Mu of Chazhou brought along 20,000 garrison troops to defect to us!”

“I suspect it’s a trap Shen Zechuan laid,” Kong Qiu said. “Why would Luo Mu take such a risk instead of remaining in his position as the prefectural prefect of Chazhou?”

“Firstly, because of the imperial court’s reward of one million,” Chen Zhen said. “And secondly, because he is sincerely loyal to the state. He was forced to submit to the rebels against his own will. From what he said in the letter, he already had the intent to switch allegiances a long time ago.

However, Shen Zechuan had misgivings of him, and that was why it was only until today that he dared to risk his life to come to the state's rescue."

"The garrison troops from Huaizhou are still on the way." Li Jianting stood beside her desk. "If Luo Mu is already on his way, then going by the timing, he will arrive a few days later."

"Dancheng is already lost to us. Assemble the remaining Capital Command Troops," Xue Xiuzhuo said. "Together with the men Luo Mu brought with him, we still have 30,000 soldiers. Qi Zhuyin wants to betray the state. Sure. Grand Secretary, please write a letter to Qi Shiyu and ask him if he wants to turn traitor too."

He folded up the letter.

"Midway in his journey, Luo Mu can intimidate Hezhou to make the Yan clan of Hezhou hand over their remaining grains as well as cut off Shen Zechuan's grains route. Without Chazhou and Hezhou, Shen Zechuan would be no different from having an arm severed. We are lacking in grains, so his grains have to be depleted too—Now that the 90,000 Armored Cavalry soldiers have penetrated deep into the desert, for each day Xiao Chiye doesn't return, Shen Zechuan will be hard-pressed to forge ahead."



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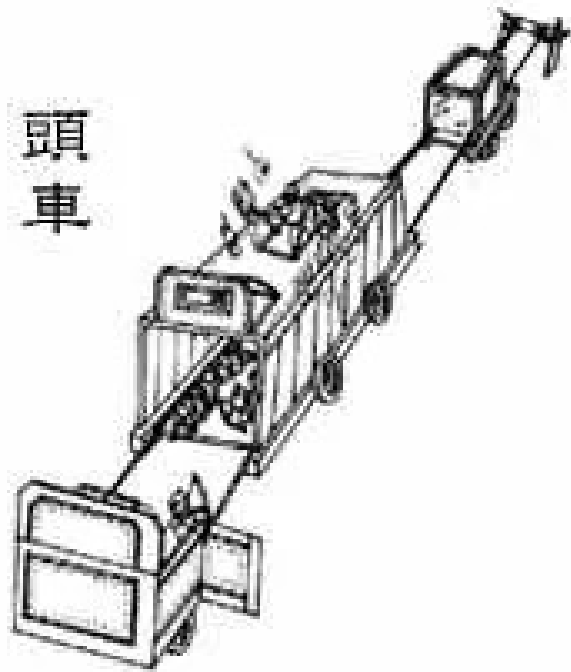


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### Footnotes

1. 绣春刀 The Xiuchun Blade was the blade of the Imperial Bodyguards during the Ming Dynasty.
2. 狼烟 specifically smoke of wolves' dung burnt to indicate the presence of hostile forces





- 3.
4. 头车 literally head cart according to sources; a complex siege weapon used for mining which can also be used as a protective cover during a siege.



- 5.
6. 包袱, a cloth bundle. In the old days, people traveled around with their clothes and possessions bundled up with a piece of cloth.

The bundle was then worn across the shoulders and carried around. It also works for carrying food around.

7. 狼烟 specifically smoke of wolves' dung burnt to indicate the presence of hostile forces



8.

9. 单梢炮 Single-component catapults, or one-branch trebuchet

10. 浮萍 also refer to a person who wanders from place to place; a drifter with an uncertain life

單梢砲



- 11.
12. 单梢炮 Single-component catapults, or one-branch trebuchet
13. 玉带 literally jade belt, or belts made of jade worn by high-level government officials in the course of duty. It's also a term in Fengshui where the road surrounds the building, much like how the jade belt embraces the waist of the wealthy in graceful semicircular arcs.
14. 车轮战 the tactic of several persons or groups taking turns in fighting one opponent in order to wear him down (kind of attrition warfare)
15. Presumably, it explicitly refers to his blade (*"this blade of mine"*) but the way it is phrased also can be read as referring to himself as the blade (*"this blade that is me"*)
16. Refer to [chapter 174](#)
17. 赤缙 also refers to light red.



18.

19. 门闩 it's a bolt in the shape of a horizontal bar , or rod, that's used to hold a door closed in ancient days. Could be long or short. Something like the above.

20. Full line is:

The passage of heavy frost through the lands  
leaves not a blade of grass in its wake.

Refer to [chapter 211](#)

21. Just a note that he literally said 蛇 which is “snake”, although what he meant was 四脚蛇 literally “four-legged snake”, i.e., lizard.

22. 四脚蛇 is also literally translated as “four-legged snake”, aka lizard.

23. 黄册 *Huangce* or literally yellow registers/yellow book served during the Ming Dynasty to provide basic data for taxation and recruitment based on the household's classification according to their occupation. It was mainly divided into three categories: civilian, military, and craftsman.

24. Youxiong is a tribe that takes the bear as its totem. The Biansha Tribes' names are based on animals. For a list, you can refer to to the [worldmap](#).

25. Refer to 242

26. For those who forgot, refer to chapter 250, returning of the head to the Biansha Tribes is considered a humiliation of sorts.

27. 既然 *jiran* literally means “since”

28. 元气 or *yuan qi*, or primordial *qi*, or vital energy, is the fundamental *qi* we are born with.

29. Just a note that it actually said “mother“ in the raws, not sure if it was an unintentional typo. As usual, will double check with the traditional chinese physical copy when it is released.
30. A practice in former times where two locks of hair from the husband and wife are bound together during the wedding as a symbol of lasting union.
31. 小师父 Little *shifu*, or Little (Venerable) Master, the *shifu* here is term of respect for a monk or nun and is not referring to Jiran as Qiao Tianya’s martial art master.
32. 施主 *shizhu*, or benefactor, patron; term used by monks or nuns as a general term of address towards laymen; also used by Buddhist monks or Taoist priests for someone who has contributed to a monastery or temple.
33. This *shifu* here is legit his shifu lol. To distinguish between the *shifu*, we’ll be using *shifu* for one’s master and little (venerable) master as the monk address for Jiran.
34. “绿水无忧，因风而皱；青山不老，为雪白头① by Shen Yi-fu (沈义甫)
35. 因缘 in Buddhism, all things, phenomena, and social activities are believed arise out of the combinations of causes (因) and conditions (緣) (i.e., primary cause and secondary causes that combines to bring about a result, or effect (果). 因缘 also refers to predestined relationship or affinity.
36. “一切有为法，如梦幻泡影，如露亦如电，应作如是观。” from the Diamond Sutra 《金刚经》 Basically, all phenomena are fleeting and ephemeral, so we should treat them as such.
37. Refer to [chapter 184](#)
38. 向死而生 “being-towards-death”, a concept by German philosopher Martin Heidegger. According to Heidegger, the human being is a “being toward death” (*Being and Time*), one who cannot fully live an authentic life unless one confronts one’s own mortality.
39. 相 in Buddhism at its most basic refers to form or appearance, etc of all things. Sort of mean how he still has an attachment to all things/phenomena/etc in the secular world and can’t renounce the world just yet.
40. Refer to [chapter 203](#)

41. This is the mute lad mentioned in [chapter 221](#), will use Ya'er ("mute lad") as his name.
42. Having a son to carry on the family line is considered an act of filial piety in ancient times.
43. i.e., tom, dick, and harry
44. Does not refer to real descendants but the people under his "protection," just like how Fengquan was Pan Rugui's god-grandson and Ji Lei was Pan Rugui's godson. So this eunuch has to be someone with high rank and power in the palace who can bring some benefit to his 'descendants', such as better treatment and opportunities, etc.
45. 老祖宗 literally old ancestor or forefather; sometimes the top eunuch in the Ming Dynasty is privately addressed as such
46. 太祖 *Taizu*, Great (Imperial) Ancestor ; usually the posthumous title of the first emperor (or founder) of a new dynasty.
47. Refers to Pan Rugui
48. 铁券 iron plaque, conferred by the emperor on a distinguished minister as a special honor. It is being used here as a "free-pass".
49. 军屯 military troops (mostly in border regions) who carry out garrison duties and farm crops to supply the border garrisons with grains.



- 50.
51. 杏眼 almond eyes; a kind of eye shape said to give off a younger, adorable or pure vibe.
52. 三姓家奴 literally, a slave with three surnames. The term originates from the Romance of the Three Kingdoms 《三国演义》 and refers specifically to Lu Bu. It's used mockingly to refer to capricious, disloyal and unrighteous people who serve traitors.

53. 治大国若烹小鲜 literally, ruling a large state is like cooking/steaming/boiling a small fish. Just as one should not turn small fish too frequently when cooking lest they break apart, the ruler of a big country should not make unpredictable changes in policy or otherwise interfere too much in the lives of the people, but instead should respect the natural order of society, from Tao Te Ching (Daodejing) 《道德经》 by Laozi
54. As offerings. The burning of offerings is considered an expression of filial piety to provide the deceased with the means to enjoy the comforts of what they once had when they were alive.
55. 旌旗十万斩阎罗<sup>①</sup> Original quote “此去泉台招旧部 旌旗十万斩阎罗。” “I shall head to the netherworld to summon my former [deceased] comrades and, with a banner of 10,000 [soldiers], slay the King of Hell (a reference to the Kuo//min//tang here)” from “The Three Chapters of Meiling” 《梅岭三章》 by Chen Yi (陈毅).
56. 斩阎罗 Zhan Yan Luo, aka, Slay(er of) the King of Hell
57. 年号 reign title a designation for the years when an emperor was on the throne
58. 盛胤 the name Shengyin would translate to “prosperity for posterity“.
59. It says Marquis of Bianbo in this chapter. Previously in earlier chapters, it was Marquis of Biansha, and then he got “promoted” to Earl of Biansha. Will double-check with the traditional Chinese copy when it is released.
60. 异姓王 Specifically princes, or lords, with different surnames from the imperial family These were conferred princes who were bestowed the title by the Emperor.
61. 三人成虎, literally three men make a tiger. i.e., three people spreading reports of a tiger would make one believe that there is really one around. Basically, a repeated rumor becomes a ‘fact’.
62. From here onwards, Li Jianting used “朕” (*zhen*) to refer to herself (unless stated otherwise). It’s an imperial term for “I” exclusively used by the Emperor. It differentiates the monarch from all his people and subjects.
63. 异姓王 Specifically princes, or lords, with different surnames from the imperial family. These were conferred princes who were bestowed the title by the Emperor.

64. \* Li Jianting used the common “I” (我) here (marked with \*), then reverted to the imperial “I” (朕) used exclusively by the emperor.
65. 君臣本同治乱，共安危 from “Essentials of Government in the Zhenguan Reign” 《贞观政要》 is a compendium on statecraft during the Zhenguan reign (627-649) in the Tang Dynasty.
66. 舌上有龙泉，杀人不见血 i.e., Words (of a sharp-tongued person) can do serious harm; from “Essentials of Government in the Zhenguan Reign” 《贞观政要》 is a compendium on statecraft during the Zhenguan reign (627-649) in the Tang Dynasty. Longquan refers to a city in southern Zhejiang province where famous Longquan swords are made.
67. 二叔 *er'shu* (for Xiao Chiye) vs. 二叔叔 *er'shushu* (for Shen Zechuan). 叔叔 as “uncle” refers to one’s father’s younger brother and is also a child’s form of address for any young man one generation older.
68. The full line, “以铜为镜，可以正衣冠；以史为镜，可以知兴替；以人为镜，可以明得失” by Tang Taizong (唐太宗); He who uses bronze as his mirror can tidy his apparel; He who uses history as a mirror can know of the rise and fall of a dynasty; he who uses people as his mirror can understand successes and failures.
69. 企者不立，跨者不行 from 《道德经》 Tao Te Ching (Daodejing) by Laozi
70. 清谈 Qingtan is a Chinese philosophical movement and social practice among political and intellectual elites where the literati engaged in highly sophisticated intellectual and philosophical discussions on lofty and non-mundane matters.
71. A variant of 天下英雄入吾彀中矣 “*all heroes of the world have fallen into my trap*” spoken by Tang Taizong in reference to the imperial examinations, which not only build a meritocratic government but also replace martial conflicts for civil examinations. The people, in voluntarily choosing to take the examinations, thus fall into Taizong’s “trap”, spending their lives dedicated to studying the classics (which instill precisely the values that keep the emperor in power) rather than rising in rebellions, etc.
72. His name means 延 (extend/prolong/engage) 清 (clear/pure/upright/impartial)



73. 太祖 *Taizu*, Great (Imperial) Ancestor “; usually the posthumous title of the first emperor (or founder) of a new dynasty.
74. 乱世用重典, Govern with severe punishments in turbulent times. i.e., the rulers should impose strict laws and inflict severe punishments in turbulent times, especially as a deterrent, from “Grand Pronouncements of Ming” (明大诰).
75. 份子钱 gift money that is given during occasions like weddings, birth of a child, etc
76. 清谈 *Qingtán* is a Chinese philosophical movement and social practice among political and intellectual elites where the literati engaged in highly sophisticated intellectual and philosophical discussions on lofty and non-mundane matters.
77. specifically elder sister and younger brother
78. 见字如晤 literally seeing this letter is akin to a meeting in person. It’s commonly used in old times as an opening, sort of like “I hope this letter finds you well” in modern times.



79.

80. 团领衫 or 圆领袍 round-collared robe/attire typically worn by officials in the Ming Dynasty.

81. 亩, *mu*, or Chinese acre, measure of land equal to 0.0667 hectares

82. 掌中物 literally object in one's palm, also used to refer to being in one's control.

83. 沈腰潘鬓 *shen yao pan bin* (the 'shen' here is the same 'shen' in Shen Zechuan); refers to a man with a frail body and premature graying of hair.

84. 萧郎 *Xiao-lang* (the 'xiao' here is the same 'xiao' in Xiao Chiye); 郎 *-lang*, young man; a form of address that is also used as a term to address a lover or husband. So if your lover has the surname Zhang (张), you would be calling him *Zhang-lang* (*zhanglang* written in different characters btw, also means cockroach); 萧郎 *Xiaolang* as a whole also refers to a male lover or beloved in poetry.

85. Anitabha, or Amitabha, read with Jiran's accent.
86. The official title is Tax Circuit Intendant,(督粮道) but it's also a counterpart of Grain Tax Circuit (粮储道). Literally though, 督粮道 is "Grain-supervisory Circuit".
87. Households were classified and recorded into the *Huangce* or yellow registers/yellow book (黄册) according to their occupation to provide basic data for taxation and recruitment. It was mainly divided into three categories: civilian (民户), military (军户), and craftsman.
88. 打肿脸(充胖子) slap one's face until it's swollen (in an effort to look imposing); to do something beyond one's means in order to be impressive
89. 宝剑锋从磨砺出 The sharp edge of a treasured sword is the result of honing. i.e., one's mettle or abilities have to be honed in order to become useful and outstanding
90. 车到山前必有路 i.e., things will always sort themselves out; cross the bridge when you come to it.



91.



92.

93. 独轮车 i.e., a kind of wheelbarrow

94. 都军 it is also used as another name for the Imperial Army during the Song Dynasty, but to make it less confusing, we'll use Capital Command Troops, aka troops in active service in the capital
95. 伯乐 a figure famed for his ability to judge the quality of horses. Refers to someone who is a good judge of talents.
96. 帝王之道：制衡之术 art of rulership/governance of ruler: The technique of checks and balances was one of the most common political tools used by the emperors in ancient China to govern their officials.



97.

98. 太师椅 *Taishi* Chair or Grand Preceptor Chair, is a classical style of a wooden armchair in ancient China.



99.

100. A form of hand exercise using a pair Baoding balls, designed to help relieve stress while building finger dexterity and wrist and forearm strength. We all know what you're thinking though. (° 5 °)



101.

102.里 *li*, an ancient measure of length, 1 li is approx. 500m

103.吴下阿蒙 General Lu Meng (from the Three Kingdoms Period) was originally uneducated, but he later devoted himself to studying for many years, becoming so knowledgeable and wise that he surprised Lu Su, who said to him, “*You are no longer A-Meng from Wu*”. Now used as a model of self-improvement through diligent study.

104.水(至)清则无鱼 literally, water that is too clean has no(/few) fish, i.e., one should not demand absolute purity; you cannot expect everyone to be squeaky clean.

105.Chrysanthemums, which symbolize longevity, bloom around the ninth lunar month, also called “the month of chrysanthemum”. It is also customary to hold chrysanthemums appreciation sessions during the Double Ninth (Chongyang) Festival. Chrysanthemum is also one of the Four Gentlemen (along with plum, orchid, and bamboo) in Chinese art, which compares them to the Confucian *junzi*, or “gentlemen”.

106.硕鼠 a large rat; a metaphor for a greedy official who levies and collects money.

107.太宗 *taizong*, posthumous name given to second emperor of a dynasty

108.木秀于林，风必摧之；堆出于岸，流必湍之 from “On Fortune And Destiny” 《运命论》 by Li Kang (李康). I.e., a person

who is too outstanding will incur jealousy and is easily subjected to attacks and slanders.

109.名帖 (also 拜帖), a name card (or visitation card) written on paper or wood used by officials, nobles, or distinguished people to notify the other party of their visit. It would usually indicate his name, position, and so on.

110.天理 “Law/Principles of Heaven” i.e., feudal ethics as propounded by the Confucianists in the Song Dynasty

111.任贤必治，任不贤必乱 (original line 任贤必治，任不肖必乱) from “Historical Events Retold as a Mirror for Government” 《资治通鉴》 compiled by Sima Guang.

112.明者，销祸于未萌 from “Historical Events Retold as a Mirror for Government” 《资治通鉴》 compiled by Sima Guang.

113.穷则思变 literally one will start thinking about changes when he is in extreme poverty (or when he hits rock bottom or is at the end of his resources).

114. Based on “君王死社稷” the sovereign die for the state from “The Books of Rites” 《礼记》

115.物不极则不反，恶不极则不亡 from “Historical Events Retold as a Mirror for Government” 《资治通鉴》 compiled by Sima Guang.

116.一春秋 also refers to a year

117.招文袋 a small bag hung at the waist for keeping documents or money.

118. The first two characters for “moon over pines” (松月, literally pine moon) are the same characters for Qian Tianya’s name, Songyue.

119. The first two characters for “wind and spring” (风泉, literally wind spring) are the same characters as the name of the eunuch, Fengquan.

120.松月生夜凉，风泉满清听 “Overnight at Master’s Mountain Lodge When Ding the Eldest (Ding Feng) Failed to Arrive” 《宿业师山房待丁大不至》 by Meng Haoran (孟浩然), a Tang dynasty poet.

121.长生牌 Longevity tablet, a tablet used to pray for the blessings of one’s benefactors. (As opposed to ancestral tablets to pray to one’s dead ancestors.)

- 122.批红 compilation of an endorsement on a memorial; chief eunuchs had the right to note down remarks in red color (*pihong* 批紅) on the incoming memorials, even before the Emperor had seen them.
- 123.老祖宗, *lao-zuzong* or old/senior forefather/ancestor is also used to address the top eunuch. 小祖宗 *xiao-zuzong* or little/junior forefather/ancestor is also used as “little brat/little devil”.
- 124.酷吏 specifically officials who used harsh laws or torture to brutalize the people.
- 125.It was Emperor Guangcheng in the jjwxc version but edited to Emperor Yongyi (after the name of his reign) in the simplified Chinese physical copy. As usual, the final copy will be double-checked against and based on the traditional Chinese physical copy when it is released. Please bear with us for now.
- 126.Specifically to retire after achieving success.
- 127.纸贵 literally paper expensive. When a work is so popular everyone is copying it to circulate it, leading to paper shortage and causing the price of paper to skyrocket.
- 128.黄册 *Huangce* or yellow registers/yellow book served during the Ming Dynasty to provide basic data for taxation and recruitment based on the household’s classification according to their occupation. It was mainly divided into three categories: civilian, military, and craftsman.
- 129.火牌 military token/tally/seal or warrant to identify and authenticate soldiers delivering urgent messages.
- 130.急递铺 urgent delivery station or express post station. Together with the relay (post) stations, they formed the “arteries and veins” of the Ming Empire, working together to circulate people, information, and goods throughout the lands.
- 131.Supposedly, to repay the debt he owes his son in this life.
- 132.玉牒 literally jade records; i.e., genealogy record of the imperial family
- 133.朱批/朱砂印 literally vermilion or cinnabar seal as authentication
- 134.太祖 *Taizu*, Great (Imperial) Ancestor “; usually the posthumous title of the first emperor (or founder) of a new dynasty.
- 135.Yellow was the color of the emperor.

136.狼烟(台) specifically smoke of wolves' dung burnt to indicate the presence of hostile forces

137.For those still confused, Li Jianting is the end result when Emperor Guangcheng forced himself on his daughter-in-law, aka Prince Qin's wife, so if you were to really go into it, she's both Emperor Guangcheng's daughter and granddaughter.

138.水满则溢，月盈则缺。 Water brims only to overflow, the moon waxes only to wane. i.e., things/situations reverse when they reach their extreme or limit.

139.异姓王 Specifically princes, or lords, with different surnames from the imperial family These were conferred princes who were bestowed the title by the Emperor, so naturally, they can be stripped of the title by the emperor too.

140.当头棒喝 literally, a blow to the head or a loud shout; i.e., a stern advice/criticism or a severe shock that brings one to a sudden realization of the error of one's thinking/ways. From a traditional Chan (Zen) Buddhist teaching method where a monk would often hit a beginner student on the head or shout loudly at him to shock him out of his erroneous thinking and help him achieve enlightenment.

141.定海神针 literally "The Sea-Anchoring Divine Needle".

According to the novel Journey to the West 《西游记》，this was a divine 'needle' (or pole) that could shrink and grow according to its owner's wish. At first, it was a treasure of the Eastern Sea Dragon King's Dragon Palace, but Sun Wukong (孙悟空) later took it away to use as his weapon and changed the needle's name to the Ruyi Golden Cudgel (如意金箍棒). It's used to refer to a stabilizing force.

142.长明灯 *changming* lamp (or literally eternally bright lamp), an altar lamp that is kept burning day and night usually set in front of a memorial tablet on the family's ancestral altar as a visible aspect of ancestor veneration.

143.纲常 i.e., the three cardinal ethical relationships of social order (including the relationship between the ruler and his subject, father and son, husband and wife) and the five constant virtues in Confucianism.

144.三姓家奴 literally, a slave with three surnames. The term originates from the Romance of the Three Kingdoms 《三国演义》



and refers specifically to Lu Bu. It's used mockingly to refer to capricious, disloyal and unrighteous people who serve traitors.

145. 卖身契 more specifically, it's an indenture or a deed of sale of oneself or one's family member to someone else (e.g., into slavery, etc, or in Qiao Tianya's case, to repay a debt.)

146. For those interested in the actual characters in Chinese, Fuman wrote “风” which is the “*feng*” in “Fengquan”. Fengquan changed the “X”-like stroke into “杀”, or “*sha*”, which means kill.

147. A martial arts move where one hits an enemy from a distance away without actually laying hands on said person. i.e., to deal an indirect strike

## ◇ CHAPTER 273: REVEAL ◇



### Note:

The titles in chapter 273, 274 – Reveal (显山), Unveil (露水) – are from the idiom “显山露水”. i.e., to reveal or flaunt one’s talents or the facts.



Located to the east of Gedale, Mosanchuan made its name from the three rivers stretching uninterruptedly into the desert, where several *li* of barren shores and the Gobi Desert lay, adorned only by swathes of desert poplar trees.

It was already dark in Qudu at this moment, but here, it was still evening.

Xiao Chiye pillowed his head on both arms and watched the last sunset.

The sky of Mosanchuan was so vast that if one were to lie on the sandy ground and watch for long, they would have the illusion of being embraced in heaven’s arms. Like flowing syrup, the viscous glow of the sunset flooded over the earth.

Meng landed beside Xiao Chiye and hopped onto his chest. Xiao Chiye had been holding a straw of grass in his mouth, which he spat out when he felt the weight on his chest as Meng stepped on him.

“Hey,” Xiao Chiye said, “You’re so heavy, *gege*.”

Meng cocked its head and looked askance at him with the eye on one side.

Xiao Chiye could only free an arm and ruffle Meng's feathers. He whistled at Lang Tao Xue Jin, which was by the stream drinking water, and indicated for it to come over and take Meng away to play. Lang Tao Xue Jin, however, trod on its front hooves and turned its ass around to continue drinking the water.

The Armored Cavalry had been stationed here for a few days already. Lu Guangbai took off his helmet and patted off the sand all over him as he walked over.

"Commander-in-chief Xiao." Lu Guangbai's neck was damp with sweat. He followed Xiao Chiye's gaze and looked to the west. "Laid-back, aren't you?"

"That, I'm not. I'm miserable deep down." As if that was very much the case, Xiao Chiye pointed to the west with the hand he used to stroke Meng. "My wife is over there at that end, his face awash in tears every day as he awaits my return home."

"Put it on the record." Lu Guangbai tossed the helmet to Chen Yang. "Go back and tell that to your household's prefectural lord, and we'll see exactly whose face it is that's awash in tears."

Xiao Chiye waited for Lu Guangbai to sit down before asking. "What did the Mengtuo Tribe say?"

"Same old words." Lu Guangbai propped himself on his knees. "Baya'er is determined to betroth his daughter to you. If you don't want his daughter, then he will decline to form an alliance with the Libei Armored Cavalry."

"Baya'er, that old blockhead of a camel."<sup>122</sup> Xiao Chiye sat up, and some of the sand of his back slid off. He looked at Lu Guangbai. "He wants to give me his daughter because he's afraid that I'll cast him aside after he has served his purpose, so he wants to trap me with a woman. If I were really such a disloyal and unrighteous man, I'd still kill him even if he gives me his wife."

Lu Guangbai pointed at Xiao Chiye and said, "You went and met him with this expression. Of course he's scared."

Xiao Chiye's eyebrows lifted slightly. "It's not like I'm there to beg him."

"Keep on being hard-mouthed." Lu Guangbai said. "The territory of the Mengtuo Tribe is right at the western desert entrance of Mosanchuan,

blocking it. If we can't win over Baya'er before attacking Amu'er, we risk falling into an encirclement trap."

"Then you tell him," Xiao Chiye folded his arm, "that I have a ferocious tiger<sup>123</sup> back at home. I am but a henpecked husband."

"He even has his daughter's dowry ready. He's just waiting for her to marry into your family and show proper respect to this 'eldest madam'." So troubled was Lu Guangbai that he could not help but laugh in spite of himself. "Everybody loves Xiao Ce'an."

The son-in-law that Baya'er had set his heart on was Hasen, but Hasen insisted on marrying Duo'erlan of the Hulu Tribe, which led to animosity between him and the Mengtuo Tribe. When Xiao Chiye came to discuss an alliance after Hasen's death in battle, Baya-er stood on the sand dunes and took note of Xiao Chiye's strapping tall height and distinguished air. What's more, Xiao Chiye was the alpha wolf of Libei who slew Hasen with his own hands, and so, Baya-er began to harbor the intent to marry his daughter to him.

"The Hulu Tribe has already retreated to the banks of Lake Chiti, so why are they back again?"

"You killed Hasen," Lu Guangbai said. "His wife rode east on horseback and brought back the warriors of the Youxiong Tribe that you broke up and pleaded with her tribesfolk who had retreated back to Lake Chiti to help Amu'er again. Duo'erlan swore before the Hongying banner of the great desert she will kill you."

Xiao Chiye remembered the flower that had floated away with the water before Hasen died.

"Also," Lu Guangbai curbed his smile. "Duo'erlan was already pregnant before she headed east. That's Hasen's posthumous child."

Xiao Chiye secured his arm guard in silence. The last light of the setting sun vanished, and a brief stillness materialized in the sky that had no sun and no moon. That smear of heavy blue enveloped the dome of heaven, and the cry of the falcon pierced through the banner. Long hair that fluttered in the wind spread under this blue sky as Duo'erlan supported her lower abdomen with her hands.

Bayin covered Duo'erlan with thick clothing and persuaded, "The night is cold. You should go back."

"My husband is in the west," Duo'erlan said softly with her head tilted high as she watched a goshawk fly across in the wind. "When will my

Heroic Eagle return?”

Bayin could not bear to see her like this and felt the urge to wipe his tears.

“The wolves of Libei bit my elder brother to death, then bit my husband to death.” Hatred settled in Duo’erlan’s green eyes. “Bayin, he is here to kill my child.” She covered her abdomen, took two steps back, and said, “I want to protect my child.”

“The Hero will not let Xiao Chiye hurt you.” Bayin softened his voice. “Your father won’t either. The desert will work together to protect you, because this is Hasen’s child.”

“You’re wrong, Bayin. Look at the desert with your wise eyes. There are already three tribes following his Armored Cavalry.” Duo’erlan was almost shrinking into the wide outer robe. Her lean chin lay concealed within, and tears pooled in her heavy-hearted eyes. “In his quest for peace, Baya’er could even give his own daughter away to our enemy. No one other than Hasen can protect me.”

Sadness flashed across Bayin’s dark-skinned face. “I failed to accomplish what Hasen entrusted me with and was deceived by the Youxiong Tribe. I am Hasen’s wise man, yet I did not let him get the glory he deserved. Now that Xiao Chiye has come to the desert, Duo’erlan, we will take our revenge.”

Bayin took down the dagger at the side of his waist and held it in his palm as he handed it to Duo’erlan.

“I swear.”



To the wolf pup of my family, treat this letter as you would my person.

The bed in Cizhou has lain untouched in recent days. I’ve been staying in tents with the army, and sleep has proven elusive thus far.

Xiao Chiye looked at the words by the campfire, the forlorn ache in his chest dissolving away into a bittersweetness of knowing that he was being pined for. It was all his, Xiao Ce’an’s, chest that Lanzhou slept on behind closed doors. Without him, Lanzhou would sleep poorly, no matter how good the bed was. Xiao Chiye picked up *On Horseback* with his other hand and drank a mouthful, pouring that feeling onto his chest, lest he became too emotional. He continued reading as he drank.

Teacher left me a blade. Former minister, Shao Chengbi, was killed in battle. Everything in Qudu is in order and under control, so don’t worry. An

expedition afar is arduous; you must take care of yourself. Er-lang, if we can win this battle, we will never part again in the years to come. A warm spring bed awaits homecoming in winter. I shall sleep thinking of you.

Xiao Chiye set down the wine bag and looked at the bottom, where Shen Zechuan had drawn a fox with drooping ears and a tail with a brush. He could not help but smile in spite of himself.

Lu Guangbai flung a sweet potato at Xiao Chiye, and Xiao Chiye caught it with a lightning move of his hand.

“It’s almost the eleventh month.” Lu Guangbai peeled the sweet potato and started eating it. “What do you have in mind for dealing with the Mengtuo Tribe?”

The position of the Mengtuo Tribe was special. Its chieftain, Baya’er, had batches of camels. If they were to throw in with Amu’er, Amu’er’s current food dilemma could be resolved. Horses from Libei or Qidong were, in fact, not suitable for making long journeys in the desert. If Baya’er could lead the Mengtuo Tribe into throwing in with the Libei Armored Cavalry, it would prove not only beneficial to the transportation of military grains during the war, but also prove advantageous to the mutual frontier trade in the future.

“Since he’s afraid that I’d turn against him after the fact...” Xiao Chiye opened up the bag that came along with the letter; it was all dried beef jerky inside. He tossed the bag with a “Lu” on it to Lu Guangbai and continued, “I’ll do just that.”

Lu Guangbai was already being polite, so Xiao Chiye had no need to continue keeping up with the courtesy. He had 90,000 Armored Cavalry, 10,000 Imperial Army, and 20,000 Bianjun Commandery Garrison Troops. He did not come here to negotiate peace. He had already handed them the carrot from the Huiyan Tribe. Continue putting on airs, and he was going to use the stick.

“Tell Baya’er,” Xiao Chiye popped the beef jerky into his mouth and said, “I’m in a hurry to go home for the new year. If he wants to sink with Amu’er, I will send him on his way tonight.”

Chen Yang nodded to receive his order and called for someone to convey the message as he retreated.



There were no troops stationed in Dancheng once the Capital Command Troops withdrew. When the Dunzhou Garrison Troops entered

the city, the entire city was dead silent. There were countless rumors of the Prefectural Lord of Zhongbo, Shen Zechuan, some fearsome, and some respectable. Commoners converged in the city. Quite a number of them had also fled to Qudu the same night.

Tantai Hu was well aware of the need to appease the people. This time, he did not dare to be sloppy and gave strict instructions for the garrison troops to behave themselves. He had come to grief because of Liu Kong, and so, he specially led his brothers from the Imperial Army, neither disturbing the commoners at night nor alarming them during the day.

Yao Wenyu, having spent nearly more than a month bent over the table, was taking a stroll near Dancheng with Shen Zechuan today. Looking at the mottled marks on the city wall, he said, "Dancheng has had a close call. Luo Mu has already arrived in Hezhou's territory with his garrison troops. Qudu will be hard to attack from now on. I heard the news today that Qi Shiyu sent three letters from home, urging Commander-in-chief Qi, who is still at Tianfei Watchtower, to return home."

"Qi Shiyu is paralyzed in bed and can't lead the troops." Shen Zechuan basked in the sun; it was a rare sunny day today. "All the men in the house cannot compare to Qi Zhuyin. Even if he really wants to dismiss Qi Zhuyin from her commander-in-chief position, he can't strip her of her commander-in-chief military power."

Qidong's vital point lay in Qi Zhuyin, so they had to be able to go for the jugular with a psychological attack when it came to Qi Shiyu.

"Qi Shiyu wavers between the noble clans and those of humble origins. As long as Your Lordship is willing to give him a promise," Yao Wenyu turned the wheelchair, "the merit in assisting the new emperor in creating a new reign will far surpass the ability to protect the current emperor."

They definitely had to make an issue of it. Shao Chengbi's mobilization of troops ended in defeat. Qudu had long been thrown into turmoil. This was just great now. Li Jianting's legitimacy was in question, and so was Shen Zechuan.

"Qi Shiyu is experienced, and he understands the stakes involved best. If I speak of the merit in assisting the new emperor in creating a new reign now, he might not necessarily dare to agree." There was no telling the state of Shen Zechuan's injury from his straightened waist. "Xue Xiuzhuo wants Luo Mu. I'll give him to him."

Qudu wanted the chess piece, Luo Mu. Shen Zechuan would not begrudge the loss.

The grains in Chazhou were distributed by Shen Zechuan, and Cai Yu was eliminated by Shen Zechuan too. All the revitalization of the various trade that followed after was aided by Shen Zechuan too. Luo Mu ran so fast precisely because he could not prise Shen Zechuan away, and since he had followed Cai Yu before, all those he could take away now were the bandits.

“But I want Jiang Qingshan.” Shen Zechuan looked back. “The only question is whether Xue Xiuzhuo can bear to give him up.”



Qudu fell further into desolation. As the eleventh month drew closer, the streets of the market became a lot more deserted. The news that the rebels had fought their way to Dancheng had spread. If not for the presence of the Capital Command Troops still stationed in the city, anarchy would have already broken out. Even so, the people still fretted with restlessness.

Kong Qiu, having already switched into a thicker robe, said to Cen Yu before he entered the palace, “The snow is going to fall early this year.”

Cen Yu raised his head to look at the sky. At that moment, he could not tell if Kong Qiu was talking about this sky or Dazhou. He let out a sigh and raised his arm to urge, “Let’s go.”

“I wrote Qi Shiyu a letter. He had his son answer.” Kong Qiu walked up the stairs. “He says that he is too ill to even get off the bed.”

“The aggravation of his illness is certainly very timely,” Cen Yu scoffed while lifting the hem of his robe.

Kong Qiu slowed down and said, “Qi Shiyu is a sly old fox. Rather than say he trims his sail to the wind, one might as well say he’s wisely playing it safe to save his skin. Even back at home, he knows very well that Qi Zhuyin didn’t deploy the troops, but he just has to wait for us to write to him before he starts putting on a show of cursing,” He said with a sigh, “He’s jacking up the price with us in a roundabout way.”

“Just you watch. When Her Majesty really confers upon him what his heart desires,” Cen Yu said, “he will then not dare to accept it!”

“We still have to send someone with the gift of the gab over.” Kong Qiu strode over the threshold. “I originally thought Chongshen would do, but he isn’t experienced enough to be able to hold down Qi Shiyu. After going back and forth choosing, Wanxiao is still the most suitable choice.”



It was only when Cen Yu heard Jiang Qingshan's name that he remembered. "Wanxiao just sent a letter saying that his wife is pregnant. He probably won't make a long-distance journey at this time."

"There's no one else left in the imperial court. If he doesn't go," Kong Qiu raised a finger to point at the palace wall, "Shen Zechuan will soon be here. I heard that Wanxiao's mother highly values ties. If it really doesn't work, we will get in touch with the Old Madam. If that doesn't work, then we'll get Wanxiao to bring his wife along."

Jiang Qingshan's wife, Liu-niang, had only just gotten pregnant, and what's more, she was nursed back to fertile health by a wandering physician from the martial art fraternity and was being cherished at home. But he could not disobey the imperial court order. The journey was a long one to make, and he was initially unwilling to bring Liu-niang along and subject her to the hardship of traveling, but if he were to leave Liu-niang at home, he did not know what kind of grief his mother would give her. So, after thinking it through, he eventually decided to bring her along.

The moment Jiang Qingshan set off, Jiran set out too.

Ding Tao brought Jiran to Qidong and paid a formal visit to Qi Zhuyin, who had rushed home to receive a tongue-lashing.

"His Lordship said that he heard the old commander-in-chief and eldest madam have been in ill health lately." Ding Tao bowed to Qi Zhuyin. "His Lordship has nothing to give, so he had me bring along his own physician to take a look at the old commander-in-chief and the eldest madam."

Qi Zhuyin saw Jiran looking all tranquil and at ease, not at all timid in the presence of others. His aura was special, and he really had an ethereal air to him. "Shen Zechuan must really lack manpower. Even you have stepped out to go on errands."

"Commander-in-chief Qi doesn't know it, but I have been the Second Master's guard since a few years ago." Ding Tao led Jiran over before Qi Zhuyin. "This is the Venerable Master Yideng's last disciple."

Qi Zhuyin was moved by the words "Yideng". Seeing as Jiran was young, she said, "... The old man has already retired for a rest today. I'll notify the rear yard in a while. Someone will naturally come to receive him."

Ding Tao and Jiran bowed in unison.



“Eldest Madam is exceedingly intelligent. She is familiar with the accounts, and her mental arithmetic is outstanding.” Yao Wenyu covered his lips and coughed twice. “It would be best to have her discuss with Jiang Qingshan.”

Shen Zechuan was in the midst of reading Ge Qingqing’s letter. On hearing that, he only asked Fei Sheng, “How long has Luo Mengzheng been gone for?”

“Almost half a month,” Fei Sheng answered.

“Even if he’s riding a tortoise, he should have reached Qudu by now.” Shen Zechuan closed the letter. “If the motley crew wants to guard the city gate, then let them do as they wish. No one can say for sure whether they are brave men or boors lured by reward. Shenwei should also take a break these few days. Push them into too tight a corner, and they might be driven to take desperate measures.”

Shen Zechuan did not fear those 30,000 to 40,000 motley crew of soldiers in Qudu. Even if he fell short, he still had Xiao Jiming behind him to back him up. A 30,000-strong Armored Cavalry was enough to intimidate Qudu. Xue Xiuzhuo was indeed formidable, but Xue Xiuzhuo did not have soldiers. Qudu wanted to coerce Qi Zhuyin into deploying troops, so Shen Zechuan would force down this blade that was Qi Zhuyin. It did not matter if he could not use her; just let those 300,000 main forces remain in place as decorations. Qudu could also forget about hoping that the Qidong Garrison Troop would be able to stride past Tianfei Watchtower. For the sake of maintaining stability in the area, he even had Huo Lingyun placed there.

“Tao Ming has been eating and drinking well in Cizhou. Now that he has grown some fat, he ought to start moving too.” The prefectural lord’s folding fan tapped gently against the edge of the table. “He is the prefectural prefect of a prefecture, after all. He’s as close as family to the people of Huaizhou. The anarchy in Huaizhou is intense. Give him a few thousand Cizhou Garrison Troops soldiers and send him back to quell the unrest. If he does well, he will be handsomely rewarded in the future. If not, have him leave his entire family in Cizhou for me to take care of.”

Xue Xiuzhuo wanted to cut off Shen Zechuan’s Hezhou, so Shen Zechuan would take away his Huaizhou. Huaizhou was close to Luoxia Pass, which was in turn close to the city of Quancheng, the native hometown of the Xue clan, the route of which formed an arc-shaped

encirclement, just like the trade route between Huaizhou, Chazhou, and Cizhou.

Everyone, be it Xue Xiuzhuo or the emperor, had already exposed their weaknesses in the contention for supremacy. Had it been in the past, Shen Zechuan would definitely have nothing to worry about, but after Shao Chengbi's death, Fengquan was akin to a thorn stuck in the most inconspicuous of spots.

One that had already penetrated deep.



## ◇ CHAPTER 274: UNVEIL ◇



### Note:

The titles in chapter 273, 274 – Reveal (显山), Unveil (露水) – are from the idiom “显山露水”. i.e., to reveal or flaunt one’s talents or the facts.



The Mengtuo Tribe’s territory was close to the forest of desert poplar trees. From a distance, they looked like they lived in an inextinguishable bonfire in the desert. The desert poplar was their symbol. This was where the tributary of the Chashi River lay. They occupied the only water source of Mosanchuan. Further east along was the hinterland of the desert, dominated by sweltering heat.

It was here Baya’er, an obese man who had grown himself a grizzled goatee, hosted a feast for Xiao Chiye. He personally poured wine for Xiao Chiye and said, “I’ve heard of the legend of the wolf. Your Armored Cavalry is just as cold and grim as the severe frost stampeding through the Chashi Sinkhole to crush Achi’s elite Scorpions.”

The open-air feast was bathed in moonlight. The nights of the desert were not at all black but a rich deep blue. Xiao Chiye sat here, different from the swift and brave men of Biansha. He had the wildness and frivolousness that hailed from Libei, one that was made all the more conspicuous after he removed his armor.

“Having received the Mengtuo Tribe’s praise,” Xiao Chiye said, “I’m willing to form an alliance with the tribe to become brothers who can rely on each other, just like the Huiyan Tribe.”

“In that case, why don’t we form a marriage alliance?” Baya’er looked at Xiao Chiye and sighed with emotions. “Hongyan Mountain produces fine men, and I know you people from Libei are all tough men. I really admire you, and my daughter truly wishes to marry you. If you are worried that your wife at home will not agree, then I am willing to give five hundred camels to this eldest madam.”

The women of the Twelve Tribes controlled the tribes’ supplies. In Baya’er’s view, if Xiao Chiye’s “wife” was a sensible person, then he should agree to this marriage and minimize the hassle imposed on his husband.

Far away in Dancheng, Shen Zechuan sneezed softly. Ji Gang, who was in the outer chamber holding the medicine in hand, shouted, “Chuan’er, take your medicine on time. This weather changes on a whim. If you are not careful, you’ll get a cough again.”

Xiao Chiye grasped the wine Baya’er toasted him. He had a great capacity for wine, drinking *On Horseback* in small sips on the way, and he was unbeatable back at home. But now, he seemed to be drunk and did not look as severe as he had been the last time he came to discuss with Baya’er.

Baya’er felt this to be an opportunity to exploit. He raised an arm to motion for Xiao Chiye to look to his right, where his youngest daughter, with her face covered with a thin layer of veil, sat with her head lowered as if she was shy. Confident that Dazhou had no girls like this, Baya’er said, “My Wuya is very loveable and well-behaved. She can take care of the eldest madam like a younger sister would.”

On hearing this, Lu Guangbai cast a glance at Xiao Chiye as he sliced the beef with a dagger. “Our Pref—Eldest Madam has no brothers at home, so I think it’s good if there is really a younger sister in the picture.”

Following along Baya’er’s arm, Xiao Chiye looked over, and the girl hung her head even lower.

Baya’er then said, “Wuya, come over and toast a cup of wine to the chief wolf.”

Wuya stood up. Intricate ornaments hung from her waist, tinkling as she walked, but Xiao Chiye’s mind was already wandering. He remembered that he had also hung a silver bell on Lanzhou’s ankle the one time he had taught Lanzhou a “lesson” while he was still in Dunzhou. It not only tinkled when it swung; there was also Lanzhou’s moist, disorderly panting.

Wuya had already come before Xiao Chiye. She had an exotic fragrance on her, and when she leaned over, she revealed her fair neck.

Lanzhou's neck was the most gorgeous drenched in the rain, soaking in the water, and immersed in sweat. Its arch was exquisite, tilting up and hanging down in tandem with his body that was being held captive... Xiao Chiye missed Shen Zechuan very much, and it was especially obvious at this one moment.

Wuya poured the wine to the brim and leaned over to offer it to Xiao Chiye. Her long lashes lifted, revealing her hatred when she looked at Xiao Chiye. The golden chain around her waist clattered as the young girl flipped out a dagger with her slender palm and, taking advantage of her movement as she made a toast, thrust it right at Xiao Chiye's throat.

Chen Yang had yet to react to the sudden turn of event so close at hand, but Gu Jin had already heard something amiss. He strode a step out and involuntarily blurted out, "Second Master—!"

The golden goblet smashed onto the tabletop with a "thud", splashing wine all over. Xiao Chiye did not even touch Wuya as he used his arm guard to parry the dagger. The next moment, the short table overturned, and Wuya went rolling. Her dagger that had already slipped from her hand landed between Xiao Chiye's palm. Before Baya'er could snap back to his senses, Xiao Chiye stood up and suddenly nailed the dagger onto Baya'er's table.

Nearly stabbed in the fingers, Baya'er was so startled that he turned pale from panic and fell paralyzed to his butt on the ground.

Xiao Chiye wiped the wine off his arm guard. His eyes sober as he said frostily, "I sincerely came here to befriend the Mengtuo Tribe, but the Mengtuo Tribe are hypocritical and malicious rats who spout honeyed words but hide swords behind their backs."

The generals at the feast all jolted to their feet. The three tiers of Armored Cavalry within and outside all flashed their blades with a "swoosh", filling the crimson desert polar forest with snow-white glints. The atmosphere took a sudden, hostile turn, and tension crackled in the air.

"No!" Baya'er did not expect Wuya to make such a rash assassination attempt. He hurriedly said, "This is by no means my intention. Please, chief wolf, do not be angry!" He clambered up and said resentfully as he stomped his foot at Wuya, "I raised you for over ten years, and yet you made such a grave mistake!"

Wuya's veil fell off. Propping herself up, she spat at Baya'er. "You betrayed the Hero and gave me to Hasen's mortal enemy. You are not worthy to be my father—"

Baya'er flew into a rage, and without waiting for Wuya to finish her words, he stepped forth to slap Wuya so hard that she fell to the ground. In the Biansha tongue, he snapped, "Hold her down!" Having said that, he turned around to plead with Xiao Chiye. "She has been bewitched by Amu'er and has long since lost her mind. She cannot be considered to be my daughter. I'm willing to kill her for the chief wolf. Please do not take it out on the Mengtuo Tribe!"

Xiao Chiye's expression did not change in the slightest.

The Libei Armored Cavalry surrounded the Mengtuo Tribe. Baya'er's elites were all on the periphery. If they were to really start fighting, whatever little people he had would not be able to stop the assault of the completely geared-up Armored Cavalry at all. Baya'er was no longer in the position to negotiate further. All he could do was to draw out the saber of the guard beside him and raise it high against Wuya.

The silvery moon hung high in the sky, where a saker falcon of Mosanchuan circled alone. The towering branches of the desert poplar cut into the moon at an oblique angle, while the wind fluttered the Libei's wolf banner. Baya'er held the saber up, unable to bring himself to strike. His goatee trembled for a moment, and under the sound of Wuya's sobs, he flung down the saber and turned around to fall to his knees before Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye secured his arm guard tightly. Behind him, Chen Yang came over to put his overcoat on for him. Xiao Chiye lowered his eyes to look at Baya'er, his hand on Langli Blade beside his waist.

"I only have this one daughter left." Tears streamed down Baya'er's aged face. "I wanted to betroth her to the powerful Libei King of Wolves because our Mengtuo Tribe is always getting plundered by the other tribes all year round. Amu'er is already old. Who can ensure our survival..."

"Take back your five hundred camels." Xiao Chiye turned around to leave. "Save them for the Mengtuo Tribe's own mutual trade market use."

Xiao Chiye walked a few steps, then turned his head aside to look at Wuya. The night breeze swayed the little braid that had fallen to the side of Xiao Chiye's shoulder. He raised his hand to draw out the dagger and tossed it before Wuya.

“You are the one who handed me the lives of the entire Mengtuo Tribe on a silver platter tonight.”

Wuya’s face turned ghastly white. The exotic fragrance on her had all dissipated. She covered her face and wept.

Baya’er prostrated over the ground and shouted, “The Mengtuo Tribe is willing to follow the King of Wolves to reign in the desert...”

Xiao Chiye whistled, and Meng landed on his shoulder. He looked in front, where the entrance to Mosanchuan was already open. The narrow path that was paved with moonlight led to his destination. Behind him, the wolf banner of Libei replaced the eagle banner of the desert.



“How did you guess Wuya was going to assassinate you?” Lu Guangbai asked as he left with Xiao Chiye.

“You said Baya’er wanted to marry her to Hasen.” Xiao Chiye flipped onto the horse. As he pulled the reins of the horse, he paused for a moment. “My guess was that it was Wuya’s own wish. Baya’er wanted so badly to marry her to me because she no longer had eyes for the boys in this desert and considered them beneath her notice.”

“I even suspected that you were intoxicated.” Lu Guangbai followed suit and got on his own horse. “Gege was on tenterhooks, fearing that you would lose your head. Say, when I return and face His Lordship, should I speak without reservation, or should I feign ignorance?”

“I won’t lose my head.” Who else was there in this world who could ever compare to Shen Lanzhou? Xiao Chiye turned his horse around, letting the wind dissipate the heat and diminishing the effect of the wine. He looked at Lu Guangbai and said solemnly, “The wine and scent don’t work on me. I’m sober.”

Lu Guangbai saw him looking all serious and thorough in everything he did, so he believed it to be true. How was he to know that Xiao Chiye had his head full of immodest thoughts about Shen Lanzhou earlier?

Xiao Chiye changed the subject. “With the Mengtuo Tribe remaining here now, there’s only the Hulu Tribe left to the east of Mosanchuan to supply Amu’er with grains. Duo’erlan brought back the remaining warriors of the Youxiong Tribe for Amu’er, which shows that Amu’er doesn’t have many elites left.”

Huhelu, Achi, Zhuoli, and Hasen—Amu’er’s vanguard, raider, guard, and general were all killed in battle, and the six tribes in his hands were all



on edge after Xiao Chiye began his advance east. The Mengtuo Tribe was now willing to enter an alliance in order to preserve their lives, and Amu'er's golden tent<sup>124</sup> happened to be smack right in the hinterland of the desert.

Xiao Chiye wanted the victor to be determined in one battle.

After Hasen's death, the Biansha withdrew its troops. Going by Dazhou's conventional practice, they would not pursue beyond the Chashi River's line of defense. But to Xiao Chiye, the lives of the others could perhaps be spared, but not Amu'er's.

As the man in the desert who nearly became the Great Ruler of the Twelve Tribes. Amu'er was a formidable and ambitious man who could fight for supremacy with Xiao Fangxu. What made him more dangerous than Hasen was that he also had the political means. He not only wanted to fight victorious battles—that was something he delegated to the others. He spent twenty years painstakingly bringing about the collapse of a dynasty. As long as he was given the opportunity to catch his breath and survive, he would have new plans, and his methods would only become more sophisticated and tough to detect.

This man must die, or Xiao Chiye would not sleep easy at night.



Amu'er perched on his throne. His golden tent did not have the curtains closed, and the moonlight shone through the gap to illuminate the ground at his feet. He sat alone, gazing at the rolling sand dunes under the moon.

"Many years ago," Amu'er said in a quiet voice. "I once led my troops deep into the enemy's territory and met Xiao Fangxu at the foot of the Hongyan Mountains. At that time, he was still a nameless junior soldier. I regarded him as a lifelong adversary. I won against him many times before, and I've also lost to him many times."

The aged wise man who had prayed for Hasen sat in the corner of Amu'er's golden tent and dropped the withered branch in his hand onto the blanket before his knees. In a trembling voice, he slowly said, "You defeated him."

In the glow of the moonlight, Amu'er closed his eyes. There was no sign of his age to be seen on this face of his, and he looked so dignified that it was as if he had just ascended to the throne. He said, "It was my son who killed him."

“His son killed your son.” The wise man gasped laboriously as he prostrated over the woolen blanket. After spending a moment to catch his breath, he pushed again all those withered branches. “But you still have a grandson. Duo’erlan will bear Hasen a healthy and strong child. We have not lost this battle.”

Amu’er held on to the armrests of his throne, looking like a beast trapped here. His eyes moved, and eventually, he opened them to look at the unchanging sand dunes. “You told me the same thing too when I dispatched troops to Luoxia Pass. We walked out of the desert, looking for land we could live and survive on. But all these years, the battles have not stopped, and the number of deaths has increased. Dazhou is like a tree that has already decayed, but the favor of the heavenly god has yet to tilt towards us. Libei lost Xiao Fangxu, but very quickly, they obtained a new King of Wolves. I hear him pounding his battle drums as he walks towards my golden tent. He is far younger and stronger than Xiao Fangxu.”

“You are the last morning light the god bestowed upon the desert,” the wise man said staunchly as he grasped up those withered branches. “I shall watch you leave this wolf far behind in the dust.”

Amu’er left his throne. He stood up, following the trail of the moon as he said, “It’s time to get the Scorpions to move.”



The clothes and hat official secured the cotton-padded coat and hat for Fengquan and took down a piece of prepared paper from the assembled bamboo. Fengquan wiped his hand with the paper and listened as the other person spoke.

The clothes and hat official moved deftly, partially concealed in the darkness as he said, “Zhongbo must be defeated before the gate of Qudu. It’s only by killing Shen Zechuan and allowing the dynasty to continue lingering on the verge of death can the sun far in the east rise as usual.”

“Shen Zechuan has repeatedly been through danger many times in Dunzhou and Duanzhou.” Fengquan watched the clothes and hat official hung the clothes up to scent<sup>125</sup> and said quietly, “You people have had countless opportunities to kill him, but you didn’t do so.”

“He is far tougher than expected.” The clothes and hat official put away the shoes<sup>126</sup> for Fengquan. He was on his knees on the ground, but he raised his eyes to stare at Fengquan as he said, “You knew that already.”

Fengquan bent over and enunciated, word for word, "You people are the useless ones."

The candle of the lamp burned quietly as momentary silence descended upon the duty room.

"I already said two years back not to act presumptuously, but you people still spread the epidemic into Qudu and gave Shen Zechuan the opportunity to be promoted." Fengquan's voice was gloomy. "Amu'er thinks he has the whole picture in sight, but in truth, he can't see a thing."

The clothes and hat official suddenly straightened up and raised a hand to slap Fengquan on the leg, holding a long, thin earpick in his palm. That sharp, unexpected object pressed against Fengquan's leg, making it clear that it could also deal a fatal blow when the time called for it.

"Calm down." The clothes and hat official had pupils that leaned towards brown. "That epidemic also gave Mu Ru the opportunity... Xue Xiuzhuo trusts you so much precisely because you were able to show your loyalty at that time. You are already standing in the center right now, and the emperor of Dazhou is well within your reach. After this battle, you will be free."

Fengquan's overly cold and detached eyes looked at the clothes and hat official, not believing a single word of his lie. Ever since the day he left Qudu, he had been loaded into a box, destined to never escape for the rest of his life.

"Your foolish father is dead. You originally could have stopped him, but you didn't." The clothes and hat official kept away the earpick. "I didn't tell anyone about this... Do you understand?"

Fengquan's pale face looked a little sickly in the shadow of the lamp. "He wasn't a Scorpion. No one could manipulate him. He had long gone crazy, willing as he was to die for others. I was merely sending him on his way."

"You let him take away the firearms."

"Since he wanted to die," Fengquan's eyelids suddenly twitched, but without a change in his expression, he brushed aside the clothes and hat official's hand and continued, "then giving him that batch of fake goods worked out just fine, didn't it?"

"You're right. Shao Chengbi was a lunatic. He kept vigil at Zhaozui Temple day and night, and burned incense at home to pray to Buddha to beg

for forgiveness. To let him die is to fulfill his wish. You are a filial son.”  
The clothes and hat official tidied up his robe and stood up.

“Time for you to take your medicine.”



Credit: Thank you daisiesfordaze and [Yen](#) for spotting the typo! <3

## ◇ CHAPTER 275: GAMBIT ◇



Qudu in the eleventh month was met with an unbroken spell of wet weather. Defensive weapons were set up everywhere on all sides of the city walls. The Capital Command Troops did not mingle together with the motley crew of soldiers Luo Mu brought along from Chazhou. Everyone was clearly separated, like the waters of the Jing and Wei Rivers.

When Luo Mu returned to Qudu, he was no longer the obsequious and servile man he once was a few years ago. Qudu was now depending on him for support, and when he entered the city, Chen Zhen personally came to receive him. He changed into a brand new official robe and stood atop the city wall with Chen Zhen to look out into the distance where Dancheng was.

“The rest of the seven cities’ garrison troops are being transferred back to Qudu and will be here in the next few days. We can gather 50,000 soldiers in total for you.” Chen Zhen braced himself against the battlement, exhaling cold air in between breaths. “The armory of the Capital Command Troops will be made available to you too. Defend for as long as you can.”

Luo Mu was a civil official, but when he headed down to Chazhou, it was to reorganize armaments and combat banditry, so he was no stranger to military affairs. Holding up his umbrella, he said, “Shen Zechuan is not a man given to fighting wars. He defended Duanzhou only because he was compelled by circumstances and had no choice but to guard it. He now has only 20,000 Dunzhou Garrison Troops. It will be tough for him to breach Qudu even if he wants to.”

Qudu had sealed off the city gate to the east. The commoners who fled from Dancheng were all gathered at the entrance. While Chen Zhen and Luo Mu spoke, they looked down at the foot of the city, which was packed with refugees.

“There’s one thing I will have to ask Your Excellency the Minister to report to Her Majesty.” Luo Mu pointed to the refugees. “Shen Zechuan has the habit of buying the hearts of the people. If these refugees cannot enter the city and find a place to settle down, then once the snow falls, he will think of a way to win them over to his side, then make use of the opportunity to spread the word and blow the matter out of proportion. I fear that will only be detrimental to the imperial court.”

Cai Yu lost to Shen Zechuan in Chazhou precisely because of the word “benevolence”. Those who rescued another from extreme misery would be the said person’s great benefactor, like a second set of parents who have given them a new lease of life. Shen Zechuan could even clear himself of the charge of Shen Wei’s troop defeat, so why not they follow suit? At present, there were still rumors in Juexi about Shen Zechuan’s aid relief to Yongcheng. If Qudu could not turn the tables before winter came around, they would be the first to lose out even before they started fighting.

“In your opinion,” Chen Zhen looked at Luo Mu, “what should we do? Qudu is already overcrowded. There are even people sleeping in the public ditches on Donglong Street. If we take in any more refugees, we will be breaking the regulations of the *yamen* in Qudu. The granary can’t afford to feed them too.”

“Take in the refugees for our own use,” Luo Mu said. “I see that most of them are in the prime of their lives. Why not enlist them into the army to serve the state? As long as they can make Zhongbo suffer a crushing defeat, there won’t be a lack of rewards from the imperial court in the future. What is this bit of grain today? There will somehow be enough to go around if we scrimp on it.”

Luo Mu dared to say this because he had also “borrowed” grains when he transited through Hezhou.

“Look, Your Excellency,” Luo Mu raised his hand and pointed it out for Chen Zhen. “Cizhou is one of Shen Zechuan’s strategic points. He established a large granary on the trade route between Huaizhou, Cizhou, and Chazhou, which allows him to supply to the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path to the north and provide relief aids for Chazhou’s natural

disasters to the south. If we can wrest Cizhou from his control, it will only prove to be beneficial to us. Shen Zechuan's mobilization of troops to Dancheng has already stirred panic and unease among the groups of cities in the west. He has to take a breather at this moment; he can't act rashly. But we are different. We can send troops whenever we want to suppress the rebellion and crush the rebels. All we lack is the opportunity to fight him."

Chen Zhen looked at Luo Mu and said, "This opportunity is a tough one to seek."

"On the contrary, it's not difficult. Shen Zechuan is Shen Wei's son, after all. He enters Qudu with his eyes on the throne. If he succeeds, the condemned sinner of all time, Shen Wei, will be enshrined and worshiped in the Imperial Ancestral Temple." Luo Mu looked back at Chen Zhen and smiled, "Who would agree to this?"



"Persuasion?" Li Jianting looked back. "It is wartime now. If something untoward were to happen should we send the students out there, I'll see how you intend to answer for that."

"Your Majesty," Luo Mu prostrated himself against the wool carpet. "Shen Zechuan is shrewd and sophisticated. He is certain to round them up first and persuade them after to win over the hearts of the people. If we just sit still and resign ourselves to fate, I fear that situation may devolve rapidly. It will be difficult to ensure that nothing goes wrong then. Furthermore, Jiang Wanxiao's soliciting of Qidong's support also hinges on the way the wind blows in Qudu. As such, this humble subject deems it necessary for a war of words to be waged at this moment."

Luo Mu did not speak bluntly. With the passage of time, it was gradually becoming more and more difficult to convince the people regarding Li Jianting's lineage. If they continued to drag it on any further, by the time Gao Zhongxiong regained his strength to deal another blow, it would be difficult to win back the hearts of the people of Dancheng whom Shen Zechuan had mollified.

"Your Majesty, we have already lost the opportunity to take the lead in the Dancheng battle," Chen Zhen advised too. "If we can win back a game without using a single soldier, it will be beneficial for Qudu's present morale."

"We ought to unite against a common foe before a formidable enemy," Kong Qiu said after contemplating it. "If we can unite the hearts of the

common folks in the south and west, it won't be tough to defend this winter."

Li Jianting said, "It's widely said in Qudu that Shen Zechuan is a narrow-minded person, and that is, in fact, a rumor. The way I see him act in Dancheng is unhurried and composed. I fear it'd be hard if all of you are thinking of forcing him into deploying troops with your eloquence."

"This is not a trap targeted at Shen Zechuan," Luo Mu composed himself and raised his head, "but Yao Wenyu."

Yao Wenyu was Shen Zechuan's strategist. Not only did he call forth the wise talents of the world for Shen Zechuan, he also played a pivotal role in implementing the census register in the six prefectures. What's even rarer was that he advised Shen Zechuan to take in the former ministers of Qudu. Gao Zhongxiong and the others could escape the fate of being buried talents in exile all thanks to Yao Wenyu's wisdom. Without Yao Wenyu, Shen Zechuan's Zhongbo officials would not have expanded to such proportions.

Kong Qiu and Cen Yu had both been taught by Hai Liangyi. Hearing Luo Mu mention Yao Wenyu now, they could not help but turn aside. Unable to hold back his appreciation for talents, Cen Yu said, "I... hear Yuanzhuo has been in ill-health ever since arriving in Zhongbo. If so..."

"His Excellency Cen is right!" Luo Mu said. "We'll line up the scholars at the foot of the city to persuade them to surrender. If Yao Wenyu doesn't dare to come, Zhongbo's morale would definitely plummet, and Shen Zechuan will only be worthy of being a cowering coward. But if Yao Wenyu dares to come, returning to his former hometown will definitely kill his arrogance!"

Cen Yu jerked to his feet and pointed at Luo Mu as he blurted, "You're truly—"

Truly vicious!

Yao Wenyu was incurably ill, and both of his legs were broken. By demanding him to make his way to the foot of the city wall to respond, Luo Mu meant for him to face his former acquaintances in Qudu, as well as to show the world the way he looked dragging out a feeble existence—*look, two years ago, this man was still the Unpolished Jade renowned to all in the world!*

"As long as we can deal a blow to Yao Wenyu," Luo Mu kowtowed deeply, "Shen Zechuan will no doubt take a battering."



He did not finish his words. The students would be unarmed when they faced up against an array of tens of thousands of troops. If Yao Wenyu were no match for the students, he would incur the indignation of the garrison troops. Weapons had no eyes on the battlefield. The Dunzhou Garrison Troops only had to injure the students, and Shen Zechuan's virtuous reputation would go up in smoke.

Li Jianting looked at Luo Mu. This person devised such a vicious trap to score a victory; he could already be said to be ungrateful and cold-hearted,

Fengquan quietly cast a sidelong glance at Xue Xiuzhuo, who was hidden at the very back. Not a moment later, as he expected, Luo Mu said, "His Excellency Xue has a prestigious reputation among the students, and he studied in the same academy under the same teacher as Yao Wenyu. This humble subject thinks that His Excellency should take it upon himself for this gambit."

Xue Xiuzhuo stood up silently and said, "Since Yao Wenyu could assist Shen Zechuan with his broken legs and flailing body, he is no longer the distinguished young master of intellectual discourses of the past. By setting this trap, you merely want the whole world to watch fellow pupils kill each other." He looked at Li Jianting. "I will not agree."

Fengquan pursed his lips into a smile as he poured the tea.

Li Jianting gazed at Xue Xiuzhuo with an odd expression in her eyes in that brief moment of silence. She said, as if in reassurance, "Of course. I can't bear to subject Teacher to such hardship too. There is still no news from Jiang Wanxiao, so let the Grand Secretariat choose the students to go this time."

Raindrops pounded on the eaves, that pattering of rain giving prompt to something else.

"Where exactly are you from?"

This was what Li Jianting asked Fengquan that night.

Kneeling in the fathomless dark shadows, Fengquan replied, "This humble slave was originally the descendant of an official in Jincheng. The official convicted of a crime, Shao Chengbi, was my maternal uncle. Back then, this humble slave's mother was implicated and sent into exile to Zhongbo, where this humble slave was born. His Excellency Yanqing later went looking all over for former officials and saved this humble slave from extreme misery and brought me back to Qudu." He raised his head and said

in a timid and helpless tone, “This humble slave and my uncle are as close as father and son, so I was willing to enter the palace for my uncle’s case of injustice. Under the personal guidance of His Excellency Yanqing, I’ve served two emperors and one empress dowager in the palace... until Your Majesty, who is the most prudent.”

Xiande, Tiancheng, the Empress Dowager—all of them died in the struggle for power. Of them, the death of Emperor Tianchen, Li Jianheng, was the fishiest. Mu Ru’s assassination attempt was no secret in the Xue’s residence. To date, Xue Xiuzhuo was unwilling to replace Fengquan and still wanted to use him to serve Li Jianting.

“You report all the trifles in my daily life to him.” Li Jianting leaned over. “Is Xue Yanqing keeping an eye on me because he fears I won’t do a good job as an emperor?”

Fengquan did not dare to answer.

Li Jianting stared at him for a long time, then said, “Was Mu Ru’s assassination of Li Jianheng on Han Cheng’s or Xue Xiuzhuo’s order?”

Fengquan wanted to avoid Li Jianting’s gaze, but Li Jianting suddenly grasped of Fengquan’s chin. As she pressed in closer, she said, “He has been watching me ever since I entered the palace...” Li Jianting suddenly laughed and said mockingly, “No wonder he dared to be the minister who stands alone. The life of the emperor lies in his hands.”

Xue Xiuzhuo would not begrudge it.

He could even bear to sacrifice himself. Naturally, he could also bear to sacrifice others.

“Shao Chengbi wants to overturn the verdict for the old case,” Li Jianting released Fengquan and said coldly, “Only I can do that.”



Qi Shiyu lay on the bed, looking as if he could not weather being worn down by both illness and anger. His hair had turned several shades whiter. There was already no sign of the suaveness he once possessed when he spurred his horse through Qudu and bowled over women. Saliva trickled down the side of his lips. Qi Zhuyin wiped it off with a handkerchief.

“Jiang,” Qi Shiyu gasped as he spoke, “Jiang Wanxiao is going to arrive, arrive soon. Discuss, with him. We will send troops to, to Qudu.”

Qi Zhuyin rolled up her sleeves to reveal her arms. Washing the handkerchief in the copper basin by the bed, she said, “We’ll see.”

Qi Shiyu's chest heaved. Swiveling his eyes, he said, "When you win merit for, for protecting the emperor, you, you will be the reign of Shengyin's..."

"Two borders and three prefectures have already risen in revolt." Qi Zhuyin conscientiously washed the handkerchief. "How long can Emperor Shengyin still remain sitting on her throne? With that 10,000 Capital Command Troops of hers, she can't even step out of Qudu's main gate."

"Qi Zhu, Zhuyin!" Qi Shiyu raised his voice abruptly. "Unfilial daughter!"

Qi Zhuyin wrung the handkerchief and said nothing.

Qi Shiyu's tears soaked his temples. His lips quivered, and he choked with sobs, "You ruined, ruined the Qi clan. In the future, you won't even, even be able to be laid to rest in the ancestral graveyard,"

The setting sun at the window shone upon Qi Zhuyin's back as she focused on drying the handkerchief, looking as if she had not heard him.

"If Shen, Shen Zechuan fails," Qi Shiyu shed tears of bitterness, "Can you alone make up for the entire Qi clan? Everyone in the world will hate, hate you. You forged my, my oral message. Oh, you..."

Qi Zhuyin smoothed out her handkerchief and turned her head aside under the scattered shadows of the window lattice to gaze upon those overlapping flowers and plants. After a moment's silence, she said, "If Shen Zechuan fails, report to Qudu how I forged the message and coerced my elder brother of common birth to write it on my behalf. Kong Boran is an intelligent man. He would rather kill me alone to ensure your survival."

Qi Shiyu's message to Qudu was fake. That was something Qi Zhuyin forced her older brother of common birth with her blade to write. But was there nothing Qi Shiyu could do? He was tacitly giving his consent, wanting to leave the Qi clan with a way out. If Shen Zechuan were to suffer a defeat. Qi Shiyu would rather hand over Qi Zhuyin in exchange for the lives of the entire clan.

At that very moment Qi Zhuyin decided not to send troops, she ceased to be a daughter of the Qi clan. The freedom Qi Shiyu gave was limited to the Qi clan. If Qi Zhuyin could no longer seek honor and glory for the Qi clan, she was no different from those good-for-nothing brothers of common birth of hers.

Qi Zhuyin did not stay for long. She hung out the handkerchief to dry and withdrew from the room. Several brothers of common birth were

waiting under the eaves. None of them dare to raise their heads to look at her. She took Zhujiu Qi Wei handed her and turned a blind eye to them too.

Qi Wei followed Qi Zhuyin out of the courtyard and whispered, "His Excellency Jiang should be here by now."

"Is the Eldest Madam ready?" Qi Zhuyin asked.

Qi Wei opened his mouth but did not speak. Qi Zhuyin followed his gaze and turned her head to see Hongying lift the screen and Hua Xiangyi carrying the hem of her skirt as she got off the sedan. She did not know either where she got the idea to move past Hongying and offer her arm to Hua Xiangyi.

The delicate fragrance of Hua Xiangyi's white flower greeted her. Hua Xiangyi set a slender palm on her shoulder. It was only after she landed on the ground that she belatedly realized it was Qi Zhuyin.

Qi Zhuyin wanted to say a little something, so she offhandedly said, "Yo..." Having been a little fatigued lately, she looked at Hua Xiangyi and continued, "the flower is quite pretty."

Hongying, who was at the side, covered her lips and gave a small cough. Hua Xiangyi's pink cheeks blushed a little. She loosened her grip, initially meaning to shift her hand away, but for some reason, she changed her mind and left it on Qi Zhuyin as she said, "The tea pavilion is ready. Invite Wanxiao over later to rest his feet there. There is a screen erected in the middle. Wanxiao's wife can take a short break here, and we can also let Jiran take a look at her."

"You are the madam, so naturally, I'll leave the arrangements at your discretion," Qi Zhuyin said. "Jiang Qingshan is an eloquent speaker in Juexi, so it's better if you aren't on the losing end when discussing it over with him. No matter what, military power is still in my hand, so even if he has a glib tongue, he won't be able to save Qudu, not unless he kills me."

The upturned tip<sup>127</sup> of Hua Xiangyi's embroidered shoes peeked out a little. She smoothed the pleats of her skirt and said to Qi Zhuyin with a smile. "I have a way."



Shen Zechuan grabbed up a handful of the surplus grain from Dancheng and looked at the furnishings in the granary. "The granary has been in disrepair for years. Winter is right around the corner, and it has been overcast and rainy for days on end. We can't continue to keep the grains here as they will turn damp and moldy."

Fei Sheng closed the oil paper umbrella and answered, "The advisors have the same intent too, but it's not a good time now. Master, if we were to move the grains without careful consideration and raise the suspicions of the commoners in the city, all our efforts these days will be wasted."

The Dunzhou Garrison Troops had been stationed here for less than half a month, eating and sleeping with more reserve than they had been outside the city. Fortunately, Shen Zechuan had ample grains, so the soldiers did not have to go hungry. Although there was some private resentment at the bottom ranks, there were no incidents. Many of the common people of Dancheng had fled west, and in doing so, they blocked Shen Zechuan from moving ahead.

"There aren't many grains left." Yao Wenyu's wheelchair, which was wet with water, left marks behind as he moved it. "The winter is bitterly cold, and Dancheng still has to provide aid relief despite lacking grains. Rather than transferring it again from Cizhou when the time calls for it, why not Your Lordship distribute the grains locally?"

The grains in Dancheng were all grains the Pan clan had left. It was inevitably too much of a trouble to transfer grains with the grain wagons again. Distributing grains locally onsite could not only allay the commoners' fears, but also save a batch of relief grains for the winter. Zhongbo's grain reserves were limited. If Qudu could only be besieged but not attacked, then all both parties could compete on was endurance.

"Jiang Wanxiao headed for Qidong. Using this as a reason, Luo Mu urged the Yan clan to deliberate it over again and really managed to convince them. Several days ago, the grains from several cities were delivered to Qudu, where the military drill ground at Mount Feng has already been converted into storage for grains. The waterway to the south can lead directly to Hezhou. Master, Qudu meant to fight a protracted war with us."

"They call it a protracted war, but they are still waiting for Jiang Qingshan." Shen Zechuan let go of the grains. "The Qidong Garrison Troops is Qudu's lifeline. The Grand Secretariat and Xue Yanqing both know that they can't stop us with just a motley crew of 50,000 soldiers. They are staking it all on a single throw by stockpiling grains."

Yao Wenyu made to speak, but then covered his mouth and coughed.

"There's wind leaking into the granary," Shen Zechuan said. "Fei Sheng, give my overcoat to Yuanzhuo."

“Master can’t withstand this cold wind either.” Fei Sheng motioned for the guard at the door to hand over the clothing. “Qiao Tianya anticipated that Mister would forget to bring his overcoat and so went to the special effort of sending someone to bring the overcoat over when we were just about to set off. I’ve been waiting for Mister to ask.”

Even covered with the overcoat, Yao Wenyu’s coughs did not subside. No one brought up the issue of seeing a physician again before him now. Although he took his medicines on time, one could visibly see Yuanzhuo gradually grow wan and sallow.

“Jiang Wanxiao has arrived at Qidong...” Yao Wenyu was midway through speaking when there was a commotion outside the granary.

Tantai Hu entered with his blade over his shoulder, bowed to Shen Zechuan, and reported in a gruff voice, “Your Lordship, a messenger has arrived from Qudu, saying that they want to discuss with us as they could not bear to see the people plunged into an abyss of misery. Those dozens of students have been sent out of the city gates and are now waiting at the erected platform west of Dancheng. Your Lordship, at this moment, we are strong, and the enemy is weak, so what’s there to discuss further? Might as well get Shenwei to write a declaration of war, and we can attack our way into Qudu and save ourselves the trouble!”

Wiping his palm, Shen Zechuan asked, “Who are among those who came?”

“Cen Xunyi is taking the lead. The rest are all students.”

Shen Zechuan only had to think for a moment to know of the dangers involved.

“Jiang Wanxiao has already arrived at Qidong, and the Eldest Madam has to have a long talk with him. If we do not agree now, we will inevitably be looked down upon by Qidong. Further, a prolonged siege of Qudu is never the best policy.” Yao Wenyu held up his handkerchief and turned his head aside to say to Shen Zechuan. “The opportunity has presented itself. Your Lordship, I’ll be right back.”



The sun shone brightly in Qidong. Smoke rose from the tea pavilion.

Hua Xiangyi sat in a dignified manner across the tea table and served tea with cleaned hands.

Qi Zhuyin gestured for Jiang Qingshan to sit. “You have come a long way. This is a reception feast, so there’s no need to be nervous. Just take a

seat.”

The travel-worn Qingshan had just changed his clothes at the side hall earlier. He did not stand on ceremony as he sat with his sleeves held together. With a smile, he said, “It is my undeserving honor to be able to drink a cup of tea brewed by Third Missy.”

He addressed Hua Xiangyi as Third Missy, her old address, which meant that he did not regard Hua Xiangyi as the Eldest Madam of Qidong, but as the former master of Dicheng. That word, clearly distant and estranged, made it clear that he had no wish to discuss with Hua Xiangyi.

Hua Xiangyi held the tea and said in a soft voice, “The journey is tiring, and Madam is pregnant. It’s indeed inadvisable to stay at the relay station. I’ve got someone to clean up a courtyard earlier. If you don’t mind it, you can stay here at home.”

Her “home” was the Qi residence, and she was in charge of all the inner courtyard’s affairs. No matter what Jiang Qingshan called her, she was the Lady of the Qi clan’s house.

Jiang Qingshan sipped the tea, thereby kicking off their first exchange.



It was raining heavily in Dancheng. The sougning of the bamboo rose and fell.

Apprehensive, Cen Yu was on the high platform when he suddenly heard the sound of the flute entering the waves of bamboo. He let loose a soft exclamation of “*ah*” and watched as an oil paper made its way over in the rain along with the trickling streams of water.

A boundary line separated both armies, and Yao Wenyu did not continue to advance. The white donkey under the umbrella trod upon the water leisurely. The hem of Yao Wenyu’s green robe draped down over both sides of the donkey’s belly, while the *zhaowen* bag around his waist was still the same as before. Amidst the rain and fog around him, he looked no different from he did in the past.

“I left Qudu in such a hurry back then and did not manage to bid farewell to you.” Yao Wenyu leaned down to make a bow on the back of the donkey, “So here I am now, upon hearing of your invitation today.”

Seeing Yao Wenyu bow from the back of the donkey, Cen Yu knew the rumors were true—those legs of his had really been broken. A multitude of emotions welled up in him as he stood where he was with his ears buzzing.

All he could do was sigh with grief, “You... why subject yourself to such misery?!”



Credits: Thank you fukixie for pointing out the typos! <3



## ◇ CHAPTER 276: CONFRONTATION IN THE RAIN ◇



Why, indeed.

Yao Wenyu did not have an answer to that. He did not come today to answer the question of why he was subjecting himself to this “misery”. He knew what Qudu’s intention was by doing this. Everyone in the world was looking at him, their admiration morphed into compassion. They would rather look down upon him from above and pity him, as if without this pair of legs, he lost the courage to stand before the people.

Living was far harder than dying.

Long when Yao Wenyu had laid down, he already clearly understood his life going forward. This was not the first time he had received such gazes, nor would it be the last. As long as he still existed in the world, he would forever have to face these pitying. It was an agony he could not share with anyone else—*anyone*.

The oil umbrella formed a curtain of rain to conceal the green robe within. Yao Wenyu was so far away he seemed to be sitting among the clouds. Even when he fell, he was still clean and untainted.

“There is one state in life toughest to achieve.” Shen Zechuan stood far away in the watchtower and said to Qiao Tianya beside him, “and that is, *delighted not by external gains, and saddened not by personal losses*.<sup>128</sup> If a person can be so sanguine to such an extent, he will not be far from enlightenment. When I first met him, I thought he was this kind of person, but later, I realized it was not the case at all.”

To attain enlightenment was to be devoid of feelings—to be merciless to oneself.

Yao Wenyu could not. He had the masses in his heart. He also had *him* in his heart. He seemed to be a supermundane wanderer of the mortal world, far removed from the secular realm, spending his previous twenty years riding a donkey with all the carefreeness in the world. That was living vicariously, and it was not wrong.

Qiao Tianya looked into the distance at that smear of green, as if he was looking at the emerald willows and jade bamboo on the horizon. He set down his flute and picked up the wine to take a sip, then answered, as if intoxicated, “I understand him.”

The rain continued to fall.

Yao Wenyu’s voice was as clear and melodious as jade as he said, “There’s no need for you to worry on my behalf for now. Qudu seems to be a trapped beast, one that exhausts the strength of the seven cities to battle to the death with our Prefectural Lord. This is an unwise strategy not worth adopting.”

“If Shen Zechuan has the intent, he ought to have long surrendered and not established himself as ‘lord’. You people mass deploy troops to Dancheng to intimidate Qudu, throwing the commoners in the world into a state of panic and unease.” Cen Yu was here today to induce them to surrender. He could not hold himself back from taking a step out now to say across the misty rain, “If Yuanzhuo is willing to persuade him to surrender today, I am willing to vouch for him with my own head just for his benevolent deeds in the six prefectures of Zhongbo.”

“The situation at present is clear cut, and the outcome is a foregone conclusion. So why deceive yourself and the others any further?” Yao Wenyu said. “In order to keep the commoners in the city from having this catastrophe unleashed upon them, His Lordship stayed put in Dancheng and refused to advance. In truth, the 120,000 Garrison Troops of Zhongbo are already prepared and raring to go; besieging Qudu will only take a short time. As they say, *besiege not the walled cities, if it can possibly be avoided*.<sup>129</sup> If the emperor is willing to open the gates and surrender for the sake of the commoners in the city, I am also willing to vouch for her with my own head.”

“You and I are former acquaintances, so why make such boasts to me? There are merely 20,000 soldiers in Zhongbo available for use. Shen

Zechuan is already showing signs of exhaustion cooling his heels guarding the Cizhou granary. Chazhou and Hezhou have now surrendered and pledged allegiance to us. Evidently, he has lost the hearts of the people and cannot establish trust among them. Qudu now has the assistance of the seven cities, and there's also Qidong serving as a shield. The 300,000 Qidong Garrison Troops are the real thing. Shen Zechuan wants to obtain the Li clan's empire, but no one will possibly yield. You attacked your way into Dancheng, causing the rise of refugees everywhere." Cen Yu pointed at Qudu. "All the people before the gate of Qudu are refugees who have fled there. You can hear infants wailing at night and see widowed mothers selling their daughters during the day. If you people are really a benevolent army, how can you turn a blind eye to all these?"

Yao Wenyu did not answer.

A student beside Cen Yu bowed to Yao Wenyu and cleared his throat to speak, "Not only that, Shen Zechuan rebelled for no reason and brought calamity upon Qudu. Even if he can breach the city with a strong army, he will be hard-pressed to win the public over with the same army. The present emperor is rightfully legitimate and is the only candidate to be the Son of Heaven. The confrontation of two armies will result in countless casualties. So why not bury the hatchet today? As long as everyone from Zhongbo can surrender in all sincerity, Her Majesty, bless her wise and virtuous heart, will surely not pursue the grave offense."

They made it all out to sound so pleasant, but the consequence of disarming themselves to surrender was something that even Kong Qiu himself could not guarantee, let alone Cen Yu.

Yao Wenyu was about to speak when the wind came assailing in the rain, leaving him with no option but to temporarily cover his mouth and cough softly.

Cen Yu did not have the heart to watch, but the student beside him thought they had gained the upper hand. Seeing how frail Yuanzhuo was, he could not refrain from taking another step forth and shooting his mouth off animatedly, "I know 'Unpolished Jade Yuanzhuo' always has the fine reputation of being unrivaled in Qudu, and I also know that you were born of the Yao clan and studied under the Secretariat Elder. How lamentable that you failed to live up to your talent and learning. Instead, you devote yourself to serving the Shen clan and turning your back on the will of the forefathers! Yao Yuanzhuo, an old hero still holds high aspirations just like

an old steed still aspires to gallop a thousand *li* if it could, and yet all you can do is submit to a rebel. I lament the waste of your talents and, even more so, lament the Secretariat Elder for entrusting his legacy to the wrong person. Your sickly and feeble body of today is a far cry from the dashing and spirited presence you once cut, but even so, I'd still wish to advise you to realize the error of your ways and turn back from the path that has led you astray!"

Raindrops landed on the railings, soaking Shen Zechuan's sleeves and robes. He held the folding fan between his sleeves to prevent the rain from getting on it. He looked at the green bamboo from the watchtower, where Yao Wenyu was already partially concealed.

When Shen Zechuan was still in Qudu, he once said to Xiao Chiye that if he were given a choice, he would rather choose Xue Xiuzhuo than Yao Wenyu. This was because Yao Wenyu was aloof and far detached from the mundane world; he could not do stuff that would get his hands dirty. He had such a good station in life, so much that it was also that tortuous when he hurt.

The students' morale soared, and they all crowded onto the platform, each trying to impart words of wisdom to Yao Wenyu.

Yao Wenyu's coughing had already stopped. His expression remained unchanged, as if he had already anticipated this situation. Shen Zechuan did not lack people under his command; when Kong Ling was still in the academy, he was also an eloquent master of debate, but Shen Zechuan still agreed to let Yao Wenyu come. As a bosom friend, he understood that Yao Wenyu did not need pity, not even a smidgen of it.

"Luo Mu set this trap wanting to kill Yuanzhuo." Shen Zechuan tilted his head slightly to the side, and the jade earring by his ear glinted coldly from the reflected light. "Even so, he has to be worthy of doing so."

To belittle Yao Wenyu was to belittle Shen Zechuan. The advisors under Shen Zechuan's command possessed both integrity and ability, yet Yao Wenyu had always securely retained his position at the head. Two years ago, Yao Wenyu cut a sorry sight when he left the capital, but that had been two years ago. It had to be known that the one he assisted was the overlord of Zhongbo, Shen Zechuan.

It was a tad clamorous on the platform. The students' voices crowded into the heavy rain, buried under the waves of bamboo as the cool breeze blew. Yao Wenyu moved down the handkerchief covering his lips.

“All of you advise me to realize the error of my ways and turn back from the path that has led me astray, but I wish to advise all of you to repent and seek the salvation at hand.” Yao Wenyu’s voice was still clear and mellow. It was as if those few coughs were merely a breather he took in the rain. “May I ask of Teacher Cen, why do you rack your brain to remonstrate with the Emperor at the risk of death?”

Cen Yu answered, “To deter the villains and set hierarchy right.”

Yao Wenyu showed his true worth when the wind rose. “Not so. You spare no effort to think of the people’s welfare. You aim for stability and sue for peace, taking the people’s will in mind. You put the people first in everything you do, regarding the people as the foundation of the state every single moment. And now you’ve subverted hierarchy and turned your back on the people, all for your own selfish interest to preserve the imperial court. Cen Xunyu, Kong Boran, Xue Yanqing—how can all of you still have the face to pay your respects to my Teacher?!”

He rarely looked so solemn, and his words were so cutting Cen Yu staggered back and rasped in a hoarse voice, “We...”

Still with a composed, unchanging expression, Yao Wenyu continued, “Let me ask you again. Of the so-called remedy of the malady, return of the commoners’ fields, security of the people’s livelihood, and rectification of hierarchy, which of these four have you people achieved?”

Cen Yu was already losing steam. “The field taxes from Dancheng, Chuancheng, Wucheng, and Dicheng have all been recovered, and the fields in the four cities have been returned to the people, with taxes reduced. It is now a time of rebuilding.”

“To make up for the Chuancheng’s field taxes, the Marquis of Helian had the local gentry under him extort the people. The fields have indeed been returned, but the Gobi desert was used to pass off as fertile farmland. Refugees from the four cities are still emerging one after another in a never-ending stream. Cizhou is already overcrowded. You are merely putting inconsequential measures over what’s crucial with your so-called remedy of the malady, return of the commoners’ fields, security of the people’s livelihood. The grains all of you take to distribute as aid relief are all graciously granted by our Prefectural Lord!”

How could Cen Yu expect Yao Wenyu to state his views with such swift relentlessness? The dispute over the Chuancheng fields was a proven fact. It was only because of the external threat that they had no choice but to

temporarily put a halt to the investigation, and now, it had become Yao Wenyu's sharp weapon!

The student beside Cen Yu reacted swiftly and retorted, "What a load of nonsense! You betrayed the emperor and brought dishonor to your teacher. You are merely a dying man dragging out a shameful existence in a wheelchair. What did you do? What *can* you do?!"

The donkey under Yao Wenyu inched forward a little, and Yao Wenyu answered, "I am but a strategist. How can I act beyond my authority?"

The student promptly broke out into laughter. "That's just a perfunctory excuse. You have done nothing at all! His Excellency Xue denounces the noble clans and assists the Li clan. He is revered by all in Dancheng, Chuancheng, and the various cities! You question how they have the face to meet the Secretariat Elder, but Yao Wenyu, seems to me you are the one who is too ashamed to face the Secretariat Elder!"

Yao Wenyu's oil umbrella swayed slightly. He laughed too, but this laugh left no trace in its wake. If it was gone, it was gone. There was not a hint of complacency. "He who holds rank in a state discusses its policies.<sup>130</sup> Shouldn't it be only right for you to work for the people when you live on the emperor's salary? I cannot compare to Xue Yanqing when it comes to administering Qudu and keeping the empire in balance. He is a minister of the imperial court. I am a strategist."

His eyes dimmed slightly. The twinkling starlight in them died out, leaving behind only a heavy, pitch-black night.

"My lord navigated among the heroes in turbulent times, first quelling the scourge of banditry in Chazhou and Cizhou, then scouring the six prefectures clean of its sufferings. He established a thriving trade route between the north and south and spared no effort to help the Armored Cavalry stamp out foreign threats. In two years, he recovered lost lands, brought stability all over, and secured the livelihoods of the people, creating tens of thousands of *mu*<sup>131</sup> of fertile lands in the three prefectures, and leaving not a single wasteland in the three borders. He pushed for the census registry and implemented household registrations. He advocated freedom of speech to draw in the virtuous talents in the world, and he does not let family status and past history cut short a hero's future. What's more, he even dared to use himself as a sword to defend the city gates of Duanzhou!"

The rain pitter-pattered on his umbrella, like the deafening, urgent beats of the battle drums.

“In assisting a good lord, I am the clouds of rain in the sky, gathering and dispersing as I please. I can have no name to speak of, no virtues to boast of, and no merits to laud. But my master,” Yao Wenyu was as steady as the mountain as he enunciated his words with clarity, “must shine in history for a thousand autumns.”

Strategist!

Strategists and court ministers were both people who assisted outstanding masters. Yao Wenyu dared to belittle himself and his achievements to boost Shen Zechuan because he was Shen Zechuan’s strategist. It was for Shen Zechuan and not for himself that he sought to conquer the empire and build up a reputation. With every word he spoke, he was counter-asking everyone from Qudu, *what has Li Jianting done?* The lack of achievements to one’s master’s name was all on the incompetence of the people assisting him.

Cen Yu braced himself to push on. “For all your eloquence and glib tongue, you cannot hide the fact that Shen Zechuan’s origin lacks legitimacy. His father, Shen Wei, suffered military defeat in the six prefectures. If we were to let you enter the city, everyone in the world would have to pay their respect to that shameless traitor Shen Wei in the future!”

“And so,” Yao Wenyu said, “Li Jianting’s origin is legitimate?”

“How audacious!” The student’s face flushed red on seeing how unperturbed and composed Yao Wenyu was, even more so when he saw that the latter had also gained the upper hand. “Is Her Majesty’s honorable name something you—”

Yao Wenyu suddenly raised his voice in the rain to ask again, “Who can prove in public today that Li Jianting is legitimate? You? Xue Yanqing? You people revered her as your lord, kneeling and kowtowing to her, and yet you can’t even come to a conclusion about her authenticity. What a joke!”

“His Excellency Xue has the former emperor’s verification in writing...” The student was already thrown into confusion. “There was an auspicious omen when Her Majesty was born. It can’t be wrong. It can’t be wrong...”

“Since you people cannot prove it,” Yao Wenyu suppressed a cough, “I can.”

Cen Yu suddenly felt a chill as he looked at Yao Wenyu’s green robe swaying, feeling that this was not Yuanzhuo, but an enemy who hailed from Zhongbo.



Credits: Thanks to Gale for noticing the oversight! <3



## ◇ CHAPTER 277: INTENSE BATTLE ◇



“When Xue Yanqing invited the Heir Apparent back to the palace, he produced the former emperor’s endorsement and Prince Qin’s personal seal to show the Grand Secretariat.” Yao Wenyu brushed his finger lightly over his pale lips. “But these objects have no relevance whatsoever to one another. Prince Qin’s personal seal was not stamped on the endorsement itself. If these objects alone can prove that Li Jianting is Prince Qin’s daughter of lawful birth, then the writings of the late nobles in the study of my Yao clan are all proof of sovereignty.”

Even if Cen Yu’s limbs were growing increasingly cold, he could not show any more signs of weakness. All eyes were on this face-to-face talk at the foot of the city today. All it took was one wrong answer to doom Qudu. He composed himself before saying, “When Her Majesty entered the palace, the Grand Secretariat carried out a public verification right there and then on the imperial court. The Empress Dowager also gave the nod to confirm that Her Majesty was of the Li clan’s bloodline!”

The rain in the wind made a ruckus as it pelted down upon the oil paper umbrella like exploding beans.

“After the passing of the former emperor, the Li clan fell into decline,” Yao Wenyu said. “The so-called public examination on the imperial court you speak of is merely based on the one-sided words of Xue Yanqing. The Empress Dowager lived alone deep in the palace, with eunuchs in power holding her hostage on the inside and sycophantic officials coercing her on the outside. So, could she have been able to tell the truth?”

Cen Yu felt a punch to his guts. He stepped back in a fluster and sputtered, “Sycophantic... How can you say I am a sycophantic official... On the day of the public examination, the whole court of civilian and military officials was present. Whoever dares to coerce the Empress, I will be the first to kill him with my own hands!”

“Fine. You are loyal. I admire you for it.” Yao Wenyu pulled out a letter from his sleeve pocket and said to Cen Yu, “I happen to have a confidential letter from Third Missy, which details the fact that Han Cheng coerced the Empress Dowager with the Dicheng’s accounts, along with a family letter between the Empress Dowager and Third Missy. All of them are affixed with the Empress Dowager’s personal seal.”

An uproar arose in the rain the moment this letter emerged.

Cen Yu had never expected Yao Wenyu to have genuine proof. That chill soared up his spine—It was not Zhongbo that was in danger today at all, but Qudu! Bracing himself against the edge of the table next to him, he said, “Third Missy has been away from Qudu for a long time. She no longer waits upon the Empress Dowager. Her words...”

“Third Missy is the eldest madam of Qidong.” Yao Wenyu pressed in hard with each word. “If her words are not to be trusted, why are Qidong’s 300,000-strong garrison troops still not deployed to date?”

Muffled thunder crashed in the rain.

Yao Wenyu released his grip and let the letter fall into a water puddle. “The Qi clan would rather lose their century of prestigious reputation than send troops to the emperor’s aid, because the one sitting on the throne today is not a sovereign of the Li clan at all. Xue Yanqing deliberately misrepresented the fact, calling a deer a horse. He not only deceived everyone in the imperial court, but also fraudulently used a girl from a pleasure quarter to pose as the imperial heir!”

A girl from a pleasure quarter!

“You delude people with rumors and lies...” A student pointed at Yao Wenyu and snapped, “Her Majesty is the daughter of a farming household in Qudu. She has long had a benevolent reputation among her neighbors...”

“How muddleheaded.” There was no warmth in Yao Wenyu’s eyes. “Li Jianting has never summoned her adoptive parents after ascending to the throne. If she is truly benevolent and filial, she will not be so unconcerned and indifferent to her adoptive parents.”

At this word, Cen Yu and even the students beside him all fell onto their butts on the ground. The Capital Command Troops of Qudu whispered among themselves in horror. Dark clouds had already pressed in towards the palace halls in Qudu. Amidst the lightning and thunder, a flash of lightning illuminated the sinister-looking upturned eaves. That letter was swiftly passed throughout the various lands in the southwest as Imperial Bodyguards who were still hiding in Qudu roved the streets and alleys. Ge Qingqing occupied a teahouse and watched as the raindrops pounded on the window paper.

Li Jianting raised her head and listened to the thunder, well-acquainted as she was with the pounding of battle drums. She asked the empty Mingli Hall, "Has the Prince of Donglie sent troops?"

Fengquan lit an incense stick and replied, "Soon."



The rustling sound of clothes chafing rang out from within the screen. Jiran sat upright across from the small table, taking Liu-niang's pulse through a handkerchief.<sup>132</sup>

"The entire Qi clan is all patriotic and chivalrous people. The old commander-in-chief has an illustrious record of military achievements to his name and is in Her Majesty's good graces," Jiang Qingshan said, "With the empire now in imminent danger and rife with internal strifes, it's time for the Qi clan to restore its position as the treasured weapon of the state. I advise Commander-in-chief Qi not to corrupt the righteous cause over personal friendships. Revere your sovereign, and you will be hailed by all. The future glory and honor of the Qi clan are right at hand."

"You are a capable minister who governs a territory, so you are more familiar with civil administration than me." Qi Zhuyin drank her tea, "Since the time has come when the empire is in a crisis, we can skip all these cliches."

Thick steam enshrouded the tea pavilion. Jiang Qingshan let out a wry, bitter laugh for a moment before continuing, "So the persuasion of honor and glory are all no more than mere platitudes. I came here just to share a few heartfelt words with Commander-in-chief Qi." He set down the teacup and looked at Qi Zhuyin. "Commander-in-chief Qi, if the current emperor is incompetent, I would not have come today. But now, the revitalization of Dazhou is right around the corner. As long as the internal threats are eliminated, the prosperity of the people will not be an absurd proposition."

He paused for a moment.

“When the former emperor was on the throne, he did not involve himself in court administration. There were countless tussles for power between various factions in the imperial court. The year when Juexi was hit with a drought, I could not gather sufficient grains to distribute as relief aid. I was at my wit’s end and could only borrow grains hastily, thus incurring a towering debt. It was Yanqing who hurried overnight to Qudu to implore the Grand Secretariat to give me a way out. At that time, when Hua Siqian wanted to kill me, it was also Yanqing who kneeled before the door of the Secretariat Elder and pleaded with him to save me. All these years, he has been running around in his position as the Ministry of Revenue Supervising Secretary and fighting for a future for capable local officials. He went to great efforts and pains to build up the so-called practical doers faction of the present day, one that has allowed Dazhou to continue to keep struggling on after the reign of Tianchen. Commander-in-chief Qi, we dare not claim credit for ourselves, but in order to fight for a way out for Dazhou, we can even bet our lives and those of our families!”

Jiang Wanxiao was not lying. The corrupted dynasty of the later years of the reign of Yongyi had its roots in Qudu, but the local regions were still doing all they could to keep going. Juexi’s current ability to bear the weight of the burdens exerted on Dazhou was not something that could be achieved overnight. It was the result of the cornerstone that people like him had laid down together over the past decade or so.

“After the reign of Xiande, Yanqing has been making every effort to persuade the imperial court to allocate manpower to Zhongbo to clean up the mess there. Given the height of Hua Siqian’s power then, the Secretariat Elder did not dare to act rashly in order to protect the officials of humble origins in the central administration. It was only finally until Hua Siqian’s fall in the eighth year of Xiande that the Grand Secretariat had the intent to transfer me to Zhongbo to take up the post as its Provincial Administration Commissioner, but it was already too late; we had missed the golden opportunity. Not only were there bandits running rampant in the six prefectures, there was also the deeply-rooted influence of the noble clans at play.” Jiang Wanxiao spoke until he was emotionally worked up and could not help but pound the table in despondency. Letting loose a long sigh, he continued, “We have no troops and no power, so how are we to get about

doing it? The transfer notice alone took the Grand Secretariat half a year to deliberate over!”

The fragrance of tea was dimly discernible. He composed himself a little before continuing, “I had originally given up. It was Yanqing who supported Her Majesty and did his best to pursue the Dancheng’s field taxes. Commander-in-chief Qi, if Her Majesty was an A-Dou,<sup>133</sup> an incompetent weakling like the former emperor, then let Shen Zechuan rebel as he wishes! But there is now light at the end of the tunnel.” He looked at Qi Zhuyin and said with urgency, “When Commander-in-chief Qi wanted to send troops to assist Libei at the start of the first year of the reign of Shengyin, we agreed because of the foreign threat at hand, and we also provided military salaries and provisions. The situation is no longer like how it was during the reign of Xiande when the commander-in-chief and the generals had to enter the capital and kneel to beg for their military salaries. The Bianjun Commandery’s moldy grains case forced Lu Guangbai into rebelling, yet the Grand Secretariat has still yet to heed the imperial censors’ advice to strip the Lu clan of their noble title and rank. They wanted to give the imperial court and Lu Guangbai a chance to start over again. Let’s all start afresh. There will be no interference from the noble clans this time, only mutual sincerity and frankness between the civilian and military officials. The resurgence of Dazhou is right now.”

Everything Jiang Wanxiao said today were heartfelt words that the others could not fathom, comprehend, or even be willing to understand. They were all turning cogs in the wheel that was Dazhou. When mottled signs of rust began to show, they relied on generation after generation of virtuous talents to keep it oiled and running. This person was not just one person. He could be Qi Huilian in the early years, Hai Liangyi in the latter stage, and even Xue Xiuzhuo at present. They differed from the noble clans. Even if their ideologies were in conflict, or even if their philosophies were contradictory, they all expended their true abilities on civilian affairs without exception. They were the last gleam of hope for the survival of this old, decaying tree.

“Shen Zechuan introduced the census registry in the six prefectures of Zhongbo, while we have long since implemented the household registration in Juexi. Ever since I had jurisdiction over the thirteen cities, the *yamen* in the various areas have been checking every year that no land was lost, no field has gone to waste, and the trade at the port is thriving. If Shen

Zechuan had not insisted on interfering, the Port of Yongyi would not have been closed this year!" Jiang Wanxiao said. "The reason the eight cities' field taxes were suspended was that Shen Zechuan was pushing too hard. He self-proclaimed himself the prefectural lord in Zhongbo, and the three regions all termed him an overlord. The noble clans were going to be driven to take extreme measures, so there was no other alternative but to stop the investigation—"

Within the screen, Liu-niang suddenly exclaimed softly. Jiang Qingshan's voice came to an abrupt stop. He rose slightly. Hongying stepped out from behind the screen and whispered something in Hua Xiangyi's ear.

Hua Xiangyi looked at Jiang Qingshan and said, "The madam is weak and frail, and after being on the go, the fetus is unstable. I fear she will have to stay here for a few days to recuperate."

Liu-niang had been in ill health since the reign of Xiande. Jiang Qingshan knew that what Hua Xiangyi had said was true. Even as he was all caught up attempting to convince them with his fervent rhetoric, he was on tenterhooks worrying about Liu-niang. For a moment, he lost his voice and could neither stand nor sit.

Jiran said in a small voice, "*Anitabha*, the madam has to put on medication."

Jiang Qingshan could not help but ask, "What kind of medicine? She's frail, and all the physicians she usually sees have been cautious."

"I heard you have been married for several years, and yet your mother still wants to make her stand in attendance every day. Never mind if it had been in the past," Hua Xiangyi said with a slightly reproachful tone, "but why does she still have to do so even when she's pregnant? What kind of rule is that?"

The hardest thing for Jiang Wanxiao to speak of was his domestic affairs. His mother was widowed at an early age, and against all the odds, raised him to be a provincial governor. The Old Madam typically could not be bribed with gold and valuables, nor did she form social connections with the womenfolk of the eunuchs. She wholeheartedly wanted Jiang Qingshan to be an uncorrupted official. The only drawback was that she was too strict with the family regulations in her management of the household, especially when it came to Liu-niang.

Qi Zhuyin originally had no intention to speak up. She had a whole bunch of family troubles at home to be vexed about too. But then, she felt a nudge to her leg under the table. She came to a tacit understanding as she drank her tea and put down the cup. "I think you should leave aside government affairs for now. There's still no news from Qudu, so let's have madam settled down first."

Jiang Wanxiao had already sensed something amiss. Cautiously, he probed, "About the sending of troops..."

"I'll think about it for a couple more days," Qi Zhuyin said with a serious countenance. "Two days later, I'll definitely give you an answer."



Fei Shi covered his head as he ran through the rain. He could hear the sound of discussions all around him; *traitor, emperor, bogus*. Qudu, with its century of history, tottered precariously on the precipice in this rainstorm. He ran till his shoes were soaked. Someone knocked into him, causing him to stagger.

The junior marquis of the past was dressed simply. After Marquis of Helian was paralyzed, his disreputable friends no longer associated with him. His residence could no longer afford the upkeep of its help, so they had no choice but to dismiss their older maids and servants. Fei Shi initially wanted to continue with his idle ways, but when he saw his elder sister Zhaoyue take care of her child while toiling away all night doing embroidery for a living, he realized then that his family was thoroughly broke. Now, he was eking out a livelihood by writing letters for others.

Fei Shi cursed as he picked up the letters, "Damn dog must be blind to bump into me! Do you know your grandfather me used to lord it over..." He wiped the rain off his face. Finding the person who had fallen to the ground familiar, he kicked him with his foot. "Hey?"

This person abruptly raised his head. He was so unkempt and disheveled that his face was not clearly distinguishable. He merely clapped his hands at Fei Shi and giggled in a silly manner, "Junior Marquis! Junior Marquis!"

Fei Shi pocketed the letter and said, "Yo, you're an observant one. That's me."

This lunatic was filthy all over, and only one of his feet had a shoe on. Shaking his head, he said, "Junior Marquis, looking, looking for my eldest brother!"

"I'm not your eldest fucking brother!" Fei Shi yanked his clothes back. Disgusted with the man's stench, he drove him away. "Shoo, shoo, shoo!"

This lunatic bared his mouth in a grin and really left. He jumped around in the rainstorm, yelling at everyone he came across, "Eldest brother, my eldest brother is a major official! A major official with a blade!"

"What bad luck." Fei Shi muttered as he took two steps forward. He found this voice really familiar. He took a few more steps where he saw the run-down Han residence across the curtain of rain and suddenly froze right on the spot.

"The Capital Command Troops are passing through! Move out of the way!"

Military boots stepped on the rainwater, sending them splashing as they ran across the streets of Qudu. The entire city was on high alert, and the defensive weapons in the armory had all been taken out and moved to the top of the city wall. The news that Shen Zechuan was about to fight his way in was even more widespread than news of the female emperor's origins.

The Capital Command Troops bumped Fei Shi aside. He was still staring blankly in shock as he turned his head around like a wooden statue.

"Han... Han Jin!"



Yao Wenyu retreated unscathed after his verbal sparring with the masses. His donkey switched direction, and the oil paper umbrella skewed slightly aside, causing the side of the hem of his green robe to be soaked by the rain.

Still in shock, Cen Yu supported himself against the edge of the table and raised a hand, wanting to call out to Yuanzhuo again.

A soldier behind soundlessly hoisted up a bow and arrow. The raised arrow pressed against his fingers, stretching the bowstrings taut. Raindrops, meanwhile, formed strings of beads at the edge of the oil paper umbrella. Yao Wenyu's breathing was slightly disorderly. The handkerchief he had been tightly clutching had long since been soaked red.

Humiliated from the defeat, a student chased a few steps after him and said, "Shen Zechuan seeks to obtain the empire. Wanting us to honor Shen Wei's memorial tablet is an act that is neither virtuous nor righteous. Even if I die, I will not kneel to him!"

The downpour of rain engulfed the sound of Yao Wenyu's coughing. When he looked back, however, his tightly pursed lips lifted slightly. The



oil paper umbrella slid to the ground. His hair was soaked through, but he was resolute and decisive as he said, “All this time we rise in power in Zhongbo, there have only been talks about the defeat of Shen Wei’s military troops. His Lordship brought peace and stability to the lands for the sake of the common people, neither marrying nor begetting a son. What’s more, he wants to overturn the old case from the reign of Yongyi to redress the injustice of the loyal officials. There is no need for you to kneel. When the country is stable and the commoners’ livelihoods are restored, and when the granaries of the world are in abundance, His Lordship—

That arrow suddenly took leave of its bowstring, and the vibration from the bowstring flicked forth a spray of raindrops. In the blink of an eye, the sharp glint came before Yao Wenyu. No sooner said than done, a swift sword suddenly came thrusting down from among the green bamboo. Amidst the sound of collision between sword and arrow, Qiao Tianya landed on the ground.

Shen Zechuan stood afar at the watchtower and looked in Qudu’s direction. The wind brushed against his overcoat, sending it fluttering. Surprisingly enough, there were bits of ice and snow mixed in with that torrential rain.

“One does not execute the envoy when two armies are in talks,” the Prefectural Lord said. “By doing so, Qudu is counting on our lack of people to bully our Zhongbo.”

Qiao Tianya slowly straightened up and stood in front of Yao Wenyu. Locks of his drenched hair covered his eyes. He pushed his sheath apart with his thumb and commanded, “Draw your blades.”

Rainwater covered the Imperial Army’s armors as the glints of the blades instantly flashed in the bamboo forest.

The incense burned out.



## ◇ CHAPTER 278: HERO ◇



Cen Yu knew it did not bode well the moment he saw the arrow flying, and when he saw the Imperial Army drawing their blades, he was in such a state of anxiety that he also coughed out blood. Cutting a sorry sight as he covered his mouth, he demanded, “Who fired the arrow?!”

When he came, he instructed Luo Mu to give strict orders to his soldiers not to make any move. Now that this arrow had been fired, Qudu was doomed whether or not Yao Wenyu died!

Tantai Hu swiftly charged forward with his blade and hollered in a booming voice, “You went back on your word. To hell with your talks at the foot of the city!”

The Imperial Army dashed orderly forth in the rain. Muddy water on the ground splattered all over. They wielded their blades in unison and, at the same time the front row spun around and slashed, barged into the motley crew of soldiers. Flashes of blades and glints of swords instantly enveloped the rainstorm. Tables and chairs on the platform overturned noisily with a clatter. The students helped Cen Yu up and retreated in a panic.

“Stop...” Cen Yu, who still held out false hopes, said in an urgent voice as he wiped his blood, “Your Lordship, please hear me out!”

The Imperial Army had already charged across the boundary line. No one listened to Cen Yu. He soaked in the rain, his official robe hanging loosely on his body. Enduring the assault of rain and snow on his face, he finally broke down and choked with sobs in Qudu’s direction, “I have failed Her Majesty!”

The bronze bell in Qudu suddenly rang with a thunderous crash. Li Jianting knew that it was not the sound of thunder. Supporting herself against the pillars, she slowly stepped into the rain. The flower embellishment between her forehead dispersed on touching water. She looked at Xue Xiuzhuo at the foot of the stairs, as if she had only just met him.

“You have ten thousand taels of silver,” Li Jianting raised her arm to point in Juexi’s direction, “and the support of the common people. Go to Juexi and find a new emperor, and you’d still be able to fight against Shen Zechuan again.”

Xue Xiuzhuo looked at Li Jianting too. After a long while, he raised his hands to take off his official *wusha* hat and said, “I am a court minister of the Li clan.”

Li Jianting smiled, and her laughter grew increasingly louder. She laughed until her face was wet with rainwater, betraying a little of her naivety. She moved closer and asked, “Teacher, have I succeeded in learning?”

All her life, she had been stuck in a crack.<sup>134</sup> It was only after gouging the nails of her ten fingers rotten that she finally amounted to something. She came from a puddle of mud, yet she bore the weight of a collapsing universe. She was inquisitive, assiduous, and even a genius of sorts, but she was all the same too powerless to save the situation.

“Could have been better. It’s all because my qualifications are mediocre.” Xue Xiuzhuo looked at the *wusha* hat in his hands. “I am the blade that went off course.”

He had long known that he was not smart. He could not remember the essays on contemporary politics. All he could do was to memorize them by rote and stay up all night burning the midnight oil. Even the time he took to drink a mouthful of water was a waste. At the age where he was at his most impulsive, Emperor Guangcheng dealt a blow to his morale and drive, and he came to the understanding that the seemingly prosperous Dazhou was, in truth, a barren expanse.

It never occurred to Xue Xiuzhuo that he would take this path. But he witnessed the sudden flash of light Qi Huilian had sparked, and that momentary light ignited his hope. He followed Qi Huilian, stubbornly believing that Dazhou could still be saved, but the reality was always so

disappointing. He revered and respected Hai Liangyi, but then, he gradually went separate ways with him.

They all wanted to save Dazhou.

And none of them succeeded.

“You brought me to this position, but no one here is willing to be reasonable. The Empress Dowager instigated Han Cheng who in turn dropped hints to Fuman. They all wanted to kill me.” Li Jianting raised her arm and rubbed away at the flower embellishment between her forehead until it was all red. “Can’t the emperor fight back? If I don’t kill them, I’ll die.” She turned around. “We exercise caution and stay put in this cage, but even if we have ambitions, we do not have the power, let alone time.”

Li Jianting was very fair, a facade cultivated from being raised in the Xue’s residence. Under this layer of attire, she was battered and bruised all over. When she stood here, she was Li Jianting. No one would ask about Ling Ting’s whereabouts, as if Ling Ting deserved to die.

“In this world, people don’t actually need the law to kill people. The sturdy bodies of men crushed my bones, and I fell to the ground.” Li Jianting looked back and said to Xue Xiuzhuo. “The passersby find me filthy. No one would hold them accountable, as if I lay there willingly. Die once, and I deserve to be treated as discarded shoes, never allowed to stand again before others.”

The toll of the bronze bell grew increasingly longer. Rainwater flooded past the hems of their robes. The sky was so dark and overcast that the palace could not be clearly seen.

Li Jianting said mockingly, “Was that my fault? Teacher, I heeded the teachings of the books and did not even kill those scums. The day you took me away from Xiangyun Villa, I thought I would seek revenge, but you taught me benevolence, justice, morality, and virtue. I had to endure it to stay in this rotten palace. In all these years, there was not a single moment I’ve let go to waste. I chased after everyone, trying to catch up, but in the end, we still ended up with nothing to our name.”

Her chest heaved. There were so many things she could not take lying down. As her forbearance hit its limits, she finally erupted.

Li Jianting pointed to her eyes and said, “I don’t rely on these eyes to live. I am not like anyone else. I am Li Jianting.” She suddenly took off the golden hairpin in her hair and flung it into the rain. Contemptuously, she

spat, "To hell with virtues and deference. I am an emperor. I am the last emperor of the Li!"

Thunder detonated in the vault of heaven, illuminating everyone's faces snowy-white in the rain. Li Jianting took off her soaked overcoat and even yanked off the cumbersome hairpins.

Her voice was frosty as she proclaimed, "I live and die with Dazhou."



Qudu had eight city gates, all of which were now sealed off. The crossbow triggers at the top of the city wall made clicking sounds as they turned. The armory of the original Eight Great Training Divisions had been emptied out, and bows and arrows densely lined the battlements. The Zhongbo Garrison troops, meanwhile, concentrated their attacks on the main east gate.

"With the Eldest Madam holding the fort in Qidong, Jiang Wanxiao won't be able to return." Yao Wenyu's gasps were slightly urgent as he propped himself up on the edge of the bed and said to Shen Zechuan, "The path ahead has been paved. I will be here waiting for Your Lordship to return in triumph."

Shen Zechuan took off his own Yang Shan Xue and set it beside Yao Wenyu's hand. "I am entrusting this blade to you. Give it back to me when I return."

Yao Wenyu smiled sadly. "Why put me in such a spot?"

"Xun'er is still in Cizhou." The expression in Shen Zechuan's eyes dimmed slightly. "You are still his teacher."

Yao Wenyu could only answer, "Yuanzhuo shall do his best."

Fei Sheng took off the overcoat for Shen Zechuan. Shen Zechuan took two steps back and held Yao Wenyu's eyes for a moment, then turned around to step out of the tent without another word. Fei Sheng got his hands on Yao Wenyu's handkerchief when he tidied up the tent in passing, and realized that the latter's handkerchief was soaked through and through with blood.

Amid the damp and dense flurry of snow outside the tent, the wind made its abrupt arrival known.

Shen Zechuan strode down the steps. The gazes of the Imperial Army on both sides never once strayed. As he walked, he secured his arm guard, and when he brushed past Tantai Hu, he heard the latter bellow with his head held high, "Tonight, we shall kill our way into Qudu, and from here

on, the fate of the empire shall be decided depending on which way the scale tips. His Lordship takes the lead in bringing the soldiers forth in a charge, and we shall repay in kind with sincerity and loyalty!”

The garrison troops pounded their chests simultaneously with the Imperial Army, their voices so deafening they drowned out the thunder, “We shall repay in kind with sincerity and loyalty!”

Luo Mu, having heard the bellows, dashed towards the city wall in the pouring rain and yanked ahold of the assistant commander who had fled back into the city,

“Who fired the arrow?!” He demanded.

The assistant commander had returned wounded from the frenzied surge of the Imperial Army earlier. Hauling around his injured arm, he answered, “The rain is too heavy, Governor-General. There was no way to see who it was at all!”

Luo Mu did give his motley crew of soldiers the instruction that they could act, but that had to be *after* the garrison troops made the first move. Even Luo Mu himself never expected Yao Wenyu to make an issue of the emperor’s origins in this battle. This one arrow broke Qudu’s defense, imperceptibly making it clear to all that even Heaven had turned away from them!

“Shut the gates and fight to the death.” Luo Mu released his hand, then shoved his deputy general hard and barked all around him in the heavy rain, “If we can’t defend Qudu, you and I will die!”

The streets were empty, for the commoners all had their doors and windows sealed shut as they hid away in their courtyard cellar, shivering uncontrollably. Public ditches discharged sewage, and the gaily-painted pleasure boats on Kailing River swayed with the motions. This was the first time in hundreds of years that Qudu felt a compelling sense of impending storm.

“The troops of the Shen clan are at the foot of the city.” Pages of paper fluttered all over the imperial college as the students covered their heads and wailed, “There is no hope left for Dazhou!”

Luo Mu saw several rows of people from afar while he was urging the pounding of battle drums. He put down the drooping banner and stepped forth to kneel and kowtow. Loudly, he said, “This humble subject has failed to live up to Her Majesty’s kindness. Tonight, I shall repay my country with my death. I vow to never wallow in the same mire as the rebels!”

Kong Qiu hobbled forward and held on to Li Jianting's arm. He choked with emotions all around him. "Her Majesty is here, as am I. If we can win tonight, all of you here will be Dazhou's most trustworthy subjects! If we can't, then I, Kong Qiu, shall be the first to jump off to die for my country when the city is breached!"

Luo Mu was so startled by Kong Qiu's bleak and miserable voice he broke out in a cold sweat. He raised his head and saw each of the Grand Secretariat ministers looking solemn. Clearly, they were not putting on a show of appeasement; they really had the determination to give their lives for the cause! Luo Mu did not expect them to be willing to go to such an extent for Dazhou, and in that instant, he felt ashamed of himself, but at the same time, he also took his chances.

"Shen Zechuan only has 25,000 soldiers. This battle is doable! Your Majesty and the various excellencies—"

The words had yet to fully leave Luo Mu's mouth when the stone catapults sprang into action. The massive boulder smashed into the city gate with a thunderous crash, and the century-old "Qudu" stone inscription monument promptly exploded apart into smithereens.

Xue Xiuzhuo brandished an arm to stop Li Jianting from moving. "Shen Zechuan has begun his assault on the city. Protect the emperor!"



Holding a dagger in his mouth, Qiao Tianya moved himself with his elbows and crawled in the dark and damp public ditch.

Back then, after the public ditch case, Pan Lin gave the construction blueprint of Qudu's public ditches to Xiao Chiye, who in turn left this blueprint in his Plum Blossom Residence. When Shen Zechuan rebelled and fled from Zhongbo, Qiao Tianya and Fei Sheng relied on this blueprint to escape from the heavy siege in Qudu. They had long since committed the public ditches that intersected Qudu to memory.

Qiao Tianya's chin was buried in the stinking sewage. He lifted his head slightly and slammed his shoulder against the slanting wooden planks above him at the end of the ditch.

The chains and lock on the wooden planks shifted away with a clatter. Ge Qingqing, who had shaved himself clean of his mustache, traded glances with Qiao Tianya and promptly broke out into a smile as he reached out to pull the latter out.

"It has been over a year since we last met," Ge Qingqing said. "How is His Lordship?"

Qiao Tianya took off his dagger and answered succinctly, "Fine."

"We have been keeping an eye on the movements within Qudu these past few days." Ge Qingqing cut the pleasantries and fished out a blueprint with areas circled in various colors. "The 'Scorpions' are here."

Qiao Tianya looked at those dense clusters of circles covering the blueprint and felt his blood freeze.

"These people can't put down roots and can only drift around Qudu waiting on standby for their orders. The majority of them are people of various trades from the three doctrines and nine schools of thoughts."<sup>135</sup> Ge Qingqing covered up the crossed-out areas. "His Lordship was right in his guess. They have a 'leader' directing the operation."

Qiao Tianya stared at the position where the "leader" was.

"The Scorpions want to hold off His Lordship for Amu'er." Ge Qingqing circled the blueprint with his finger. "Before they make their move, we have to act first. Not a single one must be spared."

Ge Qingqing's finger stopped at the location where the palace was.

Qiao Tianya did not keep away his dagger. He said in a hoarse voice, "Old profession, old regulations. Since Master gave the order to kill, then no one will return alive once the Xiuchun Blade falls. We will split up and act separately." He nailed the dagger to the palace. "I'll head here."



The defense of the main east gate had not even hit the hour mark when the garrison troops that had circled around to the south side gate near the Mount Feng military drill grounds rammed out a gap in the gate. How were the main forces of the Capital Command Troops guarding the main east gate to know that Shen Zechuan had learned this speedy assault from Hasen? It was not only fast but also ruthless.

The Capital Command Troops at the south side gate pressed up against it, but before they could shout out the signal, a blade was wedged in the gap.

"Pass the word," a young general of the Capital Command Troop shouted, "the south side gate has been breached—!"

Another ram instantly caused the city gate to slide sideways, which subsequently knocked the Capital Command Troops inside the city over to the ground. The Imperial Army, who had been waiting outside, braced



themselves against the gap and spread open their legs like monkeys to flip in. The archers inside the city readied themselves, but the reactions of the Imperial Army were even faster. They shrank their heads back and hid behind the city gate.

The Capital Command Troops had yet to breathe a sigh of relief when they heard the gate panel of the city gate emit a grating, jarring “creak”. To think the Imperial Army had actually climbed over each other’s shoulders to the top of that properly-mounted, well-crafted, and heavy-duty city gate and tore it down!

“It works!” An Imperial Army soldier rapped on the gate panel and shouted to his brothers below him. “Guess what? This gate is the same fucking gate Second Master led us to repair for the Ministry of Works! Damn handy it is. Hoist it up, and it can block the arrows and smash this bunch of silly dogs to death!”

The morale of the Capital Command Troops that had seen a sharp boost from the presence of the emperor existed for only a moment as Shen Zechuan forcibly held it down by the head and obliterated it clean. The moment the south side gate was breached, the Imperial Army was back in their elements like ducks to water.

Under the crowding and jostling, Kong Qiu protected Li Jianting. Her hair at the temples was disheveled, and she was muddied all over. Her ears were also buzzing from the constant bombardment from the catapults. Amid the wails and urgent cries of countless people, her gaze moved past the mud and dust and fell upon the Prefectural Lord of Zhongbo who was the stuff of rumors.

Two years ago, Shen Zechuan fled through the main east gate, leaving behind a shouting Qi Huilian with his hands raised at the tightly shut city gate. Now, he rode his horse across the public roads, bringing along not only his advisors but also his mighty army.

“Traitor!” Li Jianting hissed through clenched teeth.

Shen Zechuan looked at her apathetically, using a sufficiently direct way to tell her—that the young emperor was no match for a genuine hero with mere designs alone.

From here, he would stomp open the main gates of Qudu.



Credits: Thanks to Katie82 for the feedback! <3



## ◇ CHAPTER 279: FENGQUAN ◇



Fog shrouded Qudu. Very quickly, Li Jianting's figure was covered up by the chilly rain. She was the last piece of the cloud among these towering palaces, dispersing so fast that she could not even be called an "opponent". The main east gates shook violently under the creaking sounds. Luo Mu, who had once again ascended to the top of the city wall, did all he could to mobilize the soldiers in the city.

"Archers, stand by—"

Before Luo Mu could issue his order, Tantai Hu bellowed, his voice breaking up in the rain, "Ram the gate!"

Even as he spoke, the single branch cannons<sup>136</sup> of Zhongbo had already started blasting away. The Capital Command Troops, who have lived all their lives in Qudu, could not withstand the attack. Unexpectedly enough, it was the motley crew of soldiers that Luo Mu had brought along who could still hang on. Luo Mu was adept at the art of defensive battle back in Chazhou, so he was not afraid of the bandits at all. In his eyes now, Tantai Hu was a bandit!

"Bah!" Luo Mu spat out the mud in his mouth as he coldly eyed the garrison troops storming the city at the foot. "Qudu's city walls have never once fallen in a hundred years. With just those few single branch cannons, this place will still be impregnable even if they keep smashing away until next year." Holding on to the battlement, he shouted to Tantai Hu below him. "Tantai Hu, you and I have once worked together. If you want to save your dignity today, why not surrender to the imperial court now? You can't win this battle!"

Tantai Hu still bore a grudge against Luo Mu for framing him, and he was still fuming deep down. On hearing him, his fury could not help but blaze even harder. He stomped on the battering ram's butt and yelled back, "Shut your trap!"

With this one kick, the soldiers were instantly roused into action. Pushing the battering ram together with Tantai Hu, they rammed it into the city gate again, causing a loud, thunderous crash to ring out.

Unexpectedly, Luo Mu sneered for a moment before brandishing his arm to bark, "Release!"

The rocks that the motley crew of soldiers had long prepared went plummeting from the six-*zhang*<sup>137</sup> tall wall, raining down like hail upon the garrison troops. Even with helmets, they could not withstand the attack, and those who were hit by the rocks all ended up maimed or worse, killed. The soldiers near the battering ram covered their heads and dodged. A wheel of the battering ram got struck, and the entire wagon instantly tilted over. Because of its astounding weight, it could not be stopped with just a few people, and they could only watch as the battering ram tumbled into the mud.

Tantai Hu wiped the muddy water off his face, knowing that he had fucking fallen for a trap again—Luo Mu had been merely provoking him!

"Laohu!" Fei Sheng circled over on his horse, grasping the Zhongbo military banner with one arm as he shouted to Tantai Hu from afar. "I'm here to pass on His Lordship's words—Fight to your heart's content this battle!" He suddenly waved the banner and pointed at Qudu, "Success or failure, you, Tantai Hu, will always be a fine man of Zhongbo!"

A fine man!

Tantai Hu's blood suddenly pulsed through his veins, firing him up so much that his palms trembled slightly. He had been personally guided by Xiao Chiye himself, yet he kept making mistakes after mistakes under Shen Zechuan's command. Shen Zechuan, however, still gave him chances. Tantai Hu suddenly raised his hand and slapped himself on the cheeks a few times.

These slaps were so merciless that it was particularly loud and clear in the rainstorm.

Tantai Hu's cheeks reddened from the slaps. His eye with the scar opened slightly. The drive was still burning in him, but he was a tad more composed now. Grimly, he answered. "If I don't emerge victorious this

battle, then I, Tantai Hu, will no longer be worthy of being His Lordship's subject and Second Master's general! Even if I were to be crushed to powder today, I will stomp this gate open for my master!"



The eunuchs and maids in the palace fought over themselves to grab whatever they could. The sound of fighting and killing at the city gates had spread all over Qudu. They wanted to make their escape before the city was breached. Only one lamp was lit in Mingli Hall. Fengquan removed his official eunuch robe and sat all prim and proper by the side of the tea table. His slim figure resembled that of a young lad among those overlapping, dancing white gauze curtains.

The sound of the rain pitter-pattered swiftly like that of a zither, whilst the color of the sky was dusky like the long stretch of night.

Fengquan kept that weak flame going and raised his head between those dancing gauzes, revealing half of his face. He saw a pair of black boots stop in front of the thin gauze. Rainwater dripped down along the sheath of the other party's sword, forming narrow rings of rippling light on the mirror-like floor.

"Who did you think you would see?" Fengquan asked demurely. "Shao Fengquan?"

With soaking wet locks of hair dangling, Qiao Tianya held down the sheath of his sword. He could not see through those layers after layers of white gauzes. His heavy sleeves dropped to his side, as if binding the hand that held his sword.

Fengquan stroked that lamp as half of his face slowly broke into a smile. Laughter, too, brimmed in that eye.

"You're late," he said softly.

Qiao Tianya raised his eyes.

Fengquan stood up. They were too far apart. It was as if they never knew each other. All those childhood friendships slipped them by in those long, endless passages of time. Songyue, who had circled back to the original starting point, was still holding a seven-stringed zither in his arms, but gradually, he came to the realization that not one of those who left had ever returned.

"You brought your sword along with you when you left Qudu and became the swordsman you always spoke of. Qiao Songyue, I hate you so

much all these years.” Fengquan tilted his head up slightly and pointed to his own ear. “And yet all I had with me was this.”

That not-very-conspicuous ear-piercing concealed filth.

“All I had was this...” Fengquan lowered his voice, and his expression grew all the more gloomy. “Look at me. What do I look like?”

He looked so young, his overly pale face having retained the melancholy of his youth. Even his limbs looked as though they had yet to develop into adulthood.

“My father gave you the sword, and my paternal grandmother sent me to Zhongbo, where I met Lei Changming.” Fengquan squeezed the words out through his teeth. “I wanted so badly to die... I almost broke free, but Lei Jingzhe picked me up from the ditch and took me back, just like those mutts he raised. He had me live in Gedale for five years. Five years... I was smarter than those bastards. Amu’er set his eyes on me. He wanted me to be a Lizard and lead the Scorpions in Dazhou on his behalf. But, all I wanted was to come back.”

So Amu’er let him go back.

“Go back to your homeland.” Amu’er handed Fengquan a dagger in front of his golden tent. “Go see your father and friends. If they are still the same as before, you will get your freedom.”

Fengquan took it for real. He returned to Dazhou and reunited with Shao Chengbi as he wished. Fengquan looked at Qiao Tianya’s shadow and continued as if he was telling someone else’s story, “I saw my father, and he was very happy. He stroked my head, then kneeled before me and cried bitter tears.”

“He sent you,” Qiao Tianya said in a hoarse voice, “into the palace.”

“That was only a step in the plan. My father spent the latter half of his life atoning for his sins. It was useless begging Buddha; the Eastern Palace was his nightmare. The Grand Mentor did not die—this fact was the only hope of those former ministers of the Eastern Palace. My father concealed his identity and kept watch outside the doors of Zhaozui Temple, waiting for Qi Huilian to start using him. To avoid arousing suspicions, he had me consume those medicines.” Fengquan pointed to his own chest, the vicissitudes of life in his eyes at odds with his youthful appearance. He adjusted the expression on his face, looking particularly bizarre at this moment. “Who would suspect me? Even if my name was Fengquan, no one would believe that I am Shao Fengquan.”

Xue Xiuzhuo was so cautious, and yet he had never had doubts about Fengquan's identity.

Li Jianting was so vigilant, and yet she still believed Fengquan's lies.

It was not that they were not smart enough, but that Fengquan's appearance had long ceased to be consistent with his age. Shao Chengbi's son was already thirty-six years old this year, but Fengquan still looked as though he had yet to come of age.<sup>138</sup> This discrepancy kept him free from suspicions in Qudu.

Fengquan's eyes were drab and gloomy. He was tired of crying and laughing. This face was not even real.

"What's the use of Qi Huilian?" He said. "That old lunatic was trapped in Zhaozui Temple for twenty years. He was like a dog wagging its tail begging for food, yet he still thought about the success or failure of Dazhou."

Qi Huilian initially did not know that Amu'er had made his foray into these murky waters. When Shen Zechuan left Zhaozui Temple and joined the imperial court in the reign of Tianchen, Qi Huilian looked back on the case of the Zhongbo's troops' defeat and indistinctly sensed that strange, irresistible force at play. Qi Huilian himself did not expect this to be all a massive, intricate game, nor did he expect Fengquan to be the Scorpion that Amu'er had sent back.

"You admire Qi Huilian." White gauze covered Fengquan's side profile. "You're really quite pitiful too. What's the difference between Qi Huilian and Xue Xiuzhuo? They all pride themselves on being figures who would die for the righteous cause, and they all treat others as pawns. My father was even willing to trap me in this shell," Fengquan looked wearily at the top of Mingli Hall, "making me neither human nor ghost, male nor female."

"The Eastern Palace fell victim, and the innocent were caught in the crossfire. Uncle Shao's debt had long since been repaid when the family properties were sealed and confiscated." Qiao Tianya fixed his gaze on the overlapping figure on the white gauze. "You don't owe anyone anything."

Fengquan spread his arms open, dragging his wide sleeves across the tea table. He chuckled and said in a tone that was both envious and mocking, "Qiao Songyue, must be really nice being a swordsman... Why do you think my father would go to such an extent? Because of 'loyalty'?"

The tiny candlelight was about to go out.

“What brought on the downfall of the Eastern Palace at that time was the rebellion papers that the Imperial Bodyguards forged. Who could imitate the handwriting of the Crown Prince and the Eastern Palace advisors to such striking resemblance? A subordinate of the Eastern Palace himself.” Fengquan curbed his smile. “Qiao Kanghai dared to defect to the enemy precisely because he had rendered meritorious service by imitating the Eastern Palace’s handwriting to bring down the Crown Prince for the Empress Dowager.”

Qiao Tianya abruptly tightened his grip on the hilt of his sword.

Fengquan pressed in a step closer, and his sleeves knocked over the tea table., “In order to preserve the lives of your entire family, my father implored Hua Siqian to lend a helping hand, but Hua Siqian refused to, so my father could only go and plead with Shen Wei.”

Qiao Tianya’s breathing was slightly in disarray. “Zhongbo—”

“That’s right!” Fengquan abruptly yanked aside the white gauze before him and cruelly said, “The military defeat of the Zhongbo troops is connected to the leak of the Ministry of War’s military terrain map. That was a map my father gave to Shen Wei, who in turn gave it to Amu’er as a gift for their first encounter!”

Muffled thunder crashed outside the palace hall. The color drained from Qiao Tianya’s face.

“The scimitars slaughtered the cities of the six prefectures.” Fengquan pressed in closer with his sleeves trailing behind him. Unbridled insanity roiled in his eyes. “It’s all thanks to both your and my clans that Shen Zechuan’s entire family perished in that military defeat!”

Qiao Tianya’s joints on the hand grasping the sword’s hilt cracked. Fengquan scrutinized his expression, as if he was scrutinizing the sorry sight Qiao Tianya cut as he retreated again and again in defeat. Qiao Songyue was weather-worn by the vicissitudes of life, but this was not enough. He still inspired envy in others, and even when he drifted and led a wandering life, he was still free.

Fengquan advanced another step, and his face split into black and white sides under the crash of thunder and flash of lightning. His hatred built up in his chest, burning him beyond recognition.

“I returned to my father’s side,” he continued, “but he turned me into a monster to repay his debt.” He grabbed Qiao Tianya by the flaps of his clothes and bent over slightly with his head tilted up to say in an icy tone,



“Every day, every single day, I ask myself who I am. I am a Scorpion, a former subject, and countless people’s dog!” His expression turned hideously savage. “For his own bullshit penance, Shao Chengbi killed me with his very own hands! Look at me. Qiao Songyue, can you recognize who I am?! Qi Huilian was too ruthless. He didn’t trust me, yet he wanted to place me here. I disguised myself as Mu Ru’s younger brother and took Xiaofuzi’s place, imitating the affectations of a child in his youth. Oh...” He gritted his teeth. “All these conceited, self-righteous big shots... Wasn’t Qi Huilian’s death wonderful? I did everything possible to take out Wei Huaigu for him!”

“It was you,” Qiao Tianya raised his hand but did not touch Fengquan, “who replaced the relay report Yang Cheng sent to the Ministry of Justice.”

“It was me...” Fengquan’s hands were trembling with excitement. “Qi Huilian was so clever, but even he could not anticipate that he would die here. He was the one who personally sent me up here. If there were no Shen Zechuan in the equation, the entire world would be a sand table playground at my mercy.”

Yang Cheng reported Wei Huaigu for reselling the military grains, and his relay report was originally meant to be sent to the Ministry of Justice. However, the tag was switched to the Ministry of Revenue’s tag midway through. This move caused Wei Huaigu to suspect that he had already been exposed, and so, in order to keep the others safe, he opted to turn himself in, indirectly prompting Xue Xiuzhuo to take action.

“The epidemic during the reign of Tianchen,” Qiao Tianya’s fingers curled slightly, “was also your doing.”

Back then, Donglong Street’s public ditches were clogged. Ouhua Pavilion collapsed, and an epidemic broke out. Qiao Tianya had once said during his discussion with Xiao Chiye that the epidemic did not start from Donglong Street, but from the palace.

“Had Li Jianheng died on that day,” Fengquan hissed like a snake, “I’d have won this game.”

Of the Scorpions, former subordinates, and informers hiding in the inner court, Fengquan was the one with the upper hand throughout it all. His multiple identities enabled him to possess the intelligence of all the various parties in the game. He was just like a venomous spider lying in

ambush in the center of its web, contemplating and observing everyone's movement and actions every single moment.

Qiao Tianya's reddened eyes were emotionless. His Adam's apple throbbed. He did not release his sword even as Fengquan was hauling him by the front of his clothes. He looked at Fengquan and said, "But you still let Uncle Shao set out to battle."

The rainstorm completely cut off the sound of footsteps outside the palace hall. The expression in Fengquan's eyes at this moment was numb. His eyes reddened, he lifted his chin slightly and said contemptuously to Qiao Tianya, "Because I don't want to play anymore."

His contorted, bizarre shadow crept on the ground, following him as he crawled deep into this palace. He gradually lost sight of who he was as the days and nights alternated—he worked for everyone, but he also betrayed all of them. He was not the winner at all. He was a nobody in the anarchy. A nobody who broke free of manipulations.

"I waited for you all in Zhongbo for a very long time," Qiao Tianya said. "All these years, not a single one turned back."

Tears coursed down Fengquan's face as his eyes curved into crescents. Shaking his head, he said, "Oh, Songyue..." He seemed to have returned to the day they once parted. The expression in his eyes was complicated, resembling both envy and abhorrence. "That's because everyone is dead."

Qiao Tianya felt a great stab of pain in his heart. His sword-holding hand trembled uncontrollably. Under the howls of the torrential rain, he seemed to have woken up, to have broken free of that never-ending dream.

He finally understood.

Everyone was *dead*.



"The Imperial Army has entered the cities!" With the south side gate wide open, the Capital Command Troops ran the hardest they could to pass on the news in all directions. "Reinforcements!"

"No reinforcements!" The motley crew of soldiers shoved the Capital Command Troops who were in the way and looked towards the main east gate in the rain. "The rebels have surrounded Qudu."

"Huaizhou! Where are the reinforcements from Huaizhou?!" Chen Zhen lifted the hem of his robe. "The imperial court sent someone over after Tao Ming left, did they not!"

“There was no response to the transfer order we issued.” Liang Cuishan wiped the rainwater from his face and looked out of the city. “I fear they won’t be coming.”

“There are still horse carriages at the west gate.” Xue Xiuzhuo suddenly turned around and strode a few steps across the rain to grasp Li Jianting tightly by the arm, “Your Majesty, Qudu is already beyond defending, but there’s still room to turn things around in Juexi!”

Li Jianting trembled slightly under the sounds of the troops fighting and killing. She grasped Xue Xiuzhuo back and said with a resolute and steely expression, “I shall defend the city gates together with Teacher.”

Xue Xiuzhuo gazed at Li Jianting. “When the sovereign is in danger or disgrace, his ministers ought to be ready to relinquish their lives to serve him.<sup>139</sup> There is no reason to make the emperor guard the gates when the ministers are still around.”

“I cannot abandon Teacher and flee.” Li Jianting’s voice was hoarse. Drenched in the rain with rainwater on her long eyelashes, she looked as if she was shedding tears. “Even if the city is breached, I ought to live and die with all of you.”

The hair on Xue Xiuzhuo’s temples was damp. He had changed too much in this one short year. He seized over the job of defending the old ways from Hai Liangyi’s hands. In the face of a disunited imperial court where everyone did their own thing, he had already done his best. The decline of the moderates started and ended with him. He wanted to accompany Dazhou on the final leg of its journey.

“With these words of Your Majesty, this humble subject has no more regrets.” Xue Xiuzhuo lifted his body and slowly straightened his robes and crown in the heavy rain. “This humble subject and Your Majesty were teacher and pupil once... so, let me walk this last leg of the road on your behalf.”

Li Jianting involuntarily choked with sobs.

An earth-shattering crash rang out at the last ramming at the main east gate. The gate, unable to withstand the impact of the force, opened up a narrow passage. The garrison troops had already thrust their blades in. The motley crew of soldiers and Capital Command Troops on the inside pushed against the gate panel. Tantai Hu led his soldiers and exerted himself to push and slide the city gate inward.

Xue Xiuzhuo turned around and waved his sleeves aside. "Escort Her Majesty out of the city!" He ordered loudly.

Li Jianting was unwilling to leave. The guards had already swarmed over to her. She gazed despondently at Xue Xiuzhuo in the rain. All the court ministers had their backs to her; no one looked back.

"Teacher..." She shouted.

Xue Xiuzhuo strode up the city stairs, his expression calm and composed under the deafening bombardment of the catapults. "Is Shen Zechuan around?" He asked outside the city.

Raindrops pelted upon armors. Feng Ta Shuang Yi cut a particularly conspicuous sight standing among them. Military flags flapped behind Shen Zechuan. He turned his head slightly towards Xue Xiuzhuo, as though he was observing this real opponent of his.

The front of Xue Xiuzhuo's clothes was wet from the rainwater, and the beast pattern on his mandarin square<sup>140</sup> was obscured. He did not wipe the rain on his face. Even at this moment, that stubbornness of his never diminished. He raised a hand to reveal the authority token he was holding.

"When I helped you become the Imperial Bodyguards' vice commander," Xue Xiuzhuo's eyes were calm, "I suspected you of being a Scorpion. I was wrong. You are far more terrifying than a Scorpion. Stride across that gate bearing Shen Wei's name now that you have returned to Qudu, and you'd be a sinner through the ages."

Raindrops trickled down the side of Shen Zechuan's face. His expression was sinister and ruthless, and his expressive eyes appeared particularly cold and detached. Finally, he spoke. "I have been a sinner ever since I stood before this gate. You cannot predict whether I'll live or die. If I can put up with being reviled by the masses today, I can shoulder the perpetual infamy for days to come."

The gale blew up Shen Zechuan's hair. His lips moved slowly, revealing an ominous, chilling smile in the torrential rain.

"Return me my teacher, my strategist, my elder brother. All of them."

The city gate fell over with a "thud". Tantai Hu led his men in a charge into the passageway. Pieces of the battlements went flying all over from being smashed by the rocks. Both gates within Qudu were breached. The Imperial Army and the Garrison Troops worked in concert together in the south and the east, battling to the death with the Capital Command Troops and the motley crew of soldiers on the various streets and alleys.

A broken piece of stone cut Xue Xiuzhuo on the cheek, and blood flowed unceasingly. Gripping his authority token tightly in his hand, all he could do was watch as the stone monument that was a symbol of Dazhou's dignity collapsed with a thunderous crash.

"You came to collect this debt, and I am willing to pay for it with my life." Xue Xiuzhuo suddenly said at the top of his voice in the burgeoning chaos, "I was the one who killed Qi Huilian and Yao Wenyu. Call it quits now! Where horses trample past fertile farmlands, the ravages of war spread. Shen Zechuan—I will give you my head!"

Tantai Hu cut down the soldier before him. As he lifted his blade, he noticed a familiar smell. He wiped away the blood on his face and flipped over the corpse of a soldier with his foot. For some inexplicable reason, he bent over and peeled away the other man's clothes.

Shen Zechuan did not reply. The strong crossbows at the top of the city wall suddenly unleashed a burst of arrow rain. Feng Ta Shuang Yi trod its hooves uneasily.

The sound of the rain was pressing. Fei Sheng's ears suddenly twitched, and his expression promptly underwent a change. He practically tumbled off the back of his horse and stomped on a garrison troop soldier's shield to spring into the air as he bellowed, "Master, watch out!"

Shen Zechuan had no cover before him. It seemed to Fei Sheng as if he could not make it in time when he suddenly saw Shen Zechuan slide open his folding fan in the rain to forcibly block the blow. But its bamboo body was too fragile, and in the next instant, it broke with a "crack".

However, this one move was already enough!

Unable to draw his blade, Fei Sheng grabbed hold of that sharp arrow with his bare hand and steadily landed on his feet in the blink of an eye.



"Do you know?" Fengquan held up his index finger and pointed it before him. "The smartest people are also the most foolish. They seemed to me to be having too hard of a time fighting with each other, so I set up an arena for them here."

Fengquan hoodwinked Qi Huilian, deceived Xue Xiuzhuo, and made a fool of Amu'er. He made all these talented and brilliant chess players fail miserably when they least expected it. His cunning ways were cloaked in invisibility, becoming a sharp blade that revealed none of its traces.

He was not subjected to anyone's manipulation.

“I shall be the one to toss the dice.” Fengquan spread his arms open and laughed softly in the empty Mingli Hall. “Whoever can step through the main gates of the palace alive today, will be the winner of this game.”



“Fuck...” Tantai Hu had already seen the tattoo on the corpse. He raised his head to look at the densely packed motley crew of soldiers ahead and felt his blood run cold.

He spat, “... This mixed bag of soldiers are all Scorpions!”

### NOTICE:

New updated [Character Chart](#) from the QJJ Simplified CN Physical Copy!  
Check out the [Character Glossary](#)!



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### Footnotes

1. 四脚蛇 is also literally translated as “four-legged snake”, aka lizard.
2. 黃冊 *Huangce* or literally yellow registers/yellow book served during the Ming Dynasty to provide basic data for taxation and recruitment based on the household’s classification according to their occupation. It was mainly divided into three categories: civilian, military, and craftsman.
3. Youxiong is a tribe that takes the bear as its totem. The Biansha Tribes’ names are based on animals. For a list, you can refer to the [worldmap](#).
4. Refer to 242
5. For those who forgot, refer to chapter 250, returning of the head to the Biansha Tribes is considered a humiliation of sorts.
6. 既然 *jiran* literally means “since”
7. 元气 or *yuan qi*, or primordial *qi*, or vital energy, is the fundamental *qi* we are born with.
8. Just a note that it actually said “mother” in the raws, not sure if it was an unintentional typo. As usual, will double check with the traditional chinese physical copy when it is released.
9. A practice in former times where two locks of hair from the husband and wife are bound together during the wedding as a symbol of lasting union.

10. 小师父 Little *shifu*, or Little (Venerable) Master, the *shifu* here is term of respect for a monk or nun and is not referring to Jiran as Qiao Tianya's martial art master.
11. 施主 *shizhu*, or benefactor, patron; term used by monks or nuns as a general term of address towards laymen; also used by Buddhist monks or Taoist priests for someone who has contributed to a monastery or temple.
12. This *shifu* here is legit his shifu lol. To distinguish between the *shifu*, we'll be using *shifu* for one's master and little (venerable) master as the monk address for Jiran.
13. “绿水无忧，因风而皱；青山不老，为雪白头① by Shen Yifu (沈义甫)
14. 因缘 in Buddhism, all things, phenomena, and social activities are believed arise out of the combinations of causes (因) and conditions (缘) (i.e., primary cause and secondary causes that combines to bring about a result, or effect (果). 因缘 also refers to predestined relationship or affinity.
15. “一切有为法，如梦幻泡影，如露亦如电，应作如是观。” from the Diamond Sutra 《金刚经》 Basically, all phenomena are fleeting and ephemeral, so we should treat them as such.
16. Refer to [chapter 184](#)
17. 向死而生 “being-towards-death”, a concept by German philosopher Martin Heidegger. According to Heidegger, the human being is a “being toward death” (*Being and Time*), one who cannot fully live an authentic life unless one confronts one's own mortality.
18. 相 in Buddhism at its most basic refers to form or appearance, etc of all things. Sort of mean how he still has an attachment to all things/phenomena/etc in the secular world and can't renounce the world just yet.
19. Refer to [chapter 203](#)
20. This is the mute lad mentioned in [chapter 221](#), will use Ya'er (“mute lad”) as his name.
21. Having a son to carry on the family line is considered an act of filial piety in ancient times.
22. i.e., tom, dick, and harry
23. Does not refer to real descendants but the people under his “protection,” just like how Fengquan was Pan Rugui's god-grandson

and Ji Lei was Pan Rugui's godson. So this eunuch has to be someone with high rank and power in the palace who can bring some benefit to his 'descendants', such as better treatment and opportunities, etc.

24. 老祖宗 literally old ancestor or forefather; sometimes the top eunuch in the Ming Dynasty is privately addressed as such

25. 太祖 *Taizu*, Great (Imperial) Ancestor ; usually the posthumous title of the first emperor (or founder) of a new dynasty.

26. Refers to Pan Rugui

27. 铁券 iron plaque, conferred by the emperor on a distinguished minister as a special honor. It is being used here as a "free-pass".

28. 军屯 military troops (mostly in border regions) who carry out garrison duties and farm crops to supply the border garrisons with grains.



29.

30. 杏眼 almond eyes; a kind of eye shape said to give off a younger, adorable or pure vibe.

31. 三姓家奴 literally, a slave with three surnames. The term originates from the Romance of the Three Kingdoms 《三国演义》 and refers specifically to Lu Bu. It's used mockingly to refer to capricious, disloyal and unrighteous people who serve traitors.

32. 治大国若烹小鲜 literally, ruling a large state is like cooking/steaming/boiling a small fish. Just as one should not turn small fish too frequently when cooking lest they break apart, the ruler of a big country should not make unpredictable changes in policy or otherwise interfere too much in the lives of the people, but instead should respect the natural order of society, from Tao Te Ching (Daodejing) 《道德经》 by Laozi



33. As offerings. The burning of offerings is considered an expression of filial piety to provide the deceased with the means to enjoy the comforts of what they once had when they were alive.
34. 旌旗十万斩阎罗<sup>①</sup> Original quote “此去泉台招旧部 旌旗十万斩阎罗。” “I shall head to the netherworld to summon my former [deceased] comrades and, with a banner of 10,000 [soldiers], slay the King of Hell (a reference to the Kuo//min//tang here)” from “The Three Chapters of Meiling” 《梅岭三章》 by Chen Yi (陈毅).
35. 斩阎罗 Zhan Yan Luo, aka, Slay(er of) the King of Hell
36. 年号 reign title a designation for the years when an emperor was on the throne
37. 盛胤 the name Shengyin would translate to “prosperity for posterity“.
38. It says Marquis of Bianbo in this chapter. Previously in earlier chapters, it was Marquis of Biansha, and then he got “promoted” to Earl of Biansha. Will double-check with the traditional Chinese copy when it is released.
39. 异姓王 Specifically princes, or lords, with different surnames from the imperial family These were conferred princes who were bestowed the title by the Emperor.
40. 三人成虎, literally three men make a tiger. i.e., three people spreading reports of a tiger would make one believe that there is really one around. Basically, a repeated rumor becomes a ‘fact’.
41. From here onwards, Li Jianting used “朕” (*zhen*) to refer to herself (unless stated otherwise). It’s an imperial term for “I” exclusively used by the Emperor. It differentiates the monarch from all his people and subjects.
42. 异姓王 Specifically princes, or lords, with different surnames from the imperial family. These were conferred princes who were bestowed the title by the Emperor.
43. \* Li Jianting used the common “I” (我) here (marked with \*), then reverted to the imperial “I” (朕) used exclusively by the emperor.
44. 君臣本同治乱，共安危 from “Essentials of Government in the Zhenguan Reign” 《贞观政要》 is a compendium on statecraft during the Zhenguan reign (627-649) in the Tang Dynasty.

45. 舌上有龙泉，杀人不见血 i.e., Words (of a sharp-tongued person) can do serious harm; from “Essentials of Government in the Zhenguan Reign” 《贞观政要》 is a compendium on statecraft during the Zhenguan reign (627-649) in the Tang Dynasty. Longquan refers to a city in southern Zhejiang province where famous Longquan swords are made.
46. 二叔 *er'shu* (for Xiao Chiye) vs. 二叔叔 *er'shushu* (for Shen Zechuan). 叔叔 as “uncle” refers to one’s father’s younger brother and is also a child’s form of address for any young man one generation older.
47. The full line, “以铜为镜，可以正衣冠；以史为镜，可以知兴替；以人为镜，可以明得失” by Tang Taizong (唐太宗); He who uses bronze as his mirror can tidy his apparel; He who uses history as a mirror can know of the rise and fall of a dynasty; he who uses people as his mirror can understand successes and failures.
48. 企者不立，跨者不行 from 《道德经》 Tao Te Ching (Daodejing) by Laozi
49. 清谈 Qingtan is a Chinese philosophical movement and social practice among political and intellectual elites where the literati engaged in highly sophisticated intellectual and philosophical discussions on lofty and non-mundane matters.
50. A variant of 天下英雄入吾彀中矣 “*all heroes of the world have fallen into my trap*” spoken by Tang Taizong in reference to the imperial examinations, which not only build a meritocratic government but also replace martial conflicts for civil examinations. The people, in voluntarily choosing to take the examinations, thus fall into Taizong’s “trap”, spending their lives dedicated to studying the classics (which instill precisely the values that keep the emperor in power) rather than rising in rebellions, etc.
51. His name means 延 (extend/prolong/engage) 清 (clear/pure/upright/impartial)
52. 太祖 *Taizu*, Great (Imperial) Ancestor “; usually the posthumous title of the first emperor (or founder) of a new dynasty.
53. 乱世用重典, Govern with severe punishments in turbulent times. i.e., the rulers should impose strict laws and inflict severe punishments in turbulent times, especially as a deterrent, from “Grand Pronouncements of Ming” (明大诰).

54. 份子钱 gift money that is given during occasions like weddings, birth of a child, etc
55. 清谈 *Qingtán* is a Chinese philosophical movement and social practice among political and intellectual elites where the literati engaged in highly sophisticated intellectual and philosophical discussions on lofty and non-mundane matters.
56. specifically elder sister and younger brother
57. 见字如晤 literally seeing this letter is akin to a meeting in person. It's commonly used in old times as an opening, sort of like "I hope this letter finds you well" in modern times.



- 58.
59. 团领衫 or 圆领袍 round-collared robe/attire typically worn by officials in the Ming Dynasty.
60. 亩, *mu*, or Chinese acre, measure of land equal to 0.0667 hectares
61. 掌中物 literally object in one's palm, also used to refer to being in one's control.

62. 沈腰潘鬓 *shen yao pan bin* (the ‘*shen*’ here is the same ‘*shen*’ in Shen Zechuan); refers to a man with a frail body and premature graying of hair.
63. 萧郎 *Xiao-lang* (the ‘*xiao*’ here is the same ‘*xiao*’ in Xiao Chiye); 郎 *-lang*, young man; a form of address that is also used as a term to address a lover or husband. So if your lover has the surname Zhang (张), you would be calling him *Zhang-lang* (*zhanglang* written in different characters btw, also means cockroach); 萧郎 *Xiaolang* as a whole also refers to a male lover or beloved in poetry.
64. Anitabha, or Amitabha, read with Jiran’s accent.
65. The official title is Tax Circuit Intendant, (督粮道) but it’s also a counterpart of Grain Tax Circuit (粮储道). Literally though, 督粮道 is “Grain-supervisory Circuit”.
66. Households were classified and recorded into the *Huangce* or yellow registers/yellow book (黄册) according to their occupation to provide basic data for taxation and recruitment. It was mainly divided into three categories: civilian (民户), military (军户), and craftsman.
67. 打肿脸(充胖子) slap one’s face until it’s swollen (in an effort to look imposing); to do something beyond one’s means in order to be impressive
68. 宝剑锋从磨砺出 The sharp edge of a treasured sword is the result of honing. i.e., one’s mettle or abilities have to be honed in order to become useful and outstanding
69. 车到山前必有路 i.e., things will always sort themselves out; cross the bridge when you come to it.



70.



71.

72. 独轮车 i.e., a kind of wheelbarrow

73. 都军 it is also used as another name for the Imperial Army during the Song Dynasty, but to make it less confusing, we'll use Capital Command Troops, aka troops in active service in the capital

74. 伯乐 a figure famed for his ability to judge the quality of horses. Refers to someone who is a good judge of talents.

75. 帝王之道：制衡之术 art of rulership/governance of ruler: The technique of checks and balances was one of the most common political tools used by the emperors in ancient China to govern their officials.



76.

77. 太师椅 *Taishi* Chair or Grand Preceptor Chair, is a classical style of a wooden armchair in ancient China.



78.

79. A form of hand exercise using a pair Baoding balls, designed to help relieve stress while building finger dexterity and wrist and forearm strength. We all know what you're thinking though. (° 5 °)



80.

81. 里 *li*, an ancient measure of length, 1 li is approx. 500m

82. 吴下阿蒙 General Lu Meng (from the Three Kingdoms Period) was originally uneducated, but he later devoted himself to studying for many years, becoming so knowledgeable and wise that he surprised Lu Su, who said to him, “*You are no longer A-Meng from Wu*”. Now used as a model of self-improvement through diligent study.

83. 水(至)清则无鱼 literally, water that is too clean has no(/few) fish, i.e., one should not demand absolute purity; you cannot expect everyone to be squeaky clean.

84. Chrysanthemums, which symbolize longevity, bloom around the ninth lunar month, also called “the month of chrysanthemum”. It is

also customary to hold chrysanthemums appreciation sessions during the Double Ninth (Chongyang) Festival. Chrysanthemum is also one of the Four Gentlemen (along with plum, orchid, and bamboo) in Chinese art, which compares them to the Confucian *junzi*, or “gentlemen”.

85. 硕鼠 a large rat; a metaphor for a greedy official who levies and collects money.

86. 太宗 *taizong*, posthumous name given to second emperor of a dynasty

87. 木秀于林，风必摧之；堆出于岸，流必湍之 from “On Fortune And Destiny” 《运命论》 by Li Kang (李康). I.e., a person who is too outstanding will incur jealousy and is easily subjected to attacks and slanders.

88. 名帖 (also 拜帖), a name card (or visitation card) written on paper or wood used by officials, nobles, or distinguished people to notify the other party of their visit. It would usually indicate his name, position, and so on.

89. 天理 “Law/Principles of Heaven” i.e., feudal ethics as propounded by the Confucianists in the Song Dynasty

90. 任贤必治，任不贤必乱 (original line 任贤必治，任不肖必乱) from “Historical Events Retold as a Mirror for Government” 《资治通鉴》 compiled by Sima Guang.

91. 明者，销祸于未萌 from “Historical Events Retold as a Mirror for Government” 《资治通鉴》 compiled by Sima Guang.

92. 穷则思变 literally one will start thinking about changes when he is in extreme poverty (or when he hits rock bottom or is at the end of his resources).

93. Based on “君王死社稷” the sovereign die for the state from “The Books of Rites” 《礼记》

94. 物不极则不反，恶不极则不亡 from “Historical Events Retold as a Mirror for Government” 《资治通鉴》 compiled by Sima Guang.

95. 一春秋 also refers to a year

96. 招文袋 a small bag hung at the waist for keeping documents or money.

97. The first two characters for “moon over pines” (松月, literally pine moon) are the same characters for Qian Tianya’s name,

Songyue.

98. The first two characters for “wind and spring” (风泉, literally wind spring) are the same characters as the name of the eunuch, Fengquan.

99. 松月生夜凉，风泉满清听 “Overnight at Master’s Mountain Lodge When Ding the Eldest (Ding Feng) Failed to Arrive” 《宿业师山房待丁大不至》 by Meng Haoran (孟浩然), a Tang dynasty poet.

100. 长生牌 Longevity tablet, a tablet used to pray for the blessings of one’s benefactors. (As opposed to ancestral tablets to pray to one’s dead ancestors.)

101. 批红 compilation of an endorsement on a memorial; chief eunuchs had the right to note down remarks in red color (*pihong* 批紅) on the incoming memorials, even before the Emperor had seen them.

102. 老祖宗, *lao-zuzong* or old/senior forefather/ancestor is also used to address the top eunuch. 小祖宗 *xiao-zuzong* or little/junior forefather/ancestor is also used as “little brat/little devil”.

103. 酷吏 specifically officials who used harsh laws or torture to brutalize the people.

104. It was Emperor Guangcheng in the jjwxc version but edited to Emperor Yongyi (after the name of his reign) in the simplified Chinese physical copy. As usual, the final copy will be double-checked against and based on the traditional Chinese physical copy when it is released. Please bear with us for now.

105. Specifically to retire after achieving success.

106. 纸贵 literally paper expensive. When a work is so popular everyone is copying it to circulate it, leading to paper shortage and causing the price of paper to skyrocket.

107. 黄册 *Huangce* or yellow registers/yellow book served during the Ming Dynasty to provide basic data for taxation and recruitment based on the household’s classification according to their occupation. It was mainly divided into three categories: civilian, military, and craftsman.

108. 火牌 military token/tally/seal or warrant to identify and authenticate soldiers delivering urgent messages.



109.急递铺 urgent delivery station or express post station. Together with the relay (post) stations, they formed the “arteries and veins” of the Ming Empire, working together to circulate people, information, and goods throughout the lands.

110.Supposedly, to repay the debt he owes his son in this life.

111.玉牒 literally jade records; i.e., genealogy record of the imperial family

112.朱批/朱砂印 literally vermilion or cinnabar seal as authentication

113.太祖 *Taizu*, Great (Imperial) Ancestor “; usually the posthumous title of the first emperor (or founder) of a new dynasty.

114.Yellow was the color of the emperor.

115.狼烟(台) specifically smoke of wolves’ dung burnt to indicate the presence of hostile forces

116.For those still confused, Li Jianting is the end result when Emperor Guangcheng forced himself on his daughter-in-law, aka Prince Qin’s wife, so if you were to really go into it, she’s both Emperor Guangcheng’s daughter and granddaughter.

117.水满则溢，月盈则缺。Water brims only to overflow, the moon waxes only to wane. i.e., things/situations reverse when they reach their extreme or limit.

118.异姓王 Specifically princes, or lords, with different surnames from the imperial family These were conferred princes who were bestowed the title by the Emperor, so naturally, they can be stripped of the title by the emperor too.

119.当头棒喝 literally, a blow to the head or a loud shout; i.e., a stern advice/criticism or a severe shock that brings one to a sudden realization of the error of one’s thinking/ways. From a traditional Chan (Zen) Buddhist teaching method where a monk would often hit a beginner student on the head or shout loudly at him to shock him out of his erroneous thinking and help him achieve enlightenment.

120.定海神针 literally “The Sea-Anchoring Divine Needle”.

According to the novel *Journey to the West* 《西游记》，this was a divine ‘needle’ (or pole) that could shrink and grow according to its owner’s wish. At first, it was a treasure of the Eastern Sea Dragon King’s Dragon Palace, but Sun Wukong (孙悟空) later took it away to use as his weapon and changed the needle’s name to the Ruyi

Golden Cudgel (如意金箍棒). It's used to refer to a stabilizing force.

121.长明灯 *changming* lamp (or literally eternally bright lamp), an altar lamp that is kept burning day and night usually set in front of a memorial tablet on the family's ancestral altar as a visible aspect of ancestor veneration.

122.纲常 i.e., the three cardinal ethical relationships of social order (including the relationship between the ruler and his subject, father and son, husband and wife) and the five constant virtues in Confucianism.

123.三姓家奴 literally, a slave with three surnames. The term originates from the Romance of the Three Kingdoms 《三国演义》 and refers specifically to Lu Bu. It's used mockingly to refer to capricious, disloyal and unrighteous people who serve traitors.

124.卖身契 more specifically, it's an indenture or a deed of sale of oneself or one's family member to someone else (e.g., into slavery, etc, or in Qiao Tianya's case, to repay a debt.)

125.For those interested in the actual characters in Chinese, Fuman wrote “风” which is the “*feng*” in “Fengquan”. Fengquan changed the “X”-like stroke into “杀”, or “*sha*”, which means kill.

126.A martial arts move where one hits an enemy from a distance away without actually laying hands on said person. i.e., to deal an indirect strike

127.Xiao Chiye literally said “old camel” (which is also a colloquial term for blockhead). Mengtuo has “camel” in the name. The Biansha Tribes' names are based on animals and/or nature. For a list, you can refer to [Worldmap](#)

128.A 母老虎 (Xiao Chiye used 悍虎 here) back at home usually refers to a man's wife who is a tigress or a shrew.

129.金帐 literally golden tent, refers to the tent the khan of ancient nomads lives in.

130.一把莲 During the Ming Dynasty, when the bedchamber doors were shut every night when the eunuchs of the inner palace scattered back to the duty room, the clothes they took off were always hung on the rack before their bed and scented with sweet perfumes

131.It was modified from 蝎子 (scorpion) to 鞋子 (shoes) here in the Simplified Chinese physical copy. Again, will KIV to double check

with the Traditional Chinese copy.



132.

133. From 岳阳楼记 (Yueyang Tower) by Fan Zhongyan in Northern Song.

134. 攻城之法，为不得已 from the Art of War by Sun Tzu (孙子兵法)

135. Variant of 不在其位，不谋其政 (He who holds no rank in a state does not discuss its policies, or meddle not in affairs that are not part of your position) from the Analects (of Confucius). 论语·泰伯

136. 亩, mu, or Chinese acre, measure of land equal to 0.0667 hectares

137. In those days, it wasn't really proper for a man to have physical or close contact with a woman unrelated to him. (男女授受不亲). That's why he's doing the reading through a handkerchief so there's no skin contact, for propriety's sake.

138. 阿斗 A-Dou, the infant name of Liu Shan (刘禅), the last emperor of Shu Han (蜀汉), known for his lack of ability and weak character.

139. Refer to [chapter 225](#) for a recap of Li Jianting And The Crack

140. 三教九流 the Three Doctrines (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism) and the Nine Schools of Thought [i.e., Confucianism (儒家), Taoism (道教) and Buddhism (佛教); the Confucians (儒家), the Taoists (道家), the Yin-Yang (阴阳家), the Legalists (法家), the Logicians (名家), the Mohists (墨家), the Political Strategists (纵横

家), the Eclectics (杂家) and the Agriculturists (农家)]; also used to describe people in various trades; people of all sorts



141.

142.单梢炮 Single-component catapults, or one-branch trebuchet

143.丈 zhang; a measure of length, 1 zhang = ten Chinese feet (3.3m)

144.及冠 or 弱冠, a man's 20th birthday, i.e., coming of age at 20 for a male.

145.主辱臣死 often used as an expression of loyalty from a subject to the emperor.



补子 | 黄雀文

146.

147. 补子 rank badges or mandarin squares, was a large embroidered badge sewn onto the surcoat of an official to indicate the rank of the official wearing it.

## CHAPTER 280: EXILED



Xiao Chiye woke up from his sleep.

His arms, which he had rested his head on, had gone numb. He opened his eyes and stared at the tent for a while. He thought he had dreamt of the heavy downpour in Qudu.

Lu Guangbai lifted the tent flap and entered. Standing at the entrance wiping the damp sweat on his nape with a handkerchief, he said, “The falcons on patrol discovered saker falcons in the areas towards the east. Gu Jin also found traces of passage from a horse caravan there. They are the convoy squad from the Hulu Tribe.” He set the handkerchief back into the copper basin to rinse it. “Amu’er refused to surrender. He means to fight to the death.”

Xiao Chiye stood up and bent his leg to prop up an arm. “It’s nearing winter. The Hulu Tribe can’t graze sheep. This is the last of their food.”

“Amu’er’s insistence on not making an appearance is because he’s conserving his strength. He has seen through your intention to wait for him to play into your hand.” Lu Guangbai hung up the handkerchief. “He’s stalling for time.”

The Hulu Tribe had exhausted their entire tribe’s energy to supply Hasen, and now they are supplying their entire tribe’s provisions to Amu’er. They would have to slaughter their own cattle and sheep if they wanted to survive this harsh winter. Amu’er was already a spent force, like an arrow at the end of its flight, so what was he still waiting for?

With the tent flap at the entrance rolled up, Xiao Chiye stood up and bent over slightly to make his way out of the tent. He looked out at the endless sand dunes. Meng flew down from the flagpole and landed on the right arm Xiao Chiye had raised.

“Amu’er is a fine general,” Xiao Chiye said, “but he’s an even better politician.”

Amu’er was a master at keeping the enemy in check. He opened up the North-South battlefield and formed the Black and White Scorpions all to better contain the enemy. He was already old and could no longer be as valiant as Hasen on the battlefields, but that did not mean that he was helpless in the face of Xiao Chiye. Now that the game was as good as lost for him, there was only one way he could make Xiao Chiye withdraw his troops, and that was, to first crush Xiao Chiye’s backing, Shen Zechuan.

The expression in Xiao Chiye’s eyes was sharp and cutting as he looked back at Lu Guangbai and said, “He’s waiting for news from Qudu.”



Tantai Hu seemed to have stirred up a hornet’s nest with his words. Before he could dodge, his bun was slashed off by a scimitar that popped out. His black hair scattered apart, shortened by a large portion, and with the middle nearly bald!

“Motherfucker.” Tantai Hu grabbed up a handful of his short hair. “Colluding from the inside-out. The real traitorous bastards are here!”

Raindrops splashed up along with the edges of the blades. Countless soldiers held their blades level before them and barged over to ram against each other’s armors in the passageway. With a burst of strength, they advanced. Few of the motley crew of soldiers brought along their scimitars. This weapon was too conspicuous, so majority of them opted to carry their piked daggers beside their equipped blades.

“The city gates have already been breached.” Shen Zechuan promptly came to a decision and snapped his folding fan shut. “Tell Shenwei that there are people from Biansha hiding in Qudu. We have to enter even if we aren’t inclined to.”

Fei Sheng did not dare to tarry. He threw away the sharp arrows and pointed out the incoming path to his subordinate at the same time he got on his horse. “Pass on His Lordship’s order—”

Cen Yu still had yet to lead the students back into the city when he saw someone ahead galloping into the camp and shouted towards the military tent, “There are Biansha soldiers hiding in Qudu. The lives of the masses are at stake. Gao Zhongxiong, receive your orders!”

Gao Zhongxiong suddenly pushed aside the clutter of paper and grabbed his brush. Under the urgent sound of the torrential rain, he dipped

the brush into the ink and waited with bated breath and rapt attention.

“Heaven is helping His Lordship.” Yao Wenyu coughed at the window. As he gasped lightly for breath, he propped himself up and said to Gao Zhongxiong, “This move by Qudu is tantamount to committing suicide. Shen Wei’s reputation as the national traitor can be relinquished to someone more worthy now. Shenwei, His Lordship is telling you to tell the world that the internal scourge is in Qudu.”

The timing of the Scorpions’ arrival was simply too perfect. Just like Shao Chengbi who previously mobilized his troops rashly, it gave Shen Zechuan sufficient reason. The garrison troops could not kill living people when they attacked their way into the city, and it was tricky trying to deal with tens of thousands of a motley crew of soldiers, but once these soldiers turned into the Scorpions, they were foreign foes!

“The foreign enemies stand before us, and the city gates have been breached. It’s Heaven’s will that a wise, enlightened sovereign with just cause should come spurring his horse on!” Yao Wenyu covered his mouth, choking a few times as he coughed. Eventually, he held on to the edge of the bed for support and laughed out loud with some difficulty. “The pawn who enters the game on the imperial court acts not of his own volition. The Grand Mentor is truly remarkable. We’ll gladly accept this Blade of Regicide, Fengquan.” He raised his moist eyes and said in a hoarse voice as he looked at the heavy rain, “Xue Yanqing has lost!”

Xue Xiuzhuo won a game in the rainstorm and killed Qi Huilian, ousted Yao Wenyu, as well as drove Hai Liangyi to his death. However, he was similarly constrained by the chess pieces. Lu Guangbai rebelled, Xiao Chiye returned to his wolf pack, and Shen Zechuan stabilized and secured his hold on Zhongbo. The so-called foolproof planning was all an illusion. He was forced to the brink of the precipice by his own self! He went to great lengths to find the Scorpions, but he never expected the Scorpions to be right beside him.

Qi Huilian had suffered an unexpected setback before. Fengquan could not understand. The intelligent ones would never repeat the same mistakes. The Crown Prince met his defeat at the hands of a traitor, so Qi Huilian would never let Shen Zechuan fail again at the hands of a mole. The Eastern Palace had so many subordinates, so why did Qi Huilian *have* to choose the Shao and Qiao clans?

Because they were too conscience-stricken.



Compared to the others who had been doing their best for the Eastern Palace from start to end, Shao Chengbi was that “dead knot”. He had never done a misdeed when he was under the Ministry of War, but because he was a sentimental man who greatly valued ties, he let his private affairs get in the way of his official duties. He bent over backward to save the Qiao clan, but Qiao Kanghai still died. He betrayed his former master of the Eastern Palace, yet he failed to save a single person and even lost his son in the process. This was just the beginning. At the very moment the case of the Zhongbo troops’ defeat broke out, Shao Chengbi made his own prison, becoming a prisoner of the words “conscience” forever and ever.

This blood debt surpassed all of Shao Chengbi’s personal relationships, and for that reason, he could blind his own eyes, render himself a mute with poison, and give his own son out. He kneeled before the Buddha statue and wept bitter tears, but Qi Huilian did not use him.

This was the most ruthless and most brilliant thing about Qi Huilian.

When the Grand Mentor was alive, he did not use Shao Chengbi, and for every day that passed after his death, Shao Chengbi would fall even deeper into agony. This agony and guilt spurred on Shao Chengbi, and in turn, Shao Chengbi similarly spurred on Fengquan. Fengquan struggled to survive in the crack in which he had fallen. No matter whose pawn he was, Qi Huilian dared to bet the shackles he had on him on the word “father”. Shao Chengbi was Fengquan’s lock, dead or alive. At that moment Fengquan bade Shao Chengbi farewell, he had the razor pressed against the side of Shao Chengbi’s neck, but he never did make the killing move.

Xue Xiuzhuo regarded people as his pawns, and Qi Huilian treated his pawns as people. He taught and guided Shen Zechuan in the art of political power checks and balances back at Zhaozui Temple, controlling all weaknesses with the word “feelings”.

Shen Zechuan opened his eyes and saw the end of the main east gate.

Amid the curtain of rain and snow, indistinct scenes of the past played out.

Qi Huilian’s figure still seemed to be standing there, his arms held high as he pulled on the chains, refusing to look back at Shen Zechuan even in his last moments when he tilted his head back and shouted.

Lanzhou.

Don’t be afraid.

Shen Zechuan closed his eyes. When he opened them again, Feng Ta Shuang Yi suddenly charged forth. Shen Zechuan's sleeves and robes billowed amid the pelting of the frost and snow, driving the blistering wind on both sides. He was like the icy glint of a blade about to return to its sheath among the dark clouds, bound to pierce through Heaven and Earth at this moment.

He who has just cause<sup>122</sup> is justified!

The sudden thunderclap seemed to explode against his scalp. Luo Mu had already lost control over the motley crew of soldiers. He hastily retreated amid the chaos of soldiers and shouted to the officials, "... The troops have turned renegade!"

The rain and snow were blinding. Xue Xiuzhuo could not stand steady on his feet. He stood atop the city wall with the court officials and watched as Shen Zechuan took the lead. The morale of the garrison troops was at an all-time high as they followed that figure in white forward, their momentum unstoppable! The Imperial Army at the south side gate encountered the Capital Command Troops. They knew the alleyways of Qudu even better than the Capital Command Troops did, and when it came to fighting on the streets here, they were unrivaled.

Blood splattered on the walls. Tavern banners and random booths tumbled over the ground along with the fighting and killing.

Shen Zechuan urged his horse into the passageway, and stomped open the main gate of Qudu from the front just as he wanted. At his side, Fei Sheng raised the Zhongbo banner up high, while the garrison troops braved the rain of arrows from the top of the city wall and crossed into the territory one after another.

"The city is breached—!" A shrill, miserable wail rang out from the front of the Imperial College entrance. Following right after, several thousands of students cried aloud in unison amidst the spray of broken ice.

Kong Qiu staggered forward, holding on to the battlement for support as he wept, "Oh, the hundred-year reign of Dazhou..."

The bronze bell at the summit of Mount Bodhi rang with a clang. The long, drawn-out toll of the bell stirred up a wave of wind, startling away the birds among the overlapping clouds. The city gate fell over with a thunderous crash. Countless denunciations and declarations of war tumbled in the air.

Both of Xue Xiuzhuo's cheeks were wet and cold. He looked up at the overcast clouds. The burden that had been imposed upon his shoulders all this time went up in smoke along with the collapse of the city gates. He raised his hand to wipe away the rainwater on his cheeks, having already heard the cries that had risen all around him.

It has all come to an end.

Xue Xiuzhuo's eyes were like deadly still pools of deep water as he silently threw away his authority token. That token etched with the golden glory of the Li clan fell to the ground, where the hooves of horses passing by trampled it into pieces that tumbled separately into the puddles of mud.

Tantai Hu held up against the scimitar and pushed his opponent back into a retreat amid a flurry of footsteps. He abruptly swung his blade in a diagonal slash, and the sharp edge chafed against the scimitar and sliced off the other party's fingers. Tantai Hu kicked over the other man and brandished his blade to split open a path paved in blood for Shen Zechuan.

"Slay the enemies!" He shouted himself hoarse.



The blade of Qiao Tianya's sword pressed against the pulps of his fingers. The rain outside the hall was still falling, but the wind had since stopped. Sheer white gauzes hung down to the ground. The small puddle at his feet reflected glints of the sword's edge.

Fengquan raised his finger and pushed over that last lamp. The opening of his sleeves brushed against that slightly bright flame. "You've become Shen Zechuan's blade, and now you're going to kill me."

The lock of hair over Qiao Tianya's forehead hung down and blocked out the view of his eyes.

He did not know if Fengquan was crying or laughing, but the latter's shoulders shook as he hid in the darkness and clapped his palms lightly.

Water droplets dripped along the lock of Qiao Tianya's hair onto the bridge of his nose. His sword was so fast that it left its sheath in the twinkling of an eye. At the first flash of the sword glint, the "clang" of metal against metal rang out as the sword struck away the iron needles that had come hurtling towards him.

The clothes and hat official stood behind the white gauze and raised an arm to pull off the hat on his head. There was only the sound of Fengquan cackling in Mingli Hall. The clothes and hat official who had soundlessly

materialized was just like a wraith locking eyes with Qiao Tianya across the white gauzes.

The water droplet made a soft “plop” sound as it dropped to the ground.

Qiao Tianya had already sprung up like a leopard flying into a sudden rage. All his unwillingness to take it lying down dissolved into the blade of the sword as it slashed through the sheer white gauzes and thrust forth with such force that the clothes and hat official retreated swiftly.

The clothes and hat official hid his trump card in his narrow sleeves. As he raised his fingers, several silver threads lashed out in unison and nailed into the vermillion pillar while Qiao Tianya was dodging them. The man then kicked himself off the ground and flipped into the air, taking advantage of the silver threads to move as light as a swallow.

Lamp oil dripped onto the ground, and the tongues of the flame licked the floor, blazing as they chased after Fengquan’s sleeves and robes.



Even if the Garrison Troops did not kill the commoners, the commoners still fled in all directions in the pandemonium. The streets were so chaotic that Tantai Hu pushed and shoved against the commoners, fearing that the Scorpions would take advantage of the situation and fish in troubled waters.

“Disperse the people!” Tantai Hu’s palms were slick with blood. It was so slippery he could not hold his blade.

But it was too late. The people blocking the streets crashed into the formation of Scorpions. It was so dark, they could hardly make out who the other party was. The Scorpions, with scimitars in hand, killed the people and lifted the head to say in fluent Dazhou tongue, “His Lordship said, slaughter everyone in Qudu!”

Fei Sheng lifted his torch and shouted as he galloped, “The Biansha Baldies have infiltrated the city. Luo Mu’s soldiers are, in fact, rebels! Run if you don’t want to die!”

Where in the world would the panicking common folks on the road hear Fei Sheng’s voice? They crowded and jostled before the Scorpions, and after people dropped dead, they turned around and swarmed towards the Garrison Troops. This street was not spacious enough, and a battering ram that had fallen over behind was also blocking the path. The swarming of the rushing crowd threw the Garrison Troops’ formation into disarray.

The Scorpions were not wearing armor. They blended in with the common people running all over, and when they passed by the Garrison Troops, they unexpectedly threw out stabs. Over ten of the Garrison Troops in front who were caught off guard promptly fell over.

“The Zhongbo rebels are killing people!”

The commoners who cut a sorry sight fleeing for their lives covered their faces and wailed, trapped as they were with no way to advance or retreat. Under the overlapping shadows, they mistook the Scorpions for the Garrison Troops, mistakenly thinking they were already surrounded by the Garrison Troops. For a moment, deafening cries reverberated through the sky.

What a headache!

Fei Sheng turned his horse around and returned to Shen Zechuan’s side. “Master, what should we do? Several main roads are all blocked!”

It was dark now. Banners on fire everywhere burned in mid-air. The rain abated some, and those snowflakes also turned cotton-like and foam-like.

Shen Zechuan held the reins and looked towards the city wall. “Light up the watchtower. Force open the gate and sound the alarm. Have the Imperial Army who broke through the south side gate open up the street entrances.”

The Garrison Troops on both sides swiftly passed through. The arrows among the battlements were running low, and there were combats at close quarters everywhere at the foot of the city. The torches of the Garrison Troops abruptly lit up. Seizing the watchtower had become especially important.

Shen Zechuan carried a short blade on him. When his horse passed through the crowd, a gust of wind materialized at the side. He instantly dodged, and a piked dagger suddenly swiped past the side of his cheek. The wind trailing in its wake brushed against his cheek, carrying with it a slight chill.

Shen Zechuan’s short blade suddenly left its sheath, and with a spin of his left hand, he struck away the piked dagger with a “thud”. However, his wounds had yet to heal, and this one blow merely knocked the Scorpion’s piked dagger askew. The Scorpion promptly released his grip, and when the piked dagger dropped, he back-handedly grabbed it and thrust it horizontally at Shen Zechuan’s neck.

The banner overhead suddenly burst into flames. Ashes all over the sky danced around his head. At the instant the banner burned, Shen Zechuan flipped off his horse. Feng Ta Shuang Yi got his intent and started running. Having already evaded the horizontal thrust, Shen Zechuan feigned a few leaps with Feng Ta Shuang Yi. The Scorpion grabbed onto empty air. In the brief moment he was disoriented, Shen Zechuan grabbed hold of the arm he had hit out with.

The Scorpion was stunned. Delight followed soon after, and he exclaimed in the Biansha tongue, "He has no strength—"

He had yet to finish his words when Shen Zechuan released his hand. His left hand struck hard along the side of the Scorpion's arm. The Scorpion thought Shen Zechuan was going to fling him over his shoulder, so he promptly spread a leg and prepared to stabilize his lower body, but Shen Zechuan unexpectedly whirled around and kicked him right on the chest.

The Scorpion spread both arms and said in a booming voice, "Overrating your own strength like an ant trying to shake a tree!"

Two of Shen Zechuan's long, slender fingers went aiming at an angle towards the center of the Scorpion's brows. The Scorpion suspected a trap and immediately closed his eyes. Shen Zechuan, however, let out a very soft laugh. His short blade that had slipped from his hand fell downward. Putting his weight on one leg, he whirled around again and kicked the blade sideways at the Scorpion. The Scorpion, caught unprepared, took the short blade right in his lower abdomen. As a spray of blood splatter, he let loose a blood-curdling scream.

Shen Zechuan turned a deaf ear to it. The flame behind him abruptly flared bright. His figure elongated along with the movement of the blaze.

Seeing his opportunity, Fei Sheng bellowed, "Luo Mu colluded with the Biansha people, and the foreign enemies are now in the city. The Garrison Troops are killing the enemies. The rest of you, get out of the way quickly!"

The torches on the watchtower at the east gate swayed against the sky. The Garrison Troop soldiers stepping on the railings held up their Zhongbo authority token and shouted downward with all their might, "By order of His Lordship—Kill the foreign enemies. Kill the rebels. Kill the traitors!"

Seeing as their incitement was useless and that the passageways were all blocked tight by the Garrison Troops, the Scorpions could only retreat to their original path. There was complete pandemonium in the entire Qudu,

and a total bloodbath ensued as the Capital Command Troops, who were still fighting to the death making a last-ditch defense of the city gate, were slain by the Imperial Army.

Most of the battlements had already collapsed. Xue Xiuzhuo's official robe was badly shredded, and he cut a sorry sight until someone yanked him hard in an attempt to move him.

Ya'er was holding Jin-ge'er by the hand, and he had a cloth bundle slung over his shoulder. He gestured to Xue Xiuzhuo in the din, making "ah, ah" sounds while dragging him towards the steps.

Xue Xiuzhuo staggered a few steps. He braced himself against the wall and looked at Jin-ge'er. Jin-ge'er was Xue Xiuyi's son, whom Xue Xiuzhuo had kept by his side to raise. At present, the boy was so frightened that his face was awash in tears, yet he still held on to the corner of Xue Xiuzhuo's clothes and cried out as he held his tears back, "Uncle, uncle, uncle!"

Ya'er stomped his foot anxiously and kept tugging at Xue Xiuzhuo's official robe and motioning for Xue Xiuzhuo to run.

Xue Xiuzhuo raised his hand to stroke Jin-ge'er's cheek. "You're a good child," he said.

Jin-ge'er raised his head, feeling the rain on his cheeks.

Xue Xiuzhuo hunched over and turned his back to the light, concealing all of his weaknesses. He only had this brief moment of interlude in this entire life of his. It was as if this was the only moment that belonged to him.

Ya'er unwarrantedly started to cry. He shouted "AH" at Xue Xiuzhuo with all the strength he could muster and tugged at the latter until his fingers were all red.

Xue Xiuzhuo straightened up again and gently broke himself free of Ya'er's hold on him. He gave Ya'er a push on his shoulder and said, "Leave, both of you."

Jin-ge'er sobbed loudly and shouted as he pulled at Xue Xiuzhuo, "Uncle!"

Xue Xiuzhuo paid no heed to him.

The rain tonight was less heavy than it was two years ago, but he saw the same dark and bleak sky. The lone traveler guarded the city. Long before the daylight was wiped off, he had heard the echoes of decay, but he really could not take it lying down. The behemoth that once towered here was going to take its leave of the stage in such a lonesome way.

Xue Xiuzhuo slowly made his way down the steps. He walked in solitude, never looking back even once.

“So it’s to Yuanzhuo’s credit,” Xue Xiuzhuo halted in his tracks and said to Shen Zechuan, “that you pushed hard for the census registries in Zhongbo.”

Shen Zechuan did not answer.

In the dim shadows, Xue Xiuzhuo brushed off the dust on his sleeves. “I held Qi Huilian in high esteem and embarked on the path he took.” He gazed at Shen Zechuan. “But I wasn’t as ruthless as him.”

It was all too easy to gamble on a life. The hard part was in *daring* to stake this life on the game. Qi Huilian dared to do anything, and the driving force behind his insane actions was his trust in Shen Zechuan.

Lanzhou was not his pawn.

And it was precisely because of this that Qi Huilian left nothing behind for Lanzhou. Shen Zechuan did not need restraints. Qi Huilian brushed the top of his hair before.<sup>123</sup> In those five years of being together day and night, he had already pointed out the direction clearly for Lanzhou.

Teacher shall teach you the classics, and bestow upon you the courtesy name Lanzhou.

This was everything Qi Huilian had.

“Dazhou has been through the era of the heroes. For hundreds of years, even the foreign powers have not been able to breach through this gate, and now, it’s lost to you.” Xue Xiuzhuo gazed at Shen Zechuan. “A person whose fate is sealed, much like a fish swimming at the bottom of the cauldron.”

“I have heard plenty of speculations, and even Yuanzhuo has fantasized that I was perhaps a descendent with the Li’s bloodline that Shen Wei kept hidden.” Shen Zechuan turned his eyes to look at the palace. “But I am the son of a subject guilty of a crime. The whole world scrambles over one another for the imperial heir. Only Mister did the exact opposite.”

He who has just cause is not preordained by Heaven.

“Qi Huilian turned the tides with his own strength, and for that, I admire him.” Xue Xiuzhuo exhaled deeply and continued in a heavy voice, “My sovereign is young, and so it is I, Xue Xiuzhuo, who has come to surrender today. The city gates are already breached, and the public roads, opened. Shen Zechuan, do not kill the innocents—I will come to receive you!”



His voice was like a clap of thunder so sudden and deafening that the officials at the top of the city wall were all paralyzed. Opening the gates to surrender was a humiliation and a disgrace for all eternity, and now, he, Xue Yanqing, alone had shouldered it!

“No...” Kong Qiu cried out in anguish and beat his chest in sorrow, “Oh, Dazhou...”

The court officials mutually held each other in support in inconsolable grief, as if mourning the loss of a parent.

A surrender meant that the war would cease. The remaining garrison troops of Zhongbo no longer need to advance further. The fact that the thirteen cities of Juexi behind Qudu could still remain unharmed even though Qudu was breached was a testament to the painstaking effort of the practical doers' faction over several years.

They were also the last remaining granary of Dazhou.

Kong Qiu understood. This was the last wise policy. They were completely wiped out in this game of chess with Zhongbo, and with this one reception by Xue Xiuzhuo, Dazhou would thus cease to exist.

Kong Qiu was about to sag to the ground. He clung on to the battlement, his aged face awash in tears. “The change of sovereignty today is all down to our incompetence.” He tilted his head back to look at the flurry of cotton snow in the sky tangling with the official denunciation and declaration of war. Gradually, a resolute expression came over his face.

Shen Zechuan knew it did not bode well on seeing the change in Kong Qiu's expression.

The dark, gloomy canopy of the heavens covered up the clouds and moon from view. Raindrops tumbled and splashed.

Sure enough, Kong Qiu held his head high and bellowed, “I am a subject of Dazhou, and I will not kneel to a second master!”

With that, his official robe fluttered, and he made to leap off the city wall to die for his nation.

*Oh no*, Fei Sheng inwardly cursed in alarm. Xue Xiuzhuo might have surrendered and received the new sovereign, but he still had yet to hand over the Dazhou imperial jade seal. If the news of Kong Qiu's jump were to spread to tomorrow, the narrative would be twisted such that Shen Zechuan was the one who forced him into doing so!

“Stop him!” Fei Sheng shouted to the garrison troops who had attacked their way up the city wall.

The officials crowded around Kong Qiu. No matter how fast the garrison troops were, they could not push away the crowd. All they saw was Kong Qiu's official robe billowing in the wind. His body was already leaning over the battlement. Right at this critical juncture, a figure suddenly pounced from behind and grabbed hold of Kong Qiu's official robe.

"Grand Secretary, you mustn't!" Liang Cuishan cried out involuntarily.

Kong Qiu's figure lurched to a pause, chafing off the broken bricks on the top of the city wall. He held his arms and started coughing in between wails.

Liang Cuishan was sweating buckets as he dragged Kong Qiu back. Both of his arms were trembling. He was badly shaken, and his face, through the dark night and flames, was drenched in sweat.



The horse carriage was attacked on its way to the main west gate. All the various street entrances were packed with carriages and horses. The rich and noble packed up their possessions, wanting to make use of the chaos to make their escape through the main west gate, thus completely blocking this particular road.

The guards pulled the reins and brandished their whips to chase away the commoners, bellowing, "Move away! Get out of the way!"

The carriages and horses at the side came barging over, and startled shouts of alarm promptly rose. There were so many people it was like a mush of mixed gruel in a pot; there was no way the horse carriage could get any closer.

The curtain of the carriage swayed. Li Jianting saw the towering palace and heard the toll of the bronze bell.

"The city's been breached," Han Jin ran barefoot through the streets. He jumped and grabbed at the declarations fluttering all over in the air and burst out laughing like a deranged man. "The city's been breached!"

"Xue Xiuzhuo surrendered." Someone cried bitterly with his head to the sky. "Dazhou has perished!"

Li Jianting felt an acute stab of pain in her chest. Her trembling fingers lifted the carriage curtain open. Amid her urgent gasps for breath, she suddenly leaned forward and started throwing up. The strong wind blew against her disheveled hair, and the drizzle masked her face. Bones indistinctly protruded from her heaving back.

The last leg of the journey Xue Xiuzhuo spoke of was to suffer the humiliation on her behalf.

Li Jianting's body also started trembling. The chill penetrated deep into her bones, and she laughed in a raspy voice. She and Xue Xiuzhuo mutually complemented each other, but they did not have even a smidgen of teacher-pupil bond. Xue Xiuzhuo had no need for it, and so did Li Jianting. Even to this moment, Xue Xiuzhuo was still doing what he was as a "subject".

Jiang Qingshan did not return, so even if Li Jianting fled to Juexi, she would merely be struggling to drag out an ignoble existence. Dazhou had already perished. Shen Zechuan not only possessed a powerful army but also public trust. All the painstaking efforts they had made in the eight cities were handed over on a silver platter to Shen Zechuan. Those unfinished matters they had yet to work on would, after tonight, become Shen Zechuan's badges of honor.

"Dragging out an ignoble existence for the remainder of my life, fleeing and hiding left and right." Li Jianting raised her eyes and looked at the rain. "... How dull."

Li Jianting had spent half of her life "hiding". Her fate was that of a life which could never see the light. But she did her utmost to struggle. She knew where she stood among the victors and the losers.

She was defeated, and to that, she conceded.

"Your Maj—" The guard could not maintain his grip on the reins as he watched Li Jianting leap off.

Soaking in the rain, Li Jianting lifted her arm to tie up her loose hair. Tens of thousands of people were fleeing to the west. Only she alone headed east, becoming the lone figure going against the current of the tide of people.

Han Jin grasped the declaration in his hand as he danced and sang merrily among the tidal surge of people. He pranced joyfully and caught up with Li Jianting.

He grinned, "I'm looking for my eldest brother!"

Mingli Hall blazed with flames.

Li Jianting bent over and picked up a broken drum that had fallen on the road. She tapped it, and the muffled beats of the drum rang out.

"Going to the palace?"

Han Jin clapped his hands. "Yes, yes, yes!"

Troops thrown into disarray fought desperately to the death. Li Jianting no longer looked at anyone. She struck that broken drum and laughed out loud without a care together with the madman, striding in the direction of the palace as she raised her voice.

“Exiled subject I was of yesteryear, a hero too in a turbulent era. Of the learned the sage beckons, into my trap the talented walk.”<sup>124</sup>

Amid the backdrop of the bleak, lightless sky, Kong Qiu and the other court officials shed tears atop the city wall.

“Hark, the nomad flutes<sup>125</sup> at the pass of Xiao,<sup>126</sup> there goes armored hooves through waters cold. Into war the veteran general spurs his horse, his military gear heavy in the blizzard storm.”

At the stone monument of Libei that had stood erect for a spring and an autumn, a thin veil of snow blanketed Xiao Fangxu’s saber. Among the withered grass, the armored cavalry galloped. Xiao Jiming dismounted his horse and lowered his hand to wipe away the remnants of snow for the blade.

“Where mountain snow meets starburst glints, of rapacious eagles, the ruthless wolf slays.”<sup>127</sup>

The billowing waves of the Chashi River churned, as the withered flower of Chiti vanished under the long stream of current.

“Blade thus sheathed, he dusts his sleeves, scarlet tassel stark against clouds carefree. With his wine, the ailing immortal roams. Moon over pines, still of zither strings.”

Yao Wenyu leaned over and coughed, and once again, his handkerchief was stained red with blood. He gazed out of the tent, his vision obstructed by the heavy fog.

Qiao Tianya’s sword had already returned to its sheath. Amidst the fire and the pounding of the rain, he looked at Fengquan.

“In the ceremonial hall<sup>128</sup> the merry feast starts, cups and chopsticks clink,<sup>129</sup> we toast and drink.”

Li Jianting struck the broken drum as she threaded her way within the vermilion city walls.

“Relish the wine to the last of its drop, of revelry we indulged within lofty palace walls.”

The fire in Mingli Hall soared into the sky, brightly illuminating the surroundings. A blazing sea of flames lay right ahead. Han Jin ran with his arms raised, while Li Jianting turned her head back to take another look at Qudu. Her fingers tapped lightly against the drum, but the drum no longer made a sound. She looked to be in a trance amid the raging flames as she finished in a hoarse voice, "... *Intoxicated we fall amidst rapturous songs... where honor and rank need matter not...*"

The lacquered pillars of Mingli Hall collapsed with a thunderous crash and splashed forth a wave of fire. The ambers splatter onto the hem of Li Jianting's skirt and burn along the decorative patterns.

She turned around, and the raging fire engulfed her whole.

## CHAPTER 281: WOLF & EAGLE



When dawn broke, the sound of killing in the city had already stopped. As it had just rained, there were no ashes and dust floating in the air. More than half of the palace was burned down. Shen Zechuan stepped over the ruins; all he could see were crumbling walls and debris.

“Arson within the palace,” Fei Sheng lamented as he followed at Shen Zechuan’s side. “... Mingli Hall was burned to ashes.”

“The female emperor did not surrender and gave her life for her country,” Shen Zechuan said. “The name Emperor Shengyin ought to be on the annals of Dazhou.”

Fei Sheng had been longing to return to Qudu, and now that he had really returned, the sights he saw everywhere were all unfamiliar. It was not as exhilarating as it was in Zhongbo. He held his blade and pushed aside the rubble ahead for Shen Zechuan. “She was a woman of integrity and principles.”

“Tell Youjing, Minshen, and Chengfeng to standby for the order.” Shen Zechuan stopped in his tracks. “Songyue didn’t return?”

Fei Sheng looked in the direction of Mingli Hall and answered after a moment of hesitation. “... He’s back.”



Qiao Tianya was in the midst of washing his hands. His ten fingers were submerged in the copper basin, dispersing wispy tendrils of red in the water. His sword was still by the side of his waist, but its hilt was so red all over that its original color could not be made out.

“The Scorpions in the various areas have already been executed. There are a total of a hundred and forty-seven people, with the majority being eunuchs.” Ge Qingqing flipped through the eunuchs’ authority tokens. “The leader is Fengquan, who came to take Pan Rugui’s place after the eighth year of the reign of Xiande.”

“That’s a lot,” Zhou Gui said with horror.

Seeing Zhou Gui’s face go pale, Ge Qingqing could not help but comfort him. “Qudu is already surrounded by us now. Your Excellency doesn’t have to worry.”

While they were speaking, Qiao Tianya had already washed his hands clean. He lifted the hanging screen at the door and went down the steps while the sky was still not fully bright.

“If Fengquan could be captured alive...”

Kong Ling soundlessly waved his hand, and Yu Xiaozai did not go on with his words. Looking at the still swinging hanging screen, Kong Ling whispered, “Report it as is to His Lordship.”

Before Qiao Tianya made his way to the tent, he heard Yao Wenyu coughing. He stood at the entrance and raised his hand, but he did not lift the tent flap.

Yao Wenyu folded the handkerchief, put it back into his sleeves, and said in an unhurried voice, “His Lordship isn’t back yet. Come in.”

Qiao Tianya bent over at the waist to enter.

The brazier had already gone out, and it was a little cold inside the tent. Yao Wenyu was cloaked in his overcoat as he sat on the bed with a brush still in his hand. After Qiao Tianya entered, he pushed aside the small table.

Qiao Tianya took off his boots by the bed against that bit of morning light. He sagged down in silence, trapped in the cramped and narrow empty space between the bed and the small table, and rested his head on Yao Wenyu’s lap. The medicinal scent on Yao Wenyu enveloped Qiao Tianya, and he closed his eyes, as if he was sleeping in a time long bygone.

Yao Wenyu covered the hilt of the sword with one hand and covered Qiao Tianya with the other. His wide sleeves spread out all over the bed. In that minuscule bit of morning light, he lowered his head and looked at Qiao Tianya.

The incense on the table masked the smell of blood that both belonged to Yao Wenyu and Qiao Tianya.

“I have a courtyard on Mount Bodhi,” Yao Wenyu gently stroked Qiao Tianya’s hair, “where you can watch the rays of the morning sun at daybreak, and the river of stars formed by the lights of households in Qudu after sunset.”

Qiao Tianya seemed to see it.

Yao Wenyu turned his head slightly to look at the thin sheet of window paper. “The snow is here.”

The snowflakes outside the window danced gracefully in the air.



Amu’er had a gemstone secured before his forehead, and a simple and unsophisticated scimitar affixed at his waist. He bent his tall and powerfully built body over and helped Duo’erlan to pick up the Chiti silk flower. He spread his palm open. The silk flower looked just like the real thing. This was something Hasen once brought back from the borders of Qidong.

“My good lass,” Amu’er said, “follow your father back to the oasis.”

Duo’erlan took the silk flower with both hands and shook her head. “I’m Hasen’s wife. I want to defend my Heroic Eagle’s father for him.”

“His father is not old yet.” Amu’er straightened up and smiled widely in the evening glow of the setting sun. “Fighting battles is a man’s business. You allowed me to possess Suhebashou’s bear warriors.<sup>130</sup> You have already done a lot for the Hanshe Tribe. My good lass, silly girl, you’re not only Hasen’s wife, but also the mother of his child. The precious pearl of the grasslands should be riding her horse on the shores of Lake Chiti. The yellow sand of the desert here doesn’t suit you. Go back.”

Duo’erlan’s shoulders shook as she forced herself to hold back her tears, but her face still ended up wet. Holding the silk flower, she sobbed and asked, “I heard the bungle call of the King of Wolves. I smelled his butcher’s blade...”

Amu’er lowered his large palm and placed it on the center of Duo’erlan’s head, covering it. “When I was born together with Xiao Fangxu in the bosom of the Hongyan Mountains, the Hanshe Tribe was destined to fight it out with Libei until there is a victor between us. In the decades of war, we have each lost our brothers and sent out our own sons.”

His weathered face, of having been through the vicissitudes of life, was overlaid with golden light. The sunset glow was so dazzling it was as if it could contend with the morning sun.



The news from Qudu did not come back, which meant that Amu'er no longer had the advantage within Dazhou. He missed too many opportunities. Without Hasen, and without the Zhongbo supply line, the Hanshe Tribe's future was all too obvious.

"My Heroic Eagle flew over the snow-capped peaks of Libei. His father will not back down before the blade of the new King of Wolves either. We are a strong tribe among the Twelve Tribes, and this strong tribe has the Hero. We only have heroes who die in battles, not cowards who beat a retreat."

Bayin and the old wise one stood outside the golden tent. The old wise one's palms were all creased with wrinkles as he rubbed open the withered and yellow stalks of grasses and gazed at the setting out in the far distance.

Clutching his precious book, Bayin asked, "Teacher, will we win?"

The old wise one did not answer. When Hasen left, he had also kneeled in the waters of the Chashi River and asked him the same question—"Will I win?".<sup>131</sup> He let the wind blow the grass in his palm away into the distance. The old wise one's snow-white beard and hair fluttered slightly in the wind. He looked at that orb of setting sun in silence until the dome of heaven darkened.

"The wolf is here."

So said the old wise man.

The strong wind swept across the rolling mounds, and yellow sand brushed against armors. With one hand supporting his blade, the young King of Wolves slowly rose to his feet, firmly commanding everyone's line of sight. The setting sun vanished behind his back, replaced by innumerable Armored Cavalry soldiers. Meng stood on Xiao Chiye's shoulder, its sharp, penetrating gaze piercing through the gale, where it fixated on the spot ahead together with its master.

Lang Tao Xue Jin galloped forth from behind and did not stop. Xiao Chiye flipped onto the horse, and Meng flapped its wings to follow by Xiao Chiye's side. Xiao Chiye led the armored hooves of his army, stomping on the yellow sands as they charged down in an assault like the boundless dark clouds shrouding the night.



Bayin saw Duo'erlan off. He stood by the horse carriage and gave his treasured book to Duo'erlan.

“I can’t read Dazhou characters,” Duo’erlan said. “Keep it for yourself.”

Bayin was bent on placing the book beside Duo’erlan knees. “A gift for the little eagle.”

Duo’erlan covered her stomach. The flocks of sheep behind the horse carriage kept bleating incessantly. Holding on to the horse carriage, she looked at the clusters of tents and said, “... The moon tonight is too bright.”

Bayin thought Duo’erlan was worried that the return journey would be a hard one to make, so he flashed a smile and reassured her, “The Hero has already informed the tribes along the way. With the warriors from the Youxiong Tribe with you, no one will dare to hurt you.”

There was no hint of a smile on Duo’erlan’s face. She was just like a flower in the midst of wilting. Bayin could not figure out what she was thinking. Even if he had become a wise man, he was still a silly lad.

Bayin felt around his wizened pouch and found an old brush. He set this brush by Duo’erlan’s knees too. Maintaining the smile on his tanned face, he said, “Next year, when you’ve safely given birth to the little eagle, the Hero will bring you back. When that time comes, you will be the most honorable woman in the desert.”

Some of the Six Tribes had turned traitor to throw in with Xiao Chiye. The Hanshe Tribe’s status as the ruler of the desert was already an empty title that existed in name only. Bayin’s clumsy attempt at comfort could not hide a single thing.

But this time, Duo’erlan made an effort to curve her eyes into crescents. As if she believed Bayin’s words, she said, “If it’s a boy, I’ll hand him over to you to teach and guide. As for this book, I’ll return it to you when that day comes.”

Bayin scratched the back of his head rather awkwardly and said, “If it’s a boy, he will surely be as outstanding as the Heroic Eagle. He’d be the best lad of all in the desert. It’d be better to ask my teacher and the Hero to teach and guide him.” He smiled again. “Go, Duo’erlan. Your father is still waiting for you.

The folks of the Hulu Tribe herded the flock of sheep. These were their last remaining sheep, and they wanted to send them back to the oasis before the weather got worse. There were not that many warriors from the Youxiong Tribe, but their “bear horses” stood out among the ponies, and

because they were carrying their sabers with them, they appeared all the more valiant and fearsome.

The Hulu Tribe was familiar with the sandy desert routes. The man in the lead drove the horse forward, and the copper bell hung high on the banner tinkled. Amid the rocking of the horse carriage, Duo'erlan waved to Bayin.

Bayin chased a few steps after her and mustered up the courage to shout, "Duo'erlan!"

Duo'erlan pushed aside the hanging screen of the carriage and looked at him.

Bayin stopped in his tracks and stood in place, waving his hand again without saying a word.

The pitch-dark sky enveloped the desert. A saker falcon in the wind hovered over the Hongying flag, which flapped noisily in the wind as the tinkling of the copper bell receded further and further into the distance. Bayin clenched his empty hands tightly into fists and chanted in silence for victory without retracting his gaze.

The moonlight was flimsy as it paved the path underfoot, looking as if it took just one step for it to break. Horses' hooves sank into it and abruptly departed.

The old wise one tossed the withered branch he used for divination in his lap. Putting his palms together, he lowered his head and silently evoked the Heavenly God of Chiti.

Bayin finally turned around and ran towards the old wise man, shouting, "Teach..."

Before the saker falcon above the Hongying banner could react, a gyrfalcon swiftly swooped down and suddenly tore it apart. Grabbing the saker falcon's remnants, Meng flapped its wings in midair and ripped off the saker falcon's feathers.

It all happened so quickly that Bayin was not able to snap out of his shock. The din of feasting and drinking among the tents had yet to stop.

"Wolves!" The Hanshe Tribe cavalry soldier on night patrol sped across the sands and did all he could to shout himself hoarse in the Biansha tongue. "Surprise attack—!"

A long blade came sliding out with a swish as heavy armor knocked over the cavalryman directly from behind. The pony was totally powerless

in the face of the tidal wave of steel and iron, and in the blink of an eye, it was completely engulfed.

Bayin stood stupefied in place.

The Libei Armored Cavalry should have only just passed Mosanchuan. The news was that Xiao Chiye intended to block the exit of Mosanchuan, and his main forces had yet to arrive here, but the shocking turn of events unfolding before him made it clear that Xiao Chiye had not only come, but he had also chosen the most direct way of doing it.

“Xiao, Xiao Chiye...” Bayin whipped his head back and hollered, “The Armored Cavalry has launched a surprise attack!”

Armored hooves trampled over the wooden-made fence at the very edge. Too late to get onto their horses, the Biansha warriors who emerged from the tents met the Armored Cavalry head-on with their scimitars in hand.

Xiao Chiye’s Langli Blade was a heavy beast. Coupled with his extraordinary arm strength, he was practically unrivaled when he cleaved and hacked. Lang Tao Xue Jin was the first to charge among the Hanshe Tribe’s tents. Several splatters of fresh blood sprayed in between each lift of his blade.

Heads tumbled to a stop at Bayin’s feet. Bayin’s throat choked up, seized as he already was with terror. Amid the glares of blade and glints of swords, he saw the eyes of a ravenous wolf.

An eye for an eye.

Bayin hastily stepped back and almost fell.

Gasping lightly for breath, Xiao Chiye raised the arm that was holding the blade and rubbed the blood off his cheek with the back of his hand. The smile gradually materializing on his face spoke of extreme danger. After months of enduring the rigors of a long, arduous journey, he finally arrived at his destination.

“Amu’er—” Amidst the sprays of blood and dancing flames, Xiao Chiye tilted his head back and demanded in a voice as cold as ice, “where is he?”

The flap of the golden tent lifted open, and a cold glint glided along the edge of the old scimitar in the moonlight. Amu’er bent at the waist to make his way out of the golden tent. His equally strapping tall figure obscured the sand and dust beneath his feet, as if he was also the stabilizing force of the Hanshe Tribe.

Saker falcons surrounded Meng, who was hovering alone on its own.

Xiao Chiye shook off the blood on his blade and heard the beats of the war drums.



## CHAPTER 282: LOFTY PALACE

Meng barged among the cast of falcons as they attacked him. It hissed at the top of its voice. Waves of fire followed in the wake of the collapsed tents and leaped onto the banner. The Hongying banner instantaneously burst into flames.

Langli Blade came cleaving down and struck against the scimitar, letting loose an ear-piercing screech of friction as blade scraped against blade. Sparks spattered as the blades slipped past.

Amu'er's arm sank slightly. "Your arm strength is even stronger than your father's."

Capitalizing on his height, Xiao Chiye dragged Langli Blade with astounding momentum and sent Amu'er's scimitar swinging and smashing down. Amu'er took the blows, and although it was only a few times, the impact brought on a tearing pain in the area between his thumb and index finger. Under Xiao Chiye's forceful attacks, he took half a step back.

Xiao Chiye's young age was his biggest advantage.

Amu'er was already old. When Xiao Fangxu stepped down after becoming ill, Amu'er retreated to the desert. He returned anew to the battlefield after many years had elapsed, and even though he did not appear old, he could no longer physically compare to Xiao Chiye, who was in his prime.

"Have you come here," Amu'er hoisted up his scimitar, "to give me back my son?"

The attacking Armored Cavalry suddenly dispersed all over. Unexpectedly enough, there was a mounted crossbow in the ripped apart golden tent. The veins of the warriors of the Hanshe Tribe, who had been waiting for a long time, bulged as they shifted its direction under the clicking sound of the crossbow trigger turning. Heavy arrow instantly hurtled forth towards the Armored Cavalry.

There was no movement in the tent that had collapsed in response. Reacting quickly as he rolled over the ground, Gu Jin reported, "The tent is empty!"

The stables of the Hanshe Tribe had long been raided by Xiao Chiye, but warriors lying in ambush suddenly emerged from among the night sand. A short while later, whistles rose all around.

The sound of horse hooves.

Gu Jin prostrated on the ground with his ear to it and immediately reported, “They still have horses!”

The terrain where the Hanshe Tribe was stationed was wide and open. There were no defensive structures installed at its borders. It could not even compare to the Mengtuo Tribe at the entrance of Mosanchuan. But even when Hasen died in battle and the enemies’ forces were pressing on to the border, they still did not get attacked by the remaining eleven tribes—because none of the tribes dared to come.

During the reign of Xiande, Amu’er swept up Zhongbo’s armory. Hasen’s gears and supplies were funded by his father. As the man most skilled in reforms and revolution in the desert, Amu’er’s guts and spunk were, most of the time, extraordinary.

The Hanshe Tribe dwelled deep in seclusion in the desert. They had venomous fangs like snakes.<sup>124</sup>

The Libei Armored Cavalry had already scattered apart. Chen Yang was about to give his command when he reined in his horse, but unexpectedly, a pony suddenly came barging from the side. The battering ram-like force did not provide Chen Yang the chance to exert his strength at all and directly knocked him off his horse.

With a ferocious expression in his eyes, the bare-chest Lizard spat in the Biansha tongue, “An eye for an eye.”

Chen Yang rolled a few times after landing on the ground, and the Lizard’s iron hammer smashed down beside his helmet. Even if it did not hit the target, the reverberations it brought on when it brushed past still made Chen Yang dizzy.

The Lizards launched a pincer attack from the sides behind Xiao Chiye. His blade that he held aloft abruptly changed trajectory, passing under his elbow and armpit to pierce through a Lizard’s chest. A spray of blood erupted forth and splashed onto Xiao Chiye’s shoulders and arms before flowing down along his armor to the saddle.

A scimitar at the side came swinging down, and Xiao Chiye deflected his head aside to dodge the blow. His little braid brushed against the other man’s blade. Unable to draw out Langli Blade immediately, he opted to bend his left arm and elbow the man hard in the face. The Lizard did not expect Xiao Chiye’s strength to be this terrifying. His entire face felt like it was about to crack open, his nasal bone broken instantly.



The blade before Xiao Chiye was already pressing in toward him. Langli Blade clung against his armor as he pulled it out in time to parry the scimitar with a resounding thud.

Lang Tao Xue Jin abruptly galloped forward, and Langli Blade, which was shouldering the other man's force, caused the other man's body to flip over during its advance. Xiao Chiye did not have the chance to catch his breath, because the moment Lang Tao Xue Jin galloped forth, the mounted crossbow in the golden tent followed suit and turned around too. At the same time he brought down the other man, a heavy arrow sliced through the wind and came charging at him!

The mounted crossbow was a siege weapon, and its weight and lethality were enough for one of it to go up against ten men. It had won countless victories for Da Zhou in its offensive and defensive battles in the early years. When Shen Zechuan was defending Duanzhou, he also chose to use it as a defensive weapon, which served to show just how formidable it was—the crucial thing was that it required several people to work together just to draw the bow, and the force of a hurtling, heavy iron-headed arrow was definitely not something a man alone could resist. Even Xiao Chiye himself could not shoulder the force of it alone when he encountered it on a thousand *li* long boundary line, let alone at such a short distance.

Gu Jin practically braced himself against the ground and broke into a dash at the same time, using the fastest speed he had ever mustered in his life, shouting himself hoarse as he ran, "Second Master!"

Xiao Fangxu was gone. The battlefield was the most unreasonable place in the world. To Libei, even if half of them were wounded or dead tonight, they could not leave Xiao Chiye behind!

Chen Yang was close to him, and when he straightened up, he encountered the iron hammer again. This time, he leveled his blade to block the blow. With an unexpected burst of strength, he shouldered the weight of the Lizard's iron hammer and lifted it up. Chen Yang's four limbs were all trembling. A deep bellow burst forth from his throat as he hissed through clenched teeth, "Block—the arrow!"

The gale, following in the wake of the heavy arrow, was already a short distance away from Xiao Chiye. He released the reins, and Lang Tao Xue Xin beneath him neighed as it dropped onto its front knees. Xiao Chiye immediately rolled off his horse. The heavy arrow hurtled past with terrifying strength and slammed into the crowd.

The warriors of the Hanshe Tribe dashing madly in the sand flipped onto their horses. Holding up their scimitars, they came converging from all directions.

Xiao Chiye gasped heavily for breath. The hair by his temples was already drenched in sweat.

“Baya’er of the Mengtuo Tribe is the most untrustworthy bastard in the desert who doesn’t keep his word.” Amu’er scraped the blood droplets off his scimitar and rubbed his thumb against his stubble. “And to think you’d believe them. This is a mistake Xiao Fangxu would never make.”

Xiao Chiye teetered as he rose to his feet. The arm guard on his right arm was dented from the sudden assault of the heavy arrow earlier, but it did not crack. Xiao Chiye stabbed Langli Blade into the ground at his feet and raised his hand to untie the arm guard and secure it at the side of his waist.

Under the moonlight smudged by the flames, Amu’er saw Xiao Chiye’s shadow extending all the way before him. Behind him, the endless, silent desert stretched.

“Stop calling my father’s name.” His words ignited Xiao Chiye’s deeply-seated fury and resentment. Hatred erupted in his chest; even the wounds on his back were burning.

Xiao Fangxu would never make such a mistake.

Xiao Fangxu would not make *many* mistakes.

But Hasen left Xiao Fangxu in the blizzard. Every time Xiao Chiye heard Amu’er say a word, it would evoke his memory of Xiao Fangxu’s body in the accumulated snow.

“Xiao Fangxu, Xiao Fangxu—” Xiao Chiye’s eyes were red as he said in a hoarse voice. “You people took my father’s head away and trampled the dignity of the King of Wolves under your feet.”

Xiao Chiye pulled out Langli Blade.

“Give him back to me.” His expression was slightly malevolent as he violently cleaved and hacked while advancing with staggered steps. He shouted himself hoarse at Amu’er.

“GIVE HIM BACK TO ME!”

Meng suddenly plunged as if it couldn’t hold up against the assault from all sides. Xiao Chiye’s bellow reverberated through the night sky. When Meng neared the ground, it suddenly flapped its wings and circled upward. The saker falcons pursuing it relentlessly from behind were still

continuing with their downward descent. Gu Jin sidestepped them and bent his finger to whistle at the sky. The next moment, countless falcons' wings flapped in unison, and, at the same time they soared into the sky, they pounced on the saker falcons.

Aerial combat was the Libei falcons' domain to begin with!

Meng drew in its wings and barged its way among the cast of saker falcons. One for bearing grudges, it found that particular saker falcon that had pursued it the most relentlessly and tore it to pieces in between circling before it would let the matter rest.

The Libei Armored Cavalry and Biansha Cavalry converged in the space between the tents. Bayin ran and fell to his knees before the golden tent, where he said to the old wise one, "Teacher, I'll help you leave!"

The old wise one still had his head lowered and palms placed together. His aged body was just like a withered tree. His white hair dangled silently on both sides.

Bayin's heart went cold. He reached out and placed a hand under the old wise one's nose, and the color instantly drained from his face. He could not hold back his sobs and promptly cried out loud, "Teacher!"

The gushing of blood accompanied the fighting and killing under the curtain of the night. Half of the Hanshe Tribe's tents had collapsed. The ambush Amu'er left in the outer perimeter failed to net him any advantage from the Libei Armored Cavalry. Meanwhile, the Lizards' iron hammers found it hard to unleash their full potential in the face of the brand new long blades.

The speed at which Xiao Chiye had grown up was all too fast. This was a fact that even Amu'er himself had to concede. The Mengtuo Tribe that alone guarded Mosanchuan were indeed untrustworthy bastards who did not keep their word. They did not tell Xiao Chiye that Amu'er still had horses and supplies, and they did not come forth to provide reinforcements as promised. But similarly, Baya'er had even less of an intention of coming to fight the battle for Amu'er. He was just like the fisherman with blade in hand waiting for the last moment to reap the profits at the expense of the other two. He was not only afraid Amu'er still had a card up his sleeve; he also wanted to throw in with the absolute victor of this duel.

Stars dotted the horizon. A horse suddenly galloped out from the end of the desert. The hem of Duo'erlan's skirt fluttered amidst the backdrop of the

massive setting moon as she led that batch of Youxiong Tribe warriors over on horseback.

Bayin was a sorry figure as he wiped his tears. “Duo’erlan, you silly girl!”

Duo’erlan’s black hair danced in the wind as she reined in her horse. Her pretty green eyes reflected the flames as she said, “I married Hasen. I belong to Hasen’s tribe, and Hasen, too, belongs to my tribe. Father! You’re right. The strong tribe has the Hero, and Hasen is my *Hero*!”

She drew out her own dagger.

“We only have heroes who die in battles, not cowards who beat a retreat! Baya’er, listen,” Duo’erlan faced the desert and said at the top of her voice, “Duo’erlan won’t blame you for submitting to the strong! But the desert has its own strong fighters in the desert. The Mengtuo Tribe once possessed the glory of the Hero decades ago. When you kneel before Xiao Chiye’s Armored Cavalry, it’s the Mengtuo Tribe’s dignity you killed off!”

The harsh rebuke of a woman blended into the sound of fighting and killing under the moon, and it made Baya’er, who was biding his time, feel terribly inferior and ashamed.

“I heard your daughter, Wuya, dared to make an assassination attempt on Xiao Chiye with a dagger.” Duo’erlan’s countenance was solemn and respectful. “I admire her, and so does Hasen! When my son is born in the future, I will have him acknowledge Wuya as his aunt. This is the backbone of the desert people!” As she spoke, she crassly spat a mouthful of saliva to the side. “But I will also have my son keep firmly in mind that the Mengtuo Tribe is spineless. The chieftain, Baya’er, is a coward!”

Duo’erlan’s chest heaved. She cracked her horsewhip and led the warriors of the Youxiong Tribe into a charge forward. The Libei Armored Cavalry’s numbers were terrifying, but there was no fear in Duo’erlan’s eyes. She was the most dazzling precious pearl of the desert. Even if she did not have the strong and sturdy body of a warrior, she was willing to charge toward an invincible wall of iron.

Hasen did not kneel to Xiao Chiye in his last moments. Duo’erlan understood him. Even if they were to die in battle, they had to die standing.

“Silly girl,” Amu’er roared with laughter before continuing to say with a reverent countenance, “You’re wrong. The Hero of the Hulu Tribe is not Hasen. It’s Duo’erlan!”

The Hanshe Tribe's initial low morale soared. Baya'er was still hesitating, but beside him, Wuya ran a few steps forth and said to the warriors of the Mengtuo Tribe as she pointed ahead, "We will guard the main gate of Mosanchuan and leave Xiao Chiye and the Libei Armored Cavalry to fall on their own! If all of you are going to kneel to him, you'll never be able to stand up for the next twenty years!"

Xiao Chiye kicked over the torch as he traded blows with Amu'er. His armor was tarnished with fresh blood and desert sand. The Youxiong Tribe warriors who had charged their way in amidst the sea of fire drew their blades and fought valiantly, because Xiao Chiye had killed their leader, Dalantai, at the Bianjun Commandery. At the very moment when the Mengtuo Tribe also drew out their blades, Xiao Chiye found himself caught deep in a real siege.



Shen Zechuan, who was taking a nap on his desk, woke up with a start. He moved his arm which had gone numb. The lights in the hall had been extinguished. There was still the sound of the advisors discussing from the side hall, but it appeared abnormally quiet here.

Shen Zechuan held on to the door frame. The wind outside was so icy that his back felt doubly cold. Hearing movements, Fei Sheng looked back and could not help but turn pale with fright. "Master, you are going to catch a cold!"

"The desert." The jade on Shen Zechuan's right ear swayed gently. He covered his mouth and stifled a cough to ask, "No letter yet?"



Gu Jin got on his horse, and Chen Yang led the army to assemble. With Xiao Chiye as the center, they constantly closed in. The armors of the Libei Armored Cavalry were severely worn out. Only Xiao Chiye was not wearing a helmet.

"In order to mount a surprise attack, you didn't bring along your main forces." Amu'er kept away his scimitar that had been chipped courtesy of Xiao Chiye at the side of his waist. "The young are always impulsive."

The clicking sound of crossbow triggers all around them was intensive. For tonight, Amu'er had also staked all he had onto this single throw.

Thick clouds obscured the moon. The sandy lands were packed with warriors of the desert. The warriors of the Youxiong Tribe that Duo'erlan had called upon were all the remaining forces of the Youxiong Tribe.

Thanks to Duo'erlan, they got to recuperate for a period of time in the Hanshe Tribe, and now, they had recovered from the serious injuries they sustained when they were crushed and routed by Xiao Chiye a few months back.

“You are a genius,” Amu'er said in admiration. “A genius of Libei.”

The bowstrings of the mounted crossbows were stretched taut. Heavy arrows all aimed at Xiao Chiye.

The gemstone in the center of Amu'er's forehead was already loosened. He took it off, appearing slightly lonely. He looked out into the distance in the direction of the Hongyan Mountains. “But, you killed my son.”

To the people of Da Zhou, the Chashi River was a jade belt<sup>125</sup> in the landscape. However, to the people of the desert, it was the origin of the rivers – the mother river – far off in the distance. At one time, they shared the Hongyan Mountains with Da Zhou, but the Libei Armored Cavalry's rise to prominence caused them to keep retreating to the desert, where they could only kill each other for rations.

All his life, Amu'er wanted to lead the Twelve Tribes to the west of the Chashi River.

Plunder. Pillage.

The people of Libei pillowed upon the mountains and rivers, while the desert people slept among the yellow sand. They made each other acquaintances with blades and swords, and three successive generations of heroes and heroines all met on the banks of the Chashi River. Spring came, and autumn went. No one was spared.

“The war has to end, eventually.” Amu'er hung the forehead ribbon which the gemstone was secured onto the hilt of his blade. “I will return your head to your elder brother.”

Meng whirled in the air and swooped down. The falcon of Libei was very quiet. Xiao Chiye raised his left arm to let Meng perch. “I'm afraid you no longer have this chance.”

Grit flew up from the sandy lands. Under the rustling sounds, the Mengtuo Tribe squad that was running forward saw blades that had long hilts and short blades.

It was too late for Baya'er to regret. Stamping his foot, he cried out, “Lu Guangbai. There's still Lu Guangbai!”

Lu Guangbai, who had once penetrated deep into the desert, was similarly familiar with the desert routes as the Hulu Tribe was. Xiao Chiye

left his main troops behind not because of the surprise attack, but to lure the snake out of its hole.

Amu'er was unwilling to arbitrarily meet the enemies head-on. Only Xiao Chiye's rash and reckless surprise attack could draw him out into the open. If Duo'erlan left with the Youxiong Tribe, then after tonight, Xiao Chiye would still need to penetrate deeper into the desert. But Duo'erlan returned. She helped Xiao Chiye accomplish his ploy to round up all of them in one fell swoop.

"Amu'er," Xiao Chiye tightened his grip on the hilt of his blade anew. "The war has to end, eventually."

Yellow sand billowed. When Lu Guangbai dashed his way before the Youxiong Tribe warriors, he abruptly withdrew, and the Libei Armored Cavalry behind him charged up. As he brushed past the Libei Armored Cavalry, he filled in the gaps among the Lizards and brandished his long blade to brazenly parry the Lizards' iron hammers.

Powerful forces collided. Lu Guangbai's military boots promptly slipped backward in the sand. He braced himself with an arm and grasped a handful of yellow sand. With a smile, he said, "Great strength there."

The Lizard spread opened his arms, looking as if he was going to obstruct the Bianjun Commandery Garrison Troops.

Lu Guangbai's long blade suddenly passed over his head and struck the Lizard's iron hammer with a "thud" in between turns. The Lizard had only traded blows with the Libei Armored Cavalry and had still yet to encounter this kind of strange weapon, where it was the hilt that was long. When he swung his hammer, he could not reach Lu Guangbai's body, and when he parried, he could not keep up with Lu Guangbai's speed. All he could do was keep retreating in this flurry of intense attacks.

The Libei Armored Cavalry, having already broken through the outer line of defenses, joined Xiao Chiye from the side. Xiao Chiye did not mount his horse again. Instead, he charged in to fight on foot with the Biansha warriors. This time, the Armored Cavalry was like a black tide that came bulldozing over with absolutely crushing numbers.

Amu'er killed several people and encountered Xiao Chiye again in the tumble of armors. The strong wind Xiao Chiye brought up sliced through the air from top to bottom and cleaved apart the front of Amu'er clothes. Langli Blade wedged itself in the crack of the scimitar, and Xiao Chiye suddenly pressed in two steps closer with such force that Amu'er retreated.

Amu'er exerted his strength to lift his blade up and overturn the constraint Langli Blade had imposed on it, but Langli Blade counterattacked swiftly. The long journey did not even deplete Xiao Chiye's energy. In this moment, he was unusually focused, so focused that he did not care about the injuries on his body. Those eyes of his were so calm it was terrifying.

The scimitar bounced off from the impact of the collision, but it did not slip out of his hands. Amu'er regained his grip on it and turned around to kick Xiao Chiye in the abdomen, but Xiao Chiye did not retreat as he had hoped. Holding up against the force, he slammed the hilt of his blade hard into the side of Amu'er's cheek.

Amu'er did not fall over to the ground. The metallic taste of blood saturated his mouth, and his teeth were sore from the impact of Xiao Chiye's blow.

Xiao Chiye's fighting style was a blend of martial arts from various schools, but not once had he ever broken away from his original school. He was just as overbearing and domineering as Xiao Fangxu was. When he really got serious in battle, nine out of ten times, someone would die.

Oh, behold the young King of Wolves.

The vision in Amu'er's left eye was already a little blurry. He saw the moon burning. The sorrowful cries of the Hanshe Tribe pierced through the vast, boundless night. All those stars that once belonged to him fell. The hero who had come to the end of the road had to admit that he was already advanced in age.

Hasen.

Amu'er's proud heroic eagle.

Amu'er seemed to see the back of his son when he left. It was also on a moonlit night like this. Hasen waved his arm, and his bashful red hair was then covered up by the color of the night.

Every time Xiao Chiye swung his blade, Amu'er's scimitar would emit a cry of pain. Xiao Chiye's mettle was on full display, undisguised. Every blow of his struck the sharpest part of the scimitar.

This battle was no longer evenly matched, but the Libei Armored Cavalry's one-sided crushing of their foes.

Duo'erlan's horse was abruptly knocked to the ground. She fell and looked as the dagger slipped from her hand and disappeared among the



armored hooves. Her cheeks were splattered with blood, and as she wiped them, she involuntarily burst into sobs.

With his own dagger in tow, Bayin charged into the chaos and shouted to Duo'erlan, "Take my horse, Duo'erlan. Run!"

Covering her stomach, Duo'erlan shook her head. "You should leave!"

Bayin gasped unevenly for breath. He suddenly grasped Duo'erlan's arms and said sincerely, "The little eagle must live." He could not stop himself from crying. Sobs escaped his throat. "Silly girl of Lake Chiti, run —"

Blood suddenly materialized. Before Bayin could finish his words, he fell face-first into a pool of blood. Duo'erlan widened her eyes blankly. "No..."

Chen Yang raised his helmet and looked at Duo'erlan with cold detachment as he said in the Biansha tongue, "Achi killed our left flank in Duanzhou, and this man was the one who came up with the plan. I'm just repaying the debt."

Bayin was still grasping Duo'erlan's arms. Duo'erlan bent over to hold up the young man's body. In a trembling voice that had already changed in pitch, she weakly shouted in a thin voice, "Stop..."

Achi not only killed the left flank of the Libei Armored Cavalry near Duanzhou, he also took away the heads of all the armored cavalymen in the left flank squad. They camped on the banks of the Chashi River, kicking these heads and urinating into the Armored Cavalymen's helmets. Chen Yang could never forget this humiliation.

The fire was blazing, but the moon was cold.

Shouts.

Neighing of horses.

Cries of falcons.

More and more people fell. Armored hooves trampled across tents. After the raging fire came the endless ashes. The Hanshe Tribe that had been fearsome in the desert for thirty years turned into mud in this one night, bearing the full weight of Libei's fury that had been boiling for a very long time.

The fires before the golden tent collapsed together. The forehead chain of Amu'er's gemstone broke as Langli Blade advanced. Meanwhile, the Hongying banner that was a symbol of an all-powerful strong tribe finally

toppled over in the burning. Xiao Chiye's figure blocked out the sight of it all.

In taking them by storm, Xiao Chiye forced Amu'er to lose all his routes of retreat. He shouted loudly in the raging inferno, "Amu'er!"

Amu'er took the blow from his blade with some difficulty. Dripping sweat dampened his eyes as Xiao Chiye closed in on him.

The more Xiao Chiye fought, the more valiant he was. His unbridled, untamed nature came from the grasslands. Only the mother earth of the Hongyan Mountains could beget such a man. Sweat mixed in with his soaring battle spirit. His eyes were just as dazzlingly bright as the glints and flashes of his blade, a blade which contained a blazing sun within.

Amu'er was tired out from the fierce battle. His scimitar was already slow to react, and it finally slipped from his hand when Xiao Chiye launched yet another violent attack.

The moon thinned out, and the color of the night dimmed. Day was about to break.

Amu'er's gemstone tumbled to his feet, where the yellow sand beneath was soaked with blood. He tilted his head up. There were very few left of the saker falcons in the firmament.

"The heavenly gods have been kind to the heroic eagle." Amu'er suddenly raised his right arm high and let out a last roar towards the remnants of the desert. "I, Amu'er, have ruled the Six Tribes for twenty years and reached the inner parts of Da Zhou. I have not let the Hongying banner down. The Chashi River we yearned for even in our dreams—"

Langli Blade came cleaving down right at Amu'er's head, and Amu'er used his arm that had an arm guard to block the blow.

"—The Chashi River we yearned for even in our dreams," In the interval, Amu'er laughed heartily without inhibition at Xiao Chiye and said resolutely, "Xiao Chiye, twenty years later, the Heroic Eagle of the desert will once again still fly over Hongyan Mountains. You kill me, kill us, but you can't kill all the eagles of the desert! Twenty years, forty years," The arm guard made a cracking sound under the blade. Amu'er continued in a quiet, solemn voice, "the desert shall one day welcome its true ruler!"

At the same time Xiao Chiye exerted pressure on his blade, he bellowed, "Twenty years, forty years, the wolves of Libei will always be stationed on the line of defenses. Bring it on!" With eyes reddened, he said somberly, "This time, next time, I'll be waiting for you people on the banks

of the Chashi River. The Twelve Tribes will never stride across the Chashi River!”

Amu’er’s arm guard broke off completely. Following right after, the blade cut through it like a hot knife through butter and ended his shouts face on.

Duo’erlan’s sobs came to an abrupt halt, and then she let loose a heartbreaking wail. She clambered to her feet, but stepped on the hem of her skirt and fell to the ground. She clambered up again, clutching the dagger as she rushed towards Xiao Chiye.

The swift wind swept through the flying sand, and the blade suddenly pointed right in the center of Duo’erlan’s brows.

Duo’erlan’s hair scattered all over her body. She stopped before the blade, the tears in her eyes streaming incessantly while she trembled all over. Finally, she gritted her teeth and spat in abhorrence, “Kill me! Xiao Chiye, kill me!”

The beads of blood on Langli Blade dripped in the center of Duo’erlan’s brows and weaved into her tears, obscuring this face of hers.

The first rays of the morning sun at the end of the sky pierced through the darkness, and the thin light of dawn spread over the barren sands. Xiao Chiye’s armor radiated with subtle light. He lifted his chin slightly, and sweat trickled down. To Duo’erlan, he said, “The Libei Armored Cavalry do not kill women.”

Duo’erlan’s teeth chattered—that was hatred. Here she stood, but even her dignity of dying in battle was deprived by Xiao Chiye!

“Get on your horse and get out of this expanse of desert land. In the future, the west of Mosanchuan belongs to Libei. If the Twelve Tribes dare to overstep the boundary line by even one step without my command,” Xiao Chiye’s blade shifted down and jabbed heavily into the ground before Duo’erlan’s feet, as if to draw an insurmountable chasm here, “the severe frost will slaughter the Twelves Tribes clean.”

The wolf banner of Libei fluttered in the blue dome of heaven. Xiao Chiye’s side profile was frosty and solemn. This was the last remaining mercy the King of Wolf had. His battle blade slew the heroes of Biansha, while his Armored Cavalry passed through silently like the severe frost. Behind him stood the never-changing Hongyan Mountains.

Amu’er once massacred the six prefectures. That was not being powerful. Massacre was a kind of cowardice and weakness. The truly

strong ones dared to face up to the encroachment of the years. From now on, Libei was no longer alone. Xiao Chiye had the strongest backing in the world. He was the most unstoppable blade in the world.

Duo'erlan slid to her knees on the ground and bawled out loud.

Xiao Chiye kept his blade away into its sheath. No longer looking at Duo'erlan, he turned around and got on his horse, facing the countless Libei Armored Cavalrymen.

"We won..." someone said softly.

Xiao Chiye's back was to the sunrise. At the very moment when the sun shone in all its glorious radiance, he looked just like the day he scored a victory in his first battle at fourteen years of age—although covered in dirt and dust all over, the expression in his eyes was unyielding and untameable.

He cracked his horsewhip and laughed out loud heartily amidst the caresses of the intense wind. "A resounding victory!"

The Libei King of Wolves!

Emotions swelled in Lu Guangbai's heart as he watched Xiao Chiye ride his horse. That kind of indescribable pride was very much like the moment when the Four Generals of Xiande stepped across the border.

A war general was loyal to the land. The Four Generals of Yongyi<sup>126</sup> had retired, and the Four Generals of Xiande<sup>127</sup> were worn out. The era of traitors and treacherous subjects was about to end, and the new brave generals would inevitably follow close on Xiao Chiye's heel and emerge from among the mountains and rivers.

"Aye," Lu Guangbai hugged the hilt of his blade in his arms and chased a few steps after Xiao Chiye, shouting, "We don't have horses!"

The Libei Armored Cavalry galloped in the great desert, the bursts of the men's hearty laughter reverberating through the skies. The dark clouds when they came turned into spring thunder<sup>128</sup> on their homeward journey.

Meng whirled and soared, breaking through that layer of white clouds. Home was just right ahead.



The news of victory arrived in Qudu only two months later. It was a snowy day, and Shen Zechuan, who was in the warmed hall, jolted to his feet. The advisors on both sides stood up as well.

"Whoa, we won!" Yu Xiaozai slapped his thigh in his joy. "I knew it. Second Master is invincible in battle. No problem at all!"

Gao Zhongxiong's face lit up with delight, and he hurriedly said, "I, I'll write up the news of victory! This battle is going to go down in history!"

Owing to the bitterly cold weather, Yao Wenyu rarely showed up these days. Shen Zechuan had urgently summoned Jiran into the capital, and Jiran was still on the way. On hearing the word "history", Yao Wenyu suppressed his cough and traded glances with Kong Ling beside him.

Kong Ling gave a slight nod of his head. "Qudu has no master now. To welcome back Second Master, we will still have to make preparations early."

The advisors were all in good spirits. Only Shen Zechuan turned to the side and asked softly, "Is Ce'an well?"

Fei Sheng had long inquired about it. He reported back softly too, "Don't worry, Master. Second Master is fine!"

Shen Zechuan felt a little reassured. There were green and luxuriant potted plants in the warmed hall that Zhou Gui's wife had sent over. Shen Zechuan gazed at them for a moment. Surprisingly enough, he had the impulse to cut a branch and hide it in his bosom.

It was already the hour of xu when the gentlemen left. The hanging screen at the door rose and fell. Yao Wenyu, however, picked up the teacup and unhurriedly stirred aside the tea froth. His sickly appearance was all the more obvious when he was deep in thought. On his return to Qudu, Yuanzhuo did not meet with his old friends, nor did he return to the former residence of the Yao clan.

Shen Zechuan looked at the documents on his desk. "You said this morning that you wanted to go and see Xue Xiuzhuo?"

It was very quiet inside and outside the warmed hall, so quiet that they could only hear the sound of snow falling. Gazing at the rising and falling tea froth in the teacup, Yao Wenyu answered, "We are both men on our deathbeds. I ought to see him."

Shen Zechuan averted his gaze away. No matter how self-possessed and composed he was, he had to feel emotionally moved by these words.

Yao Wenyu did not drink the tea. He looked to the window where the dim light of the lantern was seeping through. Shadows of the snow drifted down gently, a piece at a time.

"It's the new year." Yao Wenyu smiled. "Your Lordship, may your new year be a smooth-sailing one."



Xue Xiuzhuo was locked up in the Ministry of Justice's prison. The hair he had bundled up into a bun was tidy and in order. Even without that layer of official robe, he still maintained his usual composure.

When Yao Wenyu's wheelchair arrived, Xue Xiuzhuo set down his chopsticks he was using for his meal, not in the least bit surprised as he looked at him through the door. "It's cold in the first lunar month. Has Shen Zechuan sent people to clean up the streets?"

Yao Wenyu turned his wheelchair. There was no snow covering his shoulders. "The Imperial Army has their own arrangements," he answered.

Xue Xiuzhuo held his knees and looked squarely at Yao Wenyu. They both once lived in each other's shadows. In the first half of their lives, Xue Xiuzhuo was that nameless blade. In the latter half, Yao Wenyu was that shattered jade.

"The snow on the mountain at the beginning of spring has melted," Xue Xiuzhuo said. "Teacher's burial mound isn't well-positioned; see if you can fix it."

"You reside permanently in Qudu," Yao Wenyu said. "Didn't you go and take a look?"

Xue Xiuzhuo's straightened spine was left cooling in the flying snow behind him. He truthfully answered, "I didn't dare to go."

Silence blanketed the cell.

Yao Wenyu lowered his eyes, looking as if he was slightly smiling. He set the white chess piece he had been grasping in his palm on the table and soundlessly pushed it toward Xue Xiuzhuo in the dimness.

Xue Xiuzhuo gazed at that particular chess piece. In the long, endless silence, he seemed to have heard the sound of rain on Mount Bodhi.

"Many years ago," Xue Xiuzhuo's voice was calm. "Teacher did not look at me through the noble clan's prejudiced lens of those of lawful and common birth and promoted me into the imperial court to serve as an official. I read Qi Huilian's essays on contemporary politics and learned just how vast the world was. There was a kind of people called 'court officials'. They busied themselves running around the various lands of Da Zhou, becoming indispensable pillars of Da Zhou. During the reign of Yongyi when Qi Huilian was imprisoned, Teacher lingered many times at the watchtower that accorded him a view of Zhaozui Temple. I asked him what he was looking at, and he answered he was looking at the last 'official' in this world. I found it strange then, because Qi Huilian might be one, but so

was he. Then the reign of Xiande came around, and many a number of us died to collect evidence of Hua Siqian's guilt. The officials, the functionaries... all of these people were loyal subjects from the local regions, and they basically all died out."

Xue Xiuzhuo thought of these for way too long, so long he grew numb and developed a heart of stone. He would no longer cry inconsolably in the middle of the night. He respected Hai Liangyi so much, but the reality was too cruel.

"These people have no graves, no tombs. They all died in the tussle for power between factions, their existences wiped away clean with a wave of the noble clans' sleeves." Xue Xiuzhuo's eyes were emotionless. "The remonstrance at the hunting grounds during the reign of Xiande was the hope of countless people whose names you have never heard of. We took down Hua Siqian, but Teacher did not continue to push on."

As such, the empress dowager survived, and the noble clans remained indestructible. When Li Jianheng ascended to the throne, Xue Xiuzhuo had the thought to assist him too, but Li Jianheng could not shoulder the heavy responsibility at all.

What exactly was Hai Liangyi persevering for?

Xue Xiuzhuo did not understand. He stood at the fork in the road, no longer willing to follow Hai Liangyi. He could not see the light in this path.

"Even until today," Xue Xiuzhuo raised his eyes, "I still do not approve of Teacher's path. No one can convince me in this game, and you can't either, Yuanzhuo."

Yao Wenyu turned his wheelchair around and made his way out of the cell.

Xue Xiuzhuo said as he looked at Yao Wenyu's back, "Heaven beget me, Xue Xiuzhuo, so take my life, call me what you will. Between you and me, who has won? I was merely defeated. My master was born at the wrong time and lost to Shen Zechuan. It was her timing that was wrong, not her fate."

Yao Wenyu's wheelchair braked to a stop. He did not look back but merely just turned his head aside a little in the shadows to enunciate, word for word, "Timing. Fate. Luck."

The cell door shut with a "clang", completely separating them on the sides between light and dark.

Yao Wenyu pushed his wheelchair along the narrow passage. When he neared the front door, he suddenly started choking and coughing. The light at the entrance was dim. Yao Wenyu held on to the handles of his wheelchair, gradually losing sight of what lay ahead amidst his gasps for breaths.

“Mister...”

The warden at the side cried out in alarm.

Timing, fate, luck—none of which is within my control.[129](#)

Yao Wenyu’s fingers made a weak, despairing grab at empty air ahead of him as he toppled over.

When Yao Wenyu woke, it was in a room lit with a dim lamp.

Shen Zechuan watched over him at the side and said softly, “Jiran and Songyue are about to arrive. Have a chat with me as we wait for them.”

Yao Wenyu looked at the draped curtains and also answered in a soft voice, “I had Songyue go to Mount Bodhi and plant a Bodhi tree there to wait for me.”

Shen Zechuan lowered his eyes, his eyes stinging hotly as if the tears would fall if he so much as blinked again.

“The winter really is long,” Yao Wenyu said in melancholy. “Before I entered the capital, I thought I might be able to wait until the flowers on Mount Bodhi bloomed.”

“Wait for a little longer,” Shen Zechuan implored him despondently. In that instant, his voice grew hoarse. “Yuanzhuo.”

Yao Wenyu did not answer. He coughed again, and this time, blood soaked his handkerchief. He could no longer hide it.

After a moment of silence, he said, “The census registers in Juexi have been implemented for many years. Jiang Qingshan is a good official. Lanzhou, retain him. That’s the father and mother of Juexi. Commander-in-chief Qi dared to refuse to send troops for the sake of world stability. With her as a prince, you can get the Qidong Five Commanderies to pledge allegiance to you. Although Fei Sheng might have some minor flaws, he’s still a talent you can use. Let him back to Duanzhou, and Duanzhou’s safety can be assured with Yin Chang’s stone monument there. Chengfeng...” Yao Wenyu’s breathing grew heavier. “Chengfeng initially meant to retire after achieving our goals... I’ve already left him a letter... Lanzhou, the new emperor cannot be without a strategic advisor. With Chengfeng’s insights,



talents and learning, he... can help you secure your hold on the empire when I'm gone..."

Yao Wenyu was drenched all over in sweat, as if his illness was acting up again; even his complexion was turning white. He raised his hand and grabbed hold of Shen Zechuan's sleeve.

"This empire..." Yao Wenyu made to get up. Both of his eyes reddened as he took his last remaining breaths, "...you have to take the throne! Xun-er is too y-young... It's not his time yet..."

Shen Zechuan held Yao Wenyu's hands back and said slowly in the candlelight, "I'm not cut out to be an emperor."

"You are an overlord, the valiant overlord of the empire." Yao Wenyu said firmly. "You can hand over the empire in the future to come, but at this time, only you, Shen Lanzhou, can sit on the throne! Overturn the old cases and redress the injustices suffered... Pass a new judgment on Shen Wei.." As he gasped for breath, his voice broke, and that clear, jade-like tinkling voice of his turned raspy. Even as he spoke, he was still hastily coughing up blood. "Lanzhou... you're open and aboveboard..."

Shen Zechuan's tears gushed forth. His lips quivered. He couldn't even say a word.

"Once Ce'an re... returns..." Yao Wenyu tightened his grip, "You will have nothing to worry about... I wrote some papers half a year ago. All the *yamen* in the various territories are included in it, along with some on my humble... opinions of the governance of the people in the eight cities... Take them... From now on..."

Borrowing on Shen Zechuan's strength as the latter supported him, Yao Wenyu suddenly coughed out blood. The splotches of red strains seeped into his sleeves and robe. Not even wiping his blood anymore, he exerted himself with some difficulty to pull the corners of his lips.

"...The empire and state are in your hands."

The burden that Hai Liangyi unloaded, Yao Wenyu shouldered. He did not follow the others' paths; he was his own practitioner. No matter how this world was going to evaluate him, he was still that banished immortal who came riding his donkey.

All his life Yao Yuanzhuo never joined the imperial court as an official—that, he accomplished; Yao Wenyu wanted to fulfill his teacher's wish, and that, he accomplished too. He came to this world naked, and it did not matter if he was broken.

Other than Qiao Tianya, he owed no other.

“If only we could have met earlier...”

Yao Wenyu gazed at the window, where the colored silk ball that he had still yet to throw away was hanging. He smiled wearily and moved his hand with the red thread.

“... Ah.”

Qiao Tianya spurred his horse on and galloped through the heavy snow. With his seven-stringed zither on his back, he broke through the fence and tumbled off his horse under the jeers of the Imperial Army. Fei Sheng came over to help him up. He pushed Fei Sheng away and clambered to his feet in the snow. His gaze passed through the long, long corridor, and he saw that the light at the end had gone out.

Qiao Tianya walked a few steps and tripped over the steps. It was here he fell, and all of a sudden, his shoulders trembled. He looked up at the heavy snow, laughing even as his face was awash in tears.

“... Fucking Heaven! You made a fool of me... and trampled over me...” Qiao Tianya cried uncontrollably. “And I bore it all...”

Why do this to him again?

Qiao Tianya raised his arms and pulled off the seven-stringed zither off his back.

Fei Sheng strode over to stop him, calling out in an urgent voice, “Qiao —”

But it was already too late.

Qiao Tianya abruptly raised his seven-stringed zither high and smashed it down on the steps. The strings of the seven-stringed zither he had cherished all his life snapped. Then the body of the zither cracked and broke into two halves that fell into the snow.

The snowstorm obscured Qiao Tianya’s eyes. His untrammelled hair fluttered in the air. With the breakage of the seven-stringed zither, his heart died, too.

“Since there is no Yao Yuanzhuo in this world,” Qiao Tianya slowly closed his eyes, as if mocking this absurd arrangement, “then the Qiao Songyue of it is dead.”

Fei Sheng chased after Qiao Tianya and asked in the heavy snow, “Where are you going?”

Qiao Tianya did not answer. As he turned around, he undid the sword laden with past gratitude and grudges and stumbled towards the incoming

path ahead.

The horse carriage came to a stop. Jiran made his way out under the screen of the carriage and trotted over to catch up with Qiao Tianya. He clapped his hands and expounded the teachings of Buddha in a child-like voice, "Attachments I have not of all in the secular world, so bothered I am not by them all around me. Benefactor, the path ahead has not the hardships of life, only the enlightenment of you. A snap of Buddha's fingers, and the past is all ashes and smoke."

Qiao Tianya looked as though he did not hear him. Jiran followed him, and those pairs of big and small sleeves fluttered in the wind. Together, they disappeared amongst the heavy snow.

Boundless is the sky in the pure land, untainted by worldly concerns.<sup>130</sup>



Shen Zechuan alone guarded the snow-capped eaves, sitting from nightfall until the beckoning of dawn. He heard the sound of snow falling from the eaves. Time seemed to have frozen. He had finally returned to Qudu, from where he gazed at the sky, the past still vivid in his mind.

"Do you know why that year," Shen Zechuan hugged his overcoat and said slowly, "I agreed to Ce'an's request to put on the earring?"

Fei Sheng, who was standing very far behind him, answered, "Because Master and Second Master have a great relationship."

Shen Zechuan raised his hand to break off the plum blossom blocking his way. "... Because I know someone would leave, and those who disappear amidst the heavy snow would never, ever come back again... except for Ce'an."

Xiao Chiye's putting on of the earring for Lanzhou was an explicit expression of his dominance which concealed his affection and love. Every time he cupped Lanzhou's face, his gaze was always so scorching hot and blazingly passionate. This was love that could never waver, desire that could never be concealed.

Shen Zechuan's wearing of the earring that Ce'an gave was similarly a declaration of possession, that he still had tenderness amidst his pain and ruthlessness. This was his gentleness, one that he only gave to Xiao Ce'an.

Fei Sheng did not dare to go too close. After Yuanzhuo and Songyue left one after another, it was rare for Shen Zechuan to show such a mild and genial expression. Shen Zechuan was already standing at the peak of the world. Even if he had yet to wear the crown, he was different from when he

was still in Zhongbo. This difference was not because Shen Zechuan or Fei Sheng had changed, but because the place had changed. It was as if even the stairs in this imperial capital that had towered for centuries possessed the power to intimidate.

Fei Sheng racked his brain to coax him. "Master, Princess Consort Xiao and Hereditary Prince are already on the way. They will be able to enter the capital in a few more days."

Shen Zechuan uttered his acknowledgment. Fei Sheng stood in silence.

Sometime later, Shen Zechuan rubbed away the plum blossom he had plucked off. The juice of those fragile and delicate petals dampened the pulps of his fingers. At the same time he lowered his eyes, he took the handkerchief. Squishy noises suddenly sounded from the snow-covered ground. Shen Zechuan had yet to open his mouth when the top of his head was suddenly covered by an overcoat.

Shen Zechuan was momentarily stunned. Subsequently, he was picked up in someone's arms, and the motion revealed a gap in the overcoat. The back of his head was held down, and then he was kissed squarely on the lips.

Fragments of snow landed on the top of Shen Zechuan's nose, but it was all hot between his lips.

Xiao Chiye pulled off the overcoat and laughed. "I—"

Shen Zechuan yanked hard on Xiao Chiye's fur collar. He turned and lowered his head, almost crashing onto his lips.

The travel-worn Xiao Chiye promptly tightened his arms around Lanzhou, holding him so tightly the latter could barely catch his breath.

Shen Zechuan pulled away a little and whispered, "I—"

Xiao Chiye covered the back of Lanzhou's head and kissed him again, throwing all his pining over the few months they were separated into the kiss. He showed his true colors after a moment of masking it and kissed Lanzhou until the tip of Lanzhou's tongue went numb.

Xiao Chiye had long legs and great strength, so it was not at all a strain for him to hug Shen Zechuan in such a way. Shen Zechuan's head was already pushing into the branch of plum blossoms, and the snow on it fell for all it was worth and dropped onto both men's napes. It was so freezing cold they both shivered in unison.

"Man, Qudu is rather cold," Xiao Chiye lamented.

"You're rather hot yourself," Shen Zechuan answered.

The snow on Xiao Chiye's neck slid down along his back. It was so icy cold he wanted to suck in a breath, but he could not bear to part with the man before him, unwilling as he was to let go. All he could do was hop a few times with Shen Zechuan in tow.

With this hop, Shen Zechuan really went right up among the plum blossom branches. For a moment, all the chunks of snow and pieces of flowers came tumbling down, cloaking both men with snow all over their heads and shoulders.

"Xiao'er!" Shen Zechuan pressed haphazardly on Xiao Chiye's face.

Xiao Chiye's vision was obstructed, and as he took a few steps back, he fell over into the thick pile of snow. Puffs of snow sprayed onto Shen Zechuan's face. With his chest heaving, Xiao Chiye cupped Lanzhou's cheek and craned his neck for another mouthful.

"My eldest brother wanted me to stay for a few days in Dajing. I threw off the blanket in the middle of the night and ran away." The teeth that Xiao Chiye exposed appeared unusually sharp. "He is certain to enter the capital in a few days to beat me up."

"Did you come via the Northeast Provisions Bridle Path?" Shen Zechuan suddenly clasped hold of Xiao Chiye's wrist and pressed in closer to ask, "Didn't you see Eldest Sister-in-law and Xun-er on the way here?"

"I did." The center of Xiao Chiye's eyebrows arched up slightly. "But my horse is fast, and it overtook them right there and then on the spot."

Xiao Xun, who was still on the bumpy ride over, leaned over the window.

"What are you looking at?" Lu Guangbai asked.

Xiao Xun expressionlessly pointed at the road ahead. "Second Uncle said he'll be right back after taking a piss."

The row of guards before them simultaneously let loose a "pffft" sound.

Lu Guangbai patted Xiao Xun's head and said, "Your Second Uncle is a jerk, and the words of a jerk cannot be trusted."

Lu Yizhi, who was powdering her face inside the carriage, pulled open the curtain with a "swish". Cutting an imposing figure as she pointed ahead, she commanded, "Charge. Charge quickly. Even if we can't catch up with that brat, we have to make it in time for his dinner!"

Xiao Chiye ran fast, but he still ended up taking a beating from his eldest brother in Qudu. Surprisingly enough, it was Ji Gang whose heart

ached a little and subsequently whisked him away.



A few days later, Shen Zechuan organized the documents on his desk. With a brush dipped in ink, he narrated on the blank papers. Under the light of the lamp, he looked back upon the past in the reigning silence and finally straightened out everything that had transpired after the Da Zhou reign of Yongyi.

“During the reign of Yongyi, the Grand Mentor entered the imperial court thrice to serve as an official and assisted the Crown Prince in implementing the census registers.” Xiao Chiye took Shen Zechuan’s hand from behind and wrote it down with him.

In his game of chess with the noble clans, Qi Huilian suffered a defeat because of Qiao Kanghai’s betrayal. Ji Lei and Shen Wei acted under the empress dowager’s orders and forced the Crown Prince to his death at Zhaozui Temple. Since then, Qi Huilian feigned insanity and was imprisoned in Zhaozui Temple. The Eastern Palace’s lineage was thus completely severed.

Later, Shen Wei suspected that the empress dowager was going to get rid of him after he had outlived his usefulness. After repeated days of turning and tossing, Shen Wei spent a huge sum of money to bribe Pan Rugui and gained himself the opportunity to be assigned out of the capital to Zhongbo.

In the same year, in order to save everyone in the Shao clan, Shao Chengbi exploited the advantage accorded to him by his own position and stole the military map of Zhongbo as a gift to Shen Wei. But Shen Wei did not keep his word, resulting in the property confiscation and eventual execution of Qiao Kanghai, as well as the fall of the Shao clan.

Shao Chengbi’s life was saved by Chen Zhen, and the Old Matriarch Shao<sup>131</sup> sent Fengquan away. From then on, Shao Chengbi concealed his identity and lived incognito in Qudu, waiting for the right opportunity.

Shen Wei arrived in Zhongbo, and in order to preserve his life, he passed on the military topographical map of the Zhongbo six prefectures to Amu’er as a gift at the same time he was contacting Amu’er on behalf of the noble clans. In the process of contending for Gedale, he killed his wife, Bai Cha, for Amu’er.

In the third year of the reign of Xiande, Juexi was hit with a drought, and Provincial Administration Commissioner, Jiang Qingshan, ended up

owing a huge debt of tens of thousands of taels. At the risk of being charged with a capital crime punishable by death, he opened the granaries and distributed the grains to provide aid relief to the people.

In the same year, Deputy Grand Secretary Hai Liangyi joined forces with Chief Supervising Secretary of the Ministry of Revenue, Xue Xiuzhuo, and the others from the practical doers faction in the various regions to call Hua Siqian to account. Hua Siqian's attempts to ask the noble clans for money fell through. Subsequently, he took a risk out of desperation with Wei Huaigu and used Shen Wei's evasion of war as an opportunity to open up the line of defense at Zhongbo Chashi River to let the Biansha Cavalry into the territory.

When Xiao Chiye wrote to this point, his eyebrows creased slightly into a frown. As he dipped the brush in ink, he said, "In evading the battles, Shen Wei actually was the noble clans' scapegoat. It'd have been better for him to throw in with Amu'er at that time. To date, I still can't figure out why he set himself on fire."

"I originally did not understand it either." Shen Zechuan turned his head aside to look at Xiao Chiye. "It was only when Chengfeng reorganized the Shen clan's genealogical record that I found the reason—the most obvious reason."

Xiao Chiye looked at Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan coughed out the three words, "Shen Zhouji."

Xiao Chiye understood it in a flash. "...That was indeed obvious."

In order to avoid war back then, Shen Wei and Hereditary Prince, Shen Zhouji, strangled the Dunzhou Commander, Tantai Long, to death. Even if they returned to Qudu again, they would be convicted of a crime. He had meant to defect to Amu'er, but Amu'er's cavalry lassoed Shen Zhouji behind the horses and dragged him to his death on the public roads.

Shen Wei was an abandoned pawn that both sides discarded. He had no future, no way out of his predicament.

"Then, in the fourth year of Xiande," Xiao Chiye pressed his chin down on the center of Shen Zechuan's hair, "our Lanzhou entered the capital."

In that instant, the past replayed as if it were yesterday.

Shen Zechuan entered the capital alone, and at the same time, Xiao Jiming, who had rendered meritorious military service, was forced to hand over Xiao Chiye.

The mad dog crushed by hatred and the vicious dog bound with shackles tore into each other in the gloomy rain of Qudu. The metallic taste of blood saturated each other's mouths, so hot it blazed like fire.

Qudu molded and forged Shen Lanzhou and Xiao Ce'an. They were back-to-back blade and shield, and they were also face-to-face passion and desire.

Day was breaking. Xiao Chiye heard the distant toll of the bell. He stroked Shen Zechuan's temple and said with certainty, "From today onwards, my Lanzhou is the common ruler of all in the world. The 560,000 troops in the empire are all under your command. Enter and exit the ceremonial hall and the palace as you please. I, Xiao Ce'an, shall stand in the front hall with my blade in hand to watch over the heroes from all over on your behalf."

Shen Zechuan tilted his head up, and Xiao Chiye raised the emperor crown with the dangling tassels of beads<sup>132</sup> and secured it for him on his head. That deep red robe was adorned with dark gold rims. Once again, Xiao Chiye touched the red jade bead earring on Shen Zechuan's right ear.

Kong Ling, who was outside the hall, knocked thrice on the door.

"And so the hidden blade of talent returns to its sheath." Shen Zechuan's expression was a little indolent. The pulp of his fingers nudged up along the side of Xiao Chiye's arm before grasping hold of Xiao Chiye's chin. He pulled it close, but instead of kissing him, he whispered, "Who made this prince robe of yours?"

Xiao Chiye whispered back, "My secret lover."

Shen Zechuan laughed. He took half a step back and stood side by side with Xiao Chiye in front of the doors. At the very instant the doors opened, Xiao Chiye lifted his hand and gently pushed Shen Zechuan in the back of his waist.

Shen Zechuan strode out and saw the blue dome of heaven awakening. Between the layers and layers of eaves, the former subordinates of the three territories of Zhongbo, Libei, and Qidong all kneeled to the ground. Kong Ling raised the imperial jade seal and took the lead to say, "Long live—"

"Long live, Your Majesty!" Everyone present shouted reverently in unison.

The new sun promptly made an appearance. Rays of light burst through between the eaves and the dangling beads to shine upon Shen Zechuan's face. Shen Zechuan was so dazzling amongst the masses of his subjects no



one could look at him directly. He saw the sun rise in the east, heard the wind chimes stirring in the wind, and in that very instant, all sorts of emotions overwhelmed him.



Shen Zechuan erected a new Cangyun Pavilion at the former site of Yulong Terrace. On the left, he set up a civil minister registry, with the names of Qi Huilian, Hai Liangyi, and Yao Wenyu leading the various officials. On the right was the military general register, where the names of Xiao Fangxu, Xiao Jiming, Qi Zhuyin, Lu Guangbai, and Yin Chang were recorded for all posterity. At the end of those neatly arranged portraits were the images of two men of equal standing in the hierarchy.

From then on, all hostilities of war came to an end, and peace ensued. “Jing”<sup>133</sup> was chosen as the title of the reigning dynasty, with Shen Zechuan kicking off the “first year of Chunsheng”.<sup>134</sup>

On this one day, a merry feast was held in the palace. Zhou Gui, who had been simple-hearted and inarticulate for half of his life, was drunk in front of the hall. As he indulged to his heart’s content, he struck the chopsticks in his hand against the wine cup and sang, “*from the vast blue sky the egret comes, of waters boundless amidst the mist.*”

Midway through, he sighed with emotions and shed tears. Holding Kong Ling’s hands, he said, “After this, I alone will guard Cizhou. You will be here as your chancellor in white...” Having said to this point, he totally disregarded his dignity and burst out crying. “Oh, how difficult this journey has been. Chengfeng, I’m too happy!”

At the side, Fei Sheng lifted his wine cup and clinked cups with them. With a smile, he said, ‘I will return together with Your Excellency to Duanzhou and be my ‘loyal and courageous’ self!’<sup>135</sup>

They burst out laughing, then put their heads together and sobbed.

Wiping his tears, Fei Sheng said, “Blast it. Once I’m gone, who’s going to take care of Master?!”

“His Lord...” Tantai Hu wiped his tears too and corrected himself in a gruff voice, “With my Second Master assuming personal command in the capital, not even a fly can get close to His Majesty. The frick you’re worried for?!”

On hearing them, Gao Zhongxiong suddenly started bawling.

“The heck with you?!” Yu Xiaozai hurriedly asked him. “You’re not leaving anyway!”

"I thought of Yuanzhuo." Gao Zhongxiong covered his face and wiped his tears. He bowed to Tantai Hu. "Yuanzhuo wanted me to give Hunu to you. You, you must treat it well!"

"Fuck." Tantai Hu wiped his face again, but said with a solemn expression, "I understand Mister Yuanzhuo's intent. I have a bad temper. By giving me the cat, it'd be like seeing him whenever I see it in the future, and I'll think thrice before I act and won't dare to be reckless."

Huo Lingyun downed several cups of wine and said in a quiet voice, "I wonder where Commander Qiao has gone..."

"After Qiao Tianya left, Master sealed Yang Shan Xue away in a chest. This kindness is enough!" Fei Sheng forced himself to cheer up and asked, "Say, why are Master and Second Master missing?"



The emperor crown did not fall off, but the dangling beads collided against one another, making an intriguing rocking and swaying sound in the darkness. The throne was mind-blowingly high; it was the most unattainable place in the world far beyond anyone's reach. Shen Zechuan was pinned onto it, his head tilted back.

Sweat intermingled. At every thrust, the jade earring would swing.

Moonlight that shone through the window paved only the ground before the steps. Shen Zechuan's gaze melted in the darkness. His robe had not been pried off him. He reached out his hands and clenched the robe on Xiao Chiye's back tightly.

This was the most formal and solemn place in the world, and the most coveted position of all in the world. But Shen Zechuan did not care, and neither did Xiao Chiye.

That blazing, scalding sensual sensation extended all the way down to the toes.

The wolf on Xiao Chiye's back was hurting from being scratched, but he loved this pain.

It was here Shen Zechuan melted as Xiao Chiye held his jade earring in his mouth. All he could do was struggle to squint his expressive eyes. Time after time, he called out "A-Ye", ignorant of the gravity of his actions.

Xiao Chiye braced himself against the back of the throne with his hand and trapped Lanzhou in the crooks of his arms. Biting him, he let loose a chuckle amid the roughness of his motions and responded, "... Lanzhou."

He secured both of Shen Zechuan's hands in place.

Lanzhou.

Oh, Lanzhou.

The crown among Shen Zechuan's hair finally fell off and tumbled down the throne, the dangling beads "tinkling" as it rolled along the steps. Shen Zechuan liked this sound. Xiao Chiye sniffed at him, displaying a hint of aroused ruthlessness at this close distance. "Got you captive."

Shen Zechuan's fingertips that could still move slide around the area between Xiao Chiye's thumb and index finger, as if in compliment and encouragement.

Shen Zechuan was so dangerous and deadly. His slightly dazed and disoriented eyes clung to the side of Xiao Chiye's cheek, seemingly hidden in the shadow of the alpha wolf. This was Xiao Chiye's jade earring.

Both men trampled on power underfoot, crushing it as they reveled in this long-awaited feverish passion. All those strife were too far off to be visible.

From now on, they had each other to depend on.

Through weal and woe.

Till time eternal.

### **Author's Note:**

On the whole, the story adopts the Ming system. The local government system has been simplified down to the jurisdiction of the prefectural *yamen* (or office, a form of the administrative division headed by the prefectural prefect), with the clerks (also known in here as the functionaries) of the Qing system thrown into the mix and with the role of the group of advisors and aides emphasized. I've slacked off on many details that need closer study, so they are not all that rigorous. In writing the plot, my enjoyment takes precedence first and foremost.

My estimation for the length of the story was wrong every time, and it took longer than I thought to tie it all up for the conclusion. I was wrapping up when there was only a page left in the story outline. It was laborious to write in-depth with the various threads in a jumble, and deciding between going into detail or simplifying it was another problem. Often, I felt I can finish it in one go, but when I really started writing, it felt like it was still a long way off. I tried my best to restrain the melodrama in the later stages when the characters step offstage, and I didn't rehash all the hints of foreshadowing I've dropped before, but I'm still not that satisfied. I

received a lot of suggestions during the serialization. Thank you very much. And thank you for the ten months of companionship.

**Lianyin's Note:**

Ten(10) months for the serialization of the novel, twenty-nine(29) months for the translation. :V There will be some extras next (which the author posted on her Weibo before), and then it'll be editing time to clean up the translation, revise and standardize terms, weed out typos, improve parts I feel are still lacking, etc. The final version will be based on the Traditional Chinese version which will probably be released toward the end of this year. So until then, your patience and understanding are still much appreciated! Also, feel free to poke me if you have any suggestions or feedback. Last but not least, thank you for putting up with me/us all this time and for joining the Cezhou ride! (◡\_◡)

**Jia's Note:**

Hope everyone had a good time following Cezhou's story! <3 Joining this tl made me realize how much more I have to go in my tl journey, so thank you everyone for putting up with any inadequacies on my part. Let's all give lianyin a big hug and kiss hehehehe see you in the extras!

**Note:**

The last part is the uncensored version combined with newly added text in the censored version. As mentioned before, final version will be based on the Traditional Chinese copy when it is released.

Credits: Bless [Ami](#) and [Yu](#) for letting me bounce ideas off them! <3



# 将进酒

原作：唐酒卿

广播剧第一季

